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WHY THERE IS SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING

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The answer to the question of why there is Something rather than Nothing is that there has to be Something and that Nothing is impossible. There cannot not be Something so there cannot be Nothing. The paper justifies this conclusion, while also explaining why we might believe there may be Nothing. In the course of this, the so-called subtraction-argument is shown to be inadequate and question-begging.

1.

The subject of this paper is to answer the question 'Why is there Something rather than Nothing?'[1]

The paper has two aims. First, to show that the reason there is Something rather than Nothing is because Nothing is impossible – or to put it another way there not being Something is impossible – and that therefore there has to be Something. The second part will reveal why we nevertheless strongly believe that there could be Nothing, that therefore there not being Something is possible, and thus why the question of why there is Something rather than Nothing may seem to arise in the form that it usually does. Namely that, given that there could be Nothing why is there Something.

The strategy is to show that we are not rationally *justified* in thinking that there could be Nothing, while also *explaining* the psychology of why we nevertheless believe, through the way we misleadingly conceptually think about it, that there could be Nothing.[2] Logically these are quite separate matters. But considering the conceptual psychology of the

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belief that there can be Nothing is important, because in explaining how the belief arises we may blunt the conviction of the belief that there can be Nothing, since it will be shown to result from a fundamental misdescription or conceptual miscategorisation of the putative Nothing. The conceptual psychological process by which we come to think that we can conceive genuinely of Nothing stands in the way of being convinced by any argument purporting to show that Nothing is impossible. The explanation of how we come to believe that there may be Nothing, and not always Something, will show that it fails to justify the belief, but nevertheless may cause or give rise to it, and do so in a manner whereby it may appear justified.

2.

The heart of the argument here showing that Nothing is impossible is as follows. In order for us to suppose that Nothing *is*, it would have to be shown that we can have some conception of what Nothing might be. This would have to extend beyond and be given substance beyond the notion that there might not be Something. We would need a positive characterization of what Nothing might be. One way it has been supposed that we might come to a concept of Nothing is by the so-called subtraction-argument. Indeed the subtraction-argument is the *only* way in which we might get a conceptual grasp of Nothing. Unfortunately, the subtraction-argument does not do what it purports to do and fails to give us any such grasp. Far from guiding us to an intelligible concept of Nothing, it begs the question as to what Nothing might be.[3]

The rationale of the subtraction-argument is that if it is in some way difficult to get a grasp of what absolutely Nothing at all might be – a grasp of there being Nothing all in one go – we can do so in a series of easily digestible steps whereby we nibble away at what is – at the Something that exists – until we end up with the very last

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bit of that Something, and then when that goes we will all be happy to say that what we have is Nothing, and have a conceptual grasp of what that might be. In this way we circumvent, it is supposed, the paradoxical notion of there *being* Nothing – for this looks like the contradictory assertion of there being Something that exists and that thing is Nothing. If one asserts that there can be Nothing, it looks as though one has the oxymoron of both asserting and denying at the same time that there is Something. Not Something because there is Nothing and not Nothing because in there being Nothing there is therefore Something.

Having said that, some have chosen to rest the argument that there must necessarily be Something, and that Nothing is impossible, on the existence of Nothing not being assertable without contradiction.

The subtraction-argument, meant to bolster our conceptual grasp on there being Nothing, in fact does nothing of the sort. Worse, it gives us the illusion that we may have some understanding of what Nothing might consist of, and even how Nothing might arise or come to be. But in fact it is fallacious and misleading, and the conceptual process it takes us through fails to enhance our understanding of Nothing even in the slightest, although unfortunately, if poorly understood, it may seem to. The subtraction-argument does nothing to help our thinking about Nothing as a possibility, contrary to how it is often presented. The argument would only work if each act of subtraction left us with Nothing. In other words that the deletion of each Something leaves a smaller overall amount of Something. Otherwise it adds nothing to our conceptual grasp of Nothing. The analogy might be a series of numbers.[4] Using numbers highlights the counting down process involved that supposedly leads us to or leaves us with Nothing. Take the numbers 1 to 9. There are, we might suppose, precisely 9 somethings in the universe, so that the totality of what is, the totality of Something, is, [1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9]. We take away 9, and we are left with [1 2 3 4 5

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6 7 8]. We do it again and again and eventually we are left penultimately with [1]. We take that away, and are left with, it is claimed Nothing.

Before addressing the flaw in this process, it might be noted that 0, zero, does not appear on the list. If it had appeared the argument would clearly have been question-begging and superfluous as all we would have had to assert is that for there to be Nothing there only needs to be 0 somethings leaving no Something. The subtraction-argument would then be redundant; we would not need anything further to lead us to grasping Nothing, we could go straight to 0 without all the nibbling going on to get us there. But clearly, asserting that there is 0 somethings, or no Something, would not give us a positive characterization of Nothing. Indeed the inability, as has been mentioned previously, to give a positive characterization of Nothing without contradiction is one of the arguments as to why Nothing is logically impossible, and that there must always be Something.

