

Naturalism and the Fundamental Question

Stephen Maitzen

Why is there anything, rather than nothing at all? The German philosopher G. W. Leibniz, codiscoverer of calculus, called it “the first question that should rightly be asked.”¹ Another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, notorious for his impenetrable prose and (more lately) for his Nazi sympathies, called it not only “the fundamental question of metaphysics” but, indeed, “the first of all questions.”² In their honor, I propose to call it “the Fundamental Question,” which I’ll abbreviate as “FQ.”

These days, FQ often comes up as a debating tactic that believers in the supernatural—in particular, believers in

God—use against naturalism. Naturalism, as I define it, is just the denial of supernaturalism: the denial that any non-natural minds, agents, or causes exist. Many supernaturalists seem to think that FQ, couched in such a completely general way, is too profound for natural science to answer, even in principle. So, they say, naturalism can’t be the whole truth.

While they’re right that natural science can’t answer FQ, it’s not because the question is too profound or because science is too superficial. The real reason is that FQ, taken at face value, is a semantically defective pseudo-question that has no answer in the first place. Furthermore, once you turn FQ into a question that’s well-posed and therefore answerable, it has an answer that’s consistent with naturalism. FQ therefore gives supernaturalists none of the ammunition that many on both sides of the debate seem to think it does.

As a debating tactic, FQ has had some high-profile

1. G.W. Leibniz, “The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason,” *Leibniz Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner, 1951), 527.

2. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 1.



success. Even as pugnacious a critic of belief in God as the comedian Bill Maher, coproducer and star of the irreverent documentary *Religulous*, seems stumped by FQ and ready to soften his position in the face of it. Plugging his documentary on an episode of CNN's *Larry King Live*, Maher confessed the following about the existential questions allegedly answered by theism: "I've never been able to answer them and I know I never will. And you just give yourself a headache thinking about them. I mean, if you start thinking about these things, you kind of get down to 'Why is there anything?' Try to ponder that one afternoon if you're not high. . . . See, there may be answers. I'm not saying that there isn't something out there. I'm not strictly an atheist. An atheist is certain there's no God."³

In the face of the challenge, it seems, one of our culture's most visible critics of religion feels compelled to retreat from atheism and turn mealymouthed instead.

Thinghood and the Fundamental Question

But take heart, fellow atheists: we have no reason to retreat. The question "Why is there anything?" deserves no reply, because it's ill-posed for a reason that the following example helps illustrate. Hold a capped ballpoint pen in your otherwise empty hand, and consider the question "Exactly how many things are you holding in your hand?" Do you count the capped pen as one thing, or do you count its cap separately? If you uncap the pen and hold both the pen and the cap in your hand, why are you now holding two things in your hand if before you held just one? Do you count the pen's barrel shell, ink cartridge, and metal tip as distinct things you're holding? While you're at it, do you count each of the atoms that make up the pen?

Those additional questions about what to count show that "Exactly how many things are you holding in your hand?" is ill-posed and therefore has no answer if you take the question at face value. If the additional questions strike you as silly, that's perhaps because you're presupposing that in this context "thing" just means "pen" rather than any of those other candidates. But that's just the point. It's only after you assign some meaning to "thing" that you can hope to answer the original question. You can answer the question of how many pens, writing implements, pen caps, ink cartridges, or even atoms you're holding in your hand, although in the case of atoms your count will be rough rather than exact. But you don't know what to count until you know which *kind* of thing to count.

To be clear, it's not just an epistemic problem of not knowing what to count. The real problem is the lack of semantic content in the question itself. It's not as if the term "thing" *already* means "pen," "cap," "barrel shell," or

even "pen or cap or barrel shell." The term must be *supplied* one of those meanings (or some other) in the context. If someone asks the question with no kind or kinds of thing in mind, then that person has asked a pseudo-question that has no answer, not simply an answer that no one happens to know.

