3

Why Is There Anything?

The question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" provoked one of Sidney Morgenbesser's memorable comebacks: "If there was nothing, you'd still be complaining!" Bede Rundle's response in *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*[1] is somewhat longer but just as uncompromising. He argues that the question is ill-formed because there could not have been nothing. He offers general reflections on causality, eternity, God, mind, matter, and agency in order to evaluate the idea that the existence of anything at all, while it cannot be explained by science, might be explained by theology. His strategy is to argue in detail that the question, and the attempts to answer it, consistently take language beyond the bounds of meaningfulness, detaching familiar words from their usual conditions of application so that they no longer express intelligible possibilities. He is following the method of Wittgenstein, as he conceives it, though with results more destructive to religious language than Wittgenstein's own view.

The linguistic transgressions that Rundle finds fall into three categories: the idea of God, ideas of causality and explanation, and ideas about existence. They appear in the thought that, though science can explain what goes on in the universe by discovering the systematic connections among its features and elements, the existence of the

1. Bede Rundle, *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

universe as a whole clearly cannot be explained in this way, so we must seek an explanation of it in something that is not part of the universe, but outside of space and time. And if that explanation is not to leave us with a further demand to explain the existence of what we have identified as the ultimate cause, then that cause has to be something whose existence doesn't require explanation—something that couldn't not exist. This role has traditionally been attributed to God.

It is important that in talking about the existence of the universe, Rundle is not using the term "universe" in the peculiar way that is now common, to mean a particular cosmic entity that might be only one of many such entities, either coexisting or succeeding one another. In this recent sense of the term, it is possible to say that our universe—the one we live in—came into existence with the Big Bang, but that this was perhaps preceded by the contraction of a prior universe into the concentrated point from which the Big Bang exploded, or that it perhaps arose from a black hole in another universe.

In this sense, the existence of our universe might be explained by scientific cosmology, but such an explanation would still have to refer to features of some larger reality that contained or gave rise to it. A scientific explanation of the Big Bang would not be an explanation of why there was something rather than nothing, because it would have to refer to something from which that event arose. This something, or anything else cited in a further scientific explanation of it, would then have to be included in the universe whose existence we are looking for an explanation of when we ask why there is anything at all. This is a question that remains after all possible scientific questions have been answered.

Rundle dismisses as incoherent the idea that it could be answered by the hypothesis that God created the universe at some time in the past. He says that this tries to employ the idea of an agent producing something, while withholding two of the crucial conditions of the concept of agency: time and physical causation. We can understand the idea of God molding Adam out of clay, but the idea that a nonphysical God whose existence is neither in space nor in time might cause space and time to start to exist at a certain point simply takes the idea of cause and agency off the rails. A nonspatiotemporal being, if there could be such a thing, couldn't do anything.

Much of Rundle's discussion has this down-to-earth, commonsense flavor: Look at the ordinary way we use the terms "cause" or "mind" or "exist" or "nothing," and you'll see that in theological speculation they are being used in a way that tears them loose from these familiar conditions without supplying anything in their place. The minds we can talk about are revealed in what people with bodies do in space and time. When a mental intention brings

something about, it is through intentional physical action in an already existing world. The problem Rundle finds with most theological claims is not that they are unverifiable, but that they are unintelligible. He goes on to say, however, that even if we reject the thought that God might have brought the universe into existence in the past, there remains another version of the question that seems to require an answer.

> The universe may neither have, nor be susceptible of, a causal explanation, but the why-question seemingly remains. Not "Why does it exist?" where a cause of becoming is sought, but "Why does it exist?" where the query is motivated by considerations of modality: the universe need not have existed, surely, so the fact that it does is a fact that calls for explanation.

Even if God did not create the universe from nothing in the past, perhaps he sustains the universe in existence at all times, preventing the fall into nothingness.

It is this possibility of absolute nothingness that Rundle is mainly concerned to expose as an illusion. He points out that in ordinary speech, when we say there is nothing in the cupboard, or nothing that is both round and square, we are talking about an existing world, none of whose contents meet a certain description. To say nothing is X is to say everything is not X. We can perhaps conceive of the disappearance of everything in the world, so that there are no things left in it, but even then we are not imagining nothing at all, but rather a void, a vacuum, empty space. Taken literally, the hypothesis that there might have been nothing at all seems self-contradictory, since it seems equivalent to the supposition that it might have been the case that nothing was the case. Is there any way of understanding the possibility that there might have been nothing at all without interpreting it incoherently as a way things might have been—a fact, as Rundle puts it, a possible state of affairs, an alternative possible world? Rundle thinks not, and that therefore the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" does not call for an answer.

Even if it is inconceivable that nothing whatever should exist, it doesn't follow that there is any particular entity whose existence is necessary. Yet Rundle has a view about the kind of thing that has to exist: not God, but matter. He is not a materialist, for he doesn't think all other kinds of truths are equivalent to physical truths. But he does hold that our mental and mathematical concepts, for example, though not definable in physical terms, depend for their application on features of the physical world. "The thesis that nothing can exist in the absence of a material universe does not imply the nonsensical view that everything is material, but we can hold that if anything exists, matter exists, on the

grounds that it is only in matter that the necessary independent existence is to be found." One consequence is that "if there is no place for immaterial agents, then there is no place for God."

Even if one does not accept many of Rundle's Wittgensteinian interpretations of the way ordinary language works—interpretations that depend heavily on conditions of assertability available to the speaker—he has offered a serious challenge to the intelligibility of what is widely regarded as a fundamental question, as well as to one type of answer. And he does not admit the saving position that Wittgenstein himself apparently favored—that religious language does not make factual claims at all, but rather expresses an attitude toward the world. But it will not come as news to those who believe that God is responsible for the existence of the universe that they are not using words in the sense they bear in their ordinary worldly context. As Rundle acknowledges, claims about the attributes and acts of God are supposed to be based on a very distant analogy with what is meant by "mind," "good," "cause," or "create" in ordinary speech, and it is thought that we cannot grasp the divine nature but only gesture toward it with such analogical language. He rejects this kind of meaning as an illusion.

The most difficult philosophical question posed by Rundle's critique is whether such efforts to use words to indicate something that transcends the conditions of their ordinary application make sense. This question is especially acute with regard to the why-question itself, which is immediately gripping even to people who find a theological response ineligible for reasons like Rundle's. Though it is likely to make you giddy, it is hard to cast off the thought that there might have been nothing at all—not even space and time—that nothing might have been the case, ever. It is not a thought of how things might have been. It is not the thought of an empty universe. Nevertheless, it seems an alternative to all the possible positive ways the world could have been—an alternative both to the actual universe and to all the other possible universes that might have existed instead, each of them crammed with facts.

Perhaps each of us can imagine it on the analogy of our own nonexistence. The possibility that you should never have been born is an alternative to all the alternative possible courses of your experiential life, as well as to your actual life. From the objective point of view, of course, this is a perfectly imaginable state of affairs, but it is not an alternative possible course of experience for you: Subjectively, it would be not something different, but nothing. The possibility that there should never have been anything at all is the objective analogue to the subjective possibility—all too real, when you think about it—that you should never have existed.

While it is risky to use existing language to reach beyond its existing limits, we are impelled to do so again and again, however inadequately, in our recognition that our understanding of reality is so limited. This applies also to the question "Why?" which we seem capable of raising about anything, even if we have no idea what would count as an answer. Rundle's book is a wonderful stimulus to reflect on the ways in which philosophy can and cannot identify the excesses of attempted thought.