The whole idea of counting down by taking away so one arrives at Nothing is fundamentally confused anyway. As far as the question of there being Something rather than Nothing is concerned, there either is Something, or there is not – if there is any 'amount' of Something, there is just as much not-Nothing as if there were 'more' Something. More or less of Something makes no sense here; there either is Something, or there is Nothing. It is an all Something or Nothing matter, so to speak, whether there is Something rather than Nothing. There is a totality of there being Something – what ever that is – or else there is Nothing. The idea of approaching Nothing is simply confused. It cannot be a matter of degree in any case.

One might think that taking away somethings is rather like taking away portions of a cake, until ultimately one has no cake left. But this not what is envisioned in taking away somethings until one is left with Nothing. When one removes a portion of the cake there is indeed less cake left. But in removing portions of something, there is not less

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Something – that remains fixed. There is just as much Something as there was before. In removing portions of the cake one is not left Nothing, but something else – space, air, dust, where the portion of cake was. We are never in taking away something left with Nothing. So any kind of subtraction is based on a misleading analogy. The taking away process assumes – that we are left with some Nothing at each step, and a conceptual understanding of that – what it was designed to set out and show, and the whole business in therefore question-begging.

Another major misunderstanding, and oft repeated one, needs to be cleared up here in comprehending the assertion that there must always be Something. It should be noted that this does not suppose that the Something there must always be – whatever it is – exists necessarily. This is a modal error; a misplacement of the modal operator. Rather it is just that there must be *some* Something *or other*, not any particular sort of Something and that it must be impossible for it not to exist. The usual example of something that exists necessarily is God; but this is a confusion, and is not required or assumed by the assertion that there must be Something rather than Nothing.[5] What exists exists contingently; but that something-or-other contingent exists, it is claimed, is necessary. That it is necessary that Something exists does not entail that the Something that exists exists necessarily. That it is necessary that *some* thing exists does not entail that *that* thing that exists, exists necessarily.

To return to the fundamental flaw in the subtraction-argument we need only consider this. The subtraction-argument proceeds by supposing that each subtraction of a particular something reduces the totality Something. In other words, that each nibble at the totality of Something *reduces* the totality of Something. But the totality of Something is only reduced on the assumption that each removal of part of the Something leaves behind less than the previous total Something and in particular in each instance, Nothing, where there was previously Something. Something only

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gets smaller, or less,[6] if each subtraction leaves in place where there was Something, not still Something, but rather Nothing. But this is clearly false.

If it were true we would not need the subtraction-argument at all. For any one of the steps in the subtraction would immediately lead us to a firm conceptual grasp of what Nothing is, and what there being Nothing might be. We would not have to go through the nibbling process until, supposedly, all of the Something is gone. We would have Something and at the point of the removal of any part of it a gaping hole of Nothing. All we need then suppose is that there is nothing but that Nothing; that that Nothing is everywhere and absolute.

Clearly the subtraction-argument begs the question, it is contended, because it only works – works to get us to Nothing and give us a putative conceptual understanding of Nothing – if each step already presupposes what it sets out at the end of the subtraction to explain and allow us to understand, namely that there could be Nothing. But if we cannot understand what constitutes Something – not merely something – being taken away and leaving us with Nothing with each particular step in the subtraction, we will at the end of the process be none the wiser as to what Nothing might be understood as.

3.

At this point I will introduce a principle that I will call *The Conservation of Existence*. What is meant by this is that although any particular thing may cease to exist, the ceasing to exist of any particular thing never leaves Nothing, but rather something else that exists, and hence still Something. It is impossible to conceive of something ceasing to exist and leaving absolutely Nothing – it will rather be another kind of Something. No example has ever been given of something ceasing to exist and leaving

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Nothing. One way we are misled is that this may appear otherwise.

The underlying reason for this, as will be explored later, is that to say that there is nothing, is always context relative, and as such in asserting that there is nothing where there was once something, or there might be something, is never to assert that there is Nothing.

Some kinds of Something we are sorely tempted to call Nothing. Empty space, a total vacuum, for example. But these too are clearly not Nothing, for there are positive things that can be said about them that may be true or false. Such as, 'You could not fit a bus into that empty space'. But what would be true or false of genuine Nothing? It's hard to say. Indeed, it is so hard to say that we have no idea of – or we should conclude that we have no idea of – what the assertion of there being Nothing *means*. This is indicative of there being nothing you can say about Nothing; that is, other than negatively saying that it is not Something. But to say that there can be Nothing because there might not be Something, is simply to reassert what has to be shown: that there might be Nothing. It is not to say what there being Nothing would consist in. The whole notion of consistence seems misplaced here, for if Nothing is anything at all, then there will be nothing that Nothing consists in. In other words, it does not exist.