Some philosophers claim to believe not just in ordinary objects such as pens but also in esoteric entities such as arbitrary, undetached parts of ordinary objects and so-called "mereological fusions." (Mereology is a discipline that studies the relations among parts and wholes.)⁴ These philosophers would say that you're holding infinitely many things in your hand, including infinitely many undetached cross-sections of the pen's barrel shell, and perhaps also each of those cross-sections "fused" with some grain of dust on Mars. But notice that even their strange answer to the "how many" question depends on specifying some esoteric *kind* of thing infinitely many instances of which you can hold in your hand all at once. Thus, even their ontologically extravagant view in no way diminishes my point that counting requires the specification of kinds.⁵

Now to tie all this to the Fundamental Question. Believers in the supernatural, if they're otherwise well-informed,

FQ, taken at face value, is a ... pseudo-question that has no answer in the first place.

will acknowledge that natural science has proven spectacularly good at discovering not only piecemeal explanations of the existence of particular phenomena but also integrated explanations of the existence and operation of entire systems. In this sense, supernaturalists must admit that natural science can answer not only mechanistic "how"

3. Bill Maher, interview on CNN television's *Larry King Live*, August 19, 2008. <http://transcripts.cnn.com/transcripts/0808/19/lkl.01.html>.

4. See Achille Varzi, "Mereology," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mereology>.

5. By contrast, other philosophers defend meager ontologies that exclude such ordinary objects as pens. Peter van Inwagen, for example, claims that the only material objects are organisms and mereological simples (that is, objects lacking any parts): see his *Material Beings* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990). Nevertheless, my point stands: "How many organisms, mereological simples, etc., are you holding?" is just a way of supplying content to the empty question "How many things are you holding?"

questions but also existential “why” questions, such as “Why are there penguins?” or “Why is there cancer?” Indeed, science improves at that task every year.

Yet when I point this out, supernaturalists hasten to trot out their warhorse, FQ. They retort that natural science hasn’t explained, and can’t explain, why there exists anything *at all*: not specific things or kinds of things but anything in the first place, anything in general. “We agree with you,” they say, “that science can explain why there are penguins, plums, and even protons. But why are there *any* such things at all? For that, you need something beyond science.” Indeed, in my experience, they sometimes pound the table to emphasize the word *any*, as if by talking about penguins, plums, and protons I’ve been missing the whole point: Why are there any things, of any kind, at all?

But suppose that you and I have been discussing penguins, plums, and protons, and you ask me, “Why are there any of the things we’ve been discussing?” You then tell me that you don’t want explanations of the existence of penguins, plums, or protons in particular. Instead, you

want to know why there are any of the things we’ve been discussing (with table-pounding emphasis on “any”) rather than none at all. Clearly your attitude is perverse: “the things we’ve been discussing” is only a collective label for penguins, plums, and protons; it doesn’t pick out a *kind of thing* requiring an explanation beyond those you said you didn’t want to hear.

Likewise, the term *thing* is just a catchall label—a “covering term”⁶—that ranges conveniently over instances that belong to kinds such as *penguin*, *plum*, and *proton*. Nevertheless, when people reason about FQ, they commonly make the mistake of treating the term *thing* itself as if it denoted a *kind of thing*, an error that even professional philosophers sometimes commit.⁷ Clearly, “thing” can’t denote a kind of thing, much less a kind whose instances need an explanation beyond the explanations available for the genuine kinds to which they already belong. Furthermore, it’s important to see that you can’t rescue FQ by tacking on an adjective such as “physical,” “concrete,” or “contingent” in an effort to avoid the emptiness of “thing.” Notice that,

when you held the pen in your hand, every kind of thing you were holding answered to all of those adjectives: pens, pen caps, ink cartridges, atoms, undetached cross-sections of barrel shell, and even mereological fusions of the foregoing are all physical things, concrete (rather than abstract) things, and contingent (rather than necessarily existing) things. The phrase “physical, concrete, and contingent thing” no more denotes a kind of thing than “thing” alone does. So asking you to count the physical, concrete, and con-

tingent things you were holding is no more meaningful than asking you to count the things, period, you were holding.

In sum, then, asking *why* there are any things, without specifying which kinds of things, is no more meaningful than asking exactly how many things you’re holding in your hand. Anyone posing the Fundamental Question therefore fails to ask a well-posed question—unless, again, “thing” is understood to refer to a particular kind of thing. But once we specify a kind of thing (*penguin*, *plum*, *proton*, whatever), then the explanatory success of science gives us every reason to think that the “Why are there any?” question will have an answer consistent with naturalism. If FQ is simply the long disjunctive question “Why are there any penguins, or plums, or protons, or people, or . . . ?” (and so

The question ‘Why is there anything?’ deserves no reply, because it’s ill-posed.



