

Ontological Pluralism, the Gradation of Being, and the Question “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Kris McDaniel

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1. Introductory Remarks

Ontological pluralism is the view that there are modes of being, ways of existing, or different ways to be something. Ontological pluralism is an intriguing and alluring doctrine, despite its present unpopularity.<sup>1</sup> If it is true, many metaphysical questions must be rethought. One of these is the question of why there is something rather than nothing.

More generally being wrong about being often leads to being wrong about many ontological questions. Besides denying that there are modes of being, a second, and perhaps even more widespread, mistake made about being is the denial that there are gradations of being, that some things exist more than others, or enjoy more being than others. The claim that there are gradations of being also makes more complicated the question of why there is something rather than nothing.

There are both obvious and non-obvious reasons why these doctrines make more complicated the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Let’s briefly mention the obvious reasons first. If there are modes of being, that is, different ways *to be*, then either in addition to *or instead of* the question “why is there something, rather than nothing?”, we should pursue, for each mode of being, the question of why there is, in that way, something rather than nothing. As we will see in a bit, on my view, the question of why there is something rather than nothing is not actually a fundamentally important question, and so I would recommend pursuing these other questions *instead of* rather than *in addition to* it. Similarly, if there are degrees of being, one might wish to ask why something exists to this degree rather than some other degree, rather than simply ask the question of why there is something rather nothing. But, as will hopefully be clear shortly, on my view the more important questions are *whether* there are things that exist to the fullest degree, and if so, why they exist to that degree rather than to some lesser degree.

In order to better appreciate some of the non-obvious reasons why considerations of modes and degrees of being makes more complicated the question of why there is something rather than nothing, some background regarding how I’ve approached modes and gradations of being will be useful. In the next section, I provide this requisite background.

In order to avoid excessively cumbersome sentences in the pages that follow, I will henceforth use “ontological pluralism” to refer to the doctrine that there are modes of being, “the gradation thesis” to refer to the doctrine that there are gradations or degrees of being, and “the Question” to refer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing.

2. Modes of Being and Degrees of Being

I have found it helpful to think about modes of being and degrees of being in terms that most contemporary metaphysicians are more comfortable with, specifically, by way of the notion of *naturalness* or

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve defended ontological pluralism in McDaniel (2009), (2010a), (2010b), and (manuscript). Turner (2010) provides a fantastically detailed defense of the view as well.

*structure* as employed by David Lewis (1986), Theodore Sider (2009, 2012), and others. Here I recapitulate the main moves; interested readers are invited to delve more into the details in other published work.<sup>2</sup>

First, we embrace an objective ranking of properties and relations: some properties and relations are *more natural* than others. This objective ranking of properties is *fully comprehensive*: every property or relation appears at some place in the hierarchy. This does not mean that the hierarchy is linearly ordered; it only means that every property or relation bears the *is at least as natural as* relation to some property or relation. But I do accept that the hierarchy terminates at an upper bound: at the top of this hierarchy are the elite, perfectly natural properties and relations, those for which no other property or relation is more natural.

Every property appears in the naturalness hierarchy. Some properties or relations are higher-order properties or relations, that is, are properties or relations *of* other properties or relations. Finally, some of these higher-order properties or relations correspond to quantifiers; we can, if we like, take the semantic value of a quantifier to simply be either a property of properties or a kind of relation between properties; I won't settle this question here. But there is some property or relation that corresponds to the unrestricted existential quantifier of ordinary English, and it appears somewhere in this objective naturalness ranking. Let us call this property *being*.

*Being* is the "semantic value" of the ordinary unrestricted existential quantifier, the one that is sometimes employed by members of *our* linguistic community. But there could have been other linguistic communities who engage in a practice that looks from the outside very similar to the practice of existentially quantifying: such a community would have a primitive expression in their language that functions syntactically and inferentially like the existential quantifier of English. (Perhaps there are even actually such communities, but whether there are – and why there are rather than are not – are not questions that I will pursue here.) Let us call a (possible) expression that functions syntactically and inferentially like an existential quantifier an *e-quantifier*, even when the semantic value of an *e-quantifier* is not being but rather than some other property. Let us call the semantic values of these *e-quantifiers* *modes of being*, an expression which is admittedly somewhat infelicitous given that the extensions of some modes of being properly include the extension of being itself. Let us say that a *genuine mode of being* is a mode of being that ranks *at least as high* on the naturalness scale as *being* itself. Let us say that a *fundamental mode of being* is a perfectly natural mode of being. One enjoys a mode of being just in case one falls within the range of the possible *e-quantifier* that corresponds to this mode. Fundamental entities enjoy fundamental modes of being. In general, let us say that the *degree of being* enjoyed by some entity is proportionate to the naturalness of the *most* natural mode (or modes) of being enjoyed by that entity.