4.

This may lead us naturally to a stronger claim that there cannot be Nothing because that there is Nothing cannot be asserted *meaningfully*.[7] To say: 'There is Nothing', is nonsense. This would be the case not merely for reasons of paradox or contradiction as claimed earlier – because in asserting the existence of Nothing one would necessarily be asserting the existence of Something, namely Nothing – but, nonsense because 'Nothing' is not a meaningful

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concept when understood as meaning *absolutely not anything*, or there being *no Something at all*. If 'Nothing' is meaningless in *this* sense, then the assertion of there being Nothing is also meaningless. There cannot be Nothing, because to say that there is is to assert something of which we can have no understanding. It is not just that 'Nothing' has no meaning in its absolute sense; it is that it can never have a meaning in its absolute sense. This entails that the assertion 'There can be Nothing' can have no truth-value. Statements that are literal nonsense cannot be true or false.

Yet we are convinced that we can understand 'Nothing', and therefore the assertion that it is true that, 'There can be Nothing'. This is a mistake, if a tempting one. We need now to understand why it is tempting, and understand what it is we are in fact asserting when we assert 'There can be Nothing', when we think we are asserting literally 'There can be Nothing'. It is based on a misunderstanding of language, and of what we may be asserting when we talk of 'Nothing'. In all cases we are not talking about absolutely Nothing, rather we are talking of nothing (note now the lower case 'n') in a *relative* and context-dependent sense. This leads us, or causes us, to think that we may meaningfully assert that there might or may be Nothing. It *explains* but does not justify our belief that there can be Nothing, and that that belief can be expressed, as opposed to benignly merely asserting that there is nothing.

The slippery slope to thinking we have a conceptual grasp of Nothing is everywhere, but goes unnoticed. We talk about 'nothing', and engage in talk involving 'nothing', all the time. We stick our head around the door and look into a room, and we come back to report, 'There's nothing in that room'. This, or something very like it, is the paradigm case of nothing that gives 'nothing' its meaning. Of the Gobi Desert, we say 'There's nothing in it', 'It's empty'.[8] But of course as with the room, we do not, or should not, if we think about it for a moment, mean absolutely empty, or anything remotely like it. The notion of there being nothing in this case is contrasted with and relative to fullness or the

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possible but not actual presence of certain kinds of something. It is contrasted with another kind of Something that merely has different properties, not no properties at all. A city, or a landscape full of trees and many animals, and people, perhaps, in the case of the Gobi Desert. In the case of the room, an empty room, one with nothing in it, is a room with no furniture or people in it. But of course in neither case are we asserting that there is Nothing. Rather we are asserting a relative nothing. And this nothing, because it definitely *in all cases* consists of Something (or other), gives us no grasp whatsoever of the concept of Nothing, absolutely Nothing. It is only that sense of Nothing, if there was one, that would be relevant to the question of why there is Something rather than Nothing. However, we think we may understand Nothing through a kind of asymptotic approach to it via considering nothing. Or we suppose that we may understand the meaning of 'Nothing' through an understanding of 'nothing'. But we are not approaching Nothing at all, or gaining incrementally an understanding of the meaning of 'Nothing' by a consideration of nothing and the meaning of 'nothing'. Nothing is an absolute, if it is anything at all, and cannot be approached by a consideration of relative nothing, since in each instance the nothing is a something, and is no more or less something than what went before; it is merely a different kind of something; it is merely that that something may to us seem like nothing compared to some other something that might be present.[9] This is closely related to a basic flaw in the subtraction-argument.

When we assert that 'There could be Nothing', we are misdescribing what we are asserting if we think we are asserting that it is true that there could be absolutely Nothing – and not some ilk of Something. And we do this because we come to understand 'nothing' always relatively. The use of nothing that gives it meaning is always relative. We are in saying that there is nothing explicitly or implicitly – the latter by way of what might be expected to be there – asserting that this something or that something is not there

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(existing), not that what we have is no something-or-other whatsoever of any complexion. The understanding of Nothing is parasitic upon our understanding of nothing; but the expressions do not mean the same thing at all. The latter – nothing – means not this something or that something whereas the former – Nothing – means, at best if it has a meaning at all, not any kind of something whatsoever. But then that leaves us the problem of what that could be asserting.