6. See Amie L. Thomasson, *Ordinary Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 117.

7. Compare Jacob Ross, “The Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Grand Inexplicable,” in *The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?* ed. Tyron Goldschmidt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 88, which treats the term *being* as denoting a kind of being.

on, for every kind of thing), then natural science can give a long disjunctive answer to it.

Don't Fear the Regress

Some readers may still suspect that my analysis misses the point of FQ. Suppose we agree that science explains the existence of protons in terms of the existence of quarks. What, then, explains the existence of quarks? Perhaps science will discover that quarks are physical states of the exotic "strings" posited by string theory. But, in that case, what would explain the existence of the strings? And so on. In response to that barrage of questions, mustn't scientific explanations eventually give out in favor of some supernatural explanation-stopper? How can the naturalistically acceptable explanations keep coming and coming, without end?

But wait. There's no reason to presume that the explanations *ought* to come to an end; there's no reason to regard an endless chain of explanations as bad. Granted, if you think that an explanation of P in terms of Q is defective unless it also includes an explanation of Q, then you'll object to an endless chain of explanations on the grounds that *no* link in the chain is explained until every link is explained. But that view of explanation is simply mistaken. If the fire investigator concludes that a short circuit in poorly installed wiring explains why the fire started, we don't regard the explanation as in any way defective because it doesn't also explain why the wiring was poorly installed, why the building materials were combustible, or why enough oxygen was present for combustion to occur. Our concept of explanation allows that an explanation of P in terms of Q can succeed even if it fails to explain Q. Explaining Q is the duty of a *different* explanation that appeals to R. And so on.

Indeed, if we observe the rule that no genuine explanation can be circular, and therefore nothing can be literally self-explanatory, then any chain of explanations *must* be endless or else contain a link that's unexplained. Why? Because the rule requires that every link in the chain be explained by some *other* link in the chain without going in a circle. Given those alternatives, surely there's no reason to prefer a chain of explanations containing an unexplained link over an endless chain of explanations that leaves *no* link unexplained. If anything, the reverse is true.

An endless chain of explanations never contains an ultimate explainer, but the alleged virtues of an ultimate explainer are bogus. Nothing, not even God, can serve as the explanation of its own existence.⁸ So any ultimate explainer

must itself be unexplained, and if you're willing to tolerate unexplained beings, then you have no principled motivation for asking FQ—"Why is there anything?"—in the first place. In an endless but successful chain of explanations, although it's not turtles all the way down (because turtles form a kind whose instantiation needs explaining), it's *something or other* all the way down. Nothing lies at the end of an endless chain of explanations, which I hasten to add shouldn't tempt anyone to regard "nothing" as the ultimate explainer. To state the obvious, there's literally no such thing as nothing, much less a thing having explanatory power. Otherwise, those who say that nothing is greater than God would thereby identify something that's greater than God.

Supernaturalists must admit that natural science can answer not only mechanistic 'how' questions but also existential 'why' questions.

Furthermore, to ask "Why are there any links in the chain at all?" is just to ask FQ all over again. If "links in the chain" is a covering term for instances of genuine kinds, such as penguins, then we can answer the question without abandoning naturalism. If "links in the chain" isn't a covering term for instances of genuine kinds, then "Why are there any links in the chain at all?" is a pseudo-question that has no answer.

Finally, an endless chain of naturalistic explanations is consistent with the rule that to explain why any things of a particular kind ever exist, you must invoke something that *isn't* of that particular kind. For example, to explain why any humans ever exist, you must invoke something that isn't human, such as the members of another species from which humans arose. As we saw, none of the terms *thing*, *physical thing*, *concrete thing*, or *contingent thing* denotes a kind of thing, so there's nothing wrong with explaining why there are (physical, concrete, contingent) things of one kind by invoking (physical, concrete, contingent) things of some other kind, *ad infinitum*. Because (physical, concrete, contingent) things don't form a kind, you don't need to go "outside that kind" in order to explain why any such things exist.

Therefore, despite what you may have been led to believe, the Fundamental Question, if it asks anything, asks something whose answer poses no threat to naturalism. **FI**

8. As John Morreall convincingly argues in "God as Self-Explanatory," *Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1980): 206–14.

Stephen Maitzen is the W. G. Clark Professor of Philosophy at Acadia University.