This returns us to the subtraction-argument. It is a systematic case in point of the use of 'nothing'. What happens at each step is not the removal of something to leave us with Nothing, but rather the removal of something to leave us with nothing; but *that* nothing is always something, and it can never lead us to Nothing. In each case we are mistaken that the deletion of any particular something leaves us with Nothing – rather we are left with nothing, which properly viewed is merely another species of something – nothing compared to what went before in that the space where a chair was, the thin air, is in some sense, perhaps some anthropic sense 'less substantial' than the chair (the reverse might be said to be the case for a woodworm), but it is very clearly not Nothing that now takes the place of the something that is removed. But by the removal of a sequence of somethings we will never get to Nothing, because in each case we not left with Nothing, but rather at best nothing, that is merely something else – but such a sequential process if carried out on a small scale or imagined, may lead us to *think* we might understand what Nothing, as opposed to nothing, might consist of. This is a delusion. In all cases we never at any point have an instance of Nothing, but rather nothing. We misdescribe or misrepresent what we are asserting when we think we are asserting that there could be Nothing, and that leads us to think that we can assert that there could be Nothing.

The totality of our understanding of Nothing comes from an understanding of nothing (which is always a different

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kind of something). This misleads into thinking that we have a grasp of the concept of Nothing, and that the assertion that 'There can be Nothing' is meaningful by way of 'nothing' being meaningful. The conceptual psychology of this is so powerful that any argument purporting to show that there could not be Nothing will come up against resistance simply from the view that we can understand what 'There can be Nothing' means when asserted literally, so that whatever counterargument may appear to show that there could not be Nothing, must be unsound, since the mere fact that 'There can be Nothing' is meaningful shows it may possibly be true. It needs to be emphasised in order to correct this that in asserting 'There can be Nothing' we are not really asserting what we think we are asserting. Indeed, it may even be meaningless. And this, it is claimed, is what has been shown. In the case of Nothing it is at best understood as by analogy with nothing-assertions, and they never assert that there is Nothing, and give us no conceptual grasp of Nothing; but we are seduced by language into thinking we understand Nothing because of our understanding of nothing.

Therefore, it is argued here, there cannot be Nothing, although there maybe nothing, for the various reasons given above. There must always be Something – or something-or-other – which is why the answer to the question 'Why is there Something rather than Nothing?', is that Nothing is impossible, there must always be Something. We are strongly inclined to think, despite arguments to the contrary, that there may be Nothing just because we are misled by the meaning we attach to 'nothing', thinking then that we may refer to 'Nothing'. But in fact there cannot be Nothing, only nothing, and there must be Something. That is why there is Something rather than Nothing.

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Notes

[1] I will use capital letters for 'Something' and 'Nothing', in the sense of a noun referring to putative universal and absolute existence or non-existence, respectively. This is because otherwise, as will be seen, there is a confusion possible with 'nothing' and 'something' in another relevant and significant, as will be argued paradigm, sense. A distinction needs to be clearly made from that sense. Also there is the possibility of confusing infelicities of expression in using 'nothing' and 'something' in the mundane but hard to avoid sense of saying, for example, 'nothing can be said about Nothing' or alternatively, 'something can be said about Nothing', or 'nothing can be said in favour of the arguments about existence of Nothing as they say nothing about the nature of Nothing' and the like.

[2] The psychological explanatory part I see as a exercise in the tradition of David Hume, as in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888, second edition, ed P. H. Nidditch, 1978). Hume, of course, treats causality and induction in this way: exhausting, and finding wanting, the rational justifications for our belief in them and then giving a naturalistic explanation for why we nevertheless hold those beliefs.

[3] See, David Efird and Tom Stoneham, 'The Subtraction Argument for the Possibility of Free Mass.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Volume 80, Issue 1, pages 50–57, January 2010.

[4] This is an analogy on which nothing hangs as far its being numerical is concerned, their metaphysics, such as that numbers may be considered abstract objects and the like

[5] See, Peter Van InWagan, 'Why is there anything at all?' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 70 (1996), 95–110, especially, 95–99.

[6] Depending on whether one supposes the existence is continuous or discrete.

[7] I am indebted to the line of argument in Bede Rundle, *Why there is Something rather than Nothing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and to some correspondence with him, although my approach is somewhat different from his, being, roughly speaking, conceptual and logical, rather than grammatical.

[8] P. G. Woodhouse illustrates this understanding to beautiful comic effect when Bertie says of the Reverend Harold Stinker Pinker 'I believe you would bump into something if you were crossing the Gobi desert.' *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*. (1962).

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[9] To suppose that we might understand an absolute term through the consideration of a relative one, in this case nothing and Nothing, would be like supposing that we may have an understanding of temperature through an understanding of warm and cold. The temperature is what it is; whether it is warm or cold, or indeed neither, depends upon how it feels to a certain kind of creature. One cannot understand the former by thinking about the latter.

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