Are there any fundamental entities? I will assume so for the purposes of this paper, though it is certainly worth wondering what kind of argument could be given for the claim that there are fully real entities. One initial, and extremely hazy, thought is that there must be fundamental entities if there are to be any entities at all, since all facts about what there is are ultimately to be accounted for in terms of what fundamental entities there are. In short, there must be fundamental entities because there is

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the works described in the first footnote.

something, rather than nothing. But it is surprisingly hard to extract a non-hazy thesis from this hazy thought.

Let us turn to the question of whether *being* is itself a fundamental mode of being. In my view, it is not. Elsewhere, I have argued from the fact that shadows, holes, cracks, and other entities that I call ‘almost nothings’, exist to the claim that being itself is not a fundamental mode of being.<sup>3</sup> Here is one thread of this argument. Holes exist, but they are less real than their hosts. An entity’s amount of being is proportionate to the naturalness of the most natural possible e-quantifier that ranges over it. So being cannot be a fundamental mode, for if it were, then holes would be as real as their hosts, since both holes and hosts enjoy being. (Recall that, on my system, an entity’s degree of being is proportion to the naturalness of its most natural mode of being.)

So being is not itself a fundamental mode of being. Perhaps this shouldn’t be terribly surprising. Natural language did not evolve for the purposes of doing metaphysics, or for that matter, any theoretical inquiry. So it would actually be somewhat surprising if it turned out that we have managed to select as semantic values for any ordinary locution a property or relation of central importance to metaphysical inquiry. That said, it is an interesting question why being ended up as the semantic value for the ordinary unrestricted English quantifier.

I grant that part of what determines the semantic values of expressions is how high the candidates for being these values rank on the naturalness scale. But how we use these expressions obviously also plays a rather large role, as does the environment that we find ourselves in. The latter two components are not always independent – if the only things in our environment were colored black and white, we would have far less of a need for many of our color expressions, and it is likely that if they were used, they would enjoy a different use. But we are finite embodied beings, and I believe essentially so, and this finitude constrains use independently of whatever environment we happen to find ourselves in. In any world possible for creatures like us to be found, there will be perforated objects such that facts about them will not be communicable by creatures like us without them making reference to holes, without counting and hence quantifying over holes, without making comparative qualitative judgments concerning holes and other entities, without ascribing numerical identity to holes across times (and perhaps across possible worlds), and so forth. One can produce ‘paraphrases’ of such talk only if one can construct sentences of infinite length, since, for most sentences about holes, there are infinitely many ways perforated objects could make them true. A god could produce such paraphrases. But not creatures like us. Embodied finite creatures like us are doomed to use e-quantificational expressions in such a way that they are not apt to have as their semantic values fundamental modes of being. So in my view, being is not a fundamental mode of being, but there is a good explanation for why a more fundamental mode of being was not selected as the semantic value of the unrestricted English quantifier. And this explanation will of course generalize to any other natural language spoken by human beings and even, I believe, to any finite and embodied creature.

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically, in McDaniel (2010b).

So I think there are deep reasons why we did not end up selecting a perfectly natural mode of being to serve as the semantic value for ordinary quantificational claims. What is the upshot of these reflections for the Question? The question “Why is There Something Rather than Nothing?” has seemed to some philosophers, perhaps most famously Heidegger, to be an important or deep question to ask. But the notions of something and nothing do not carve nature at the joints. If a necessary condition for a question being metaphysically deep rather than metaphysically shallow is that the concepts used in forming the question must carve nature at the joints, then Question is a metaphysically shallow question.<sup>4</sup> In this case, there is a more specific reason to think that the Question is a shallow question, which will be discussed in the next section. Whether there is a better question to be asked will be examined in succeeding sections.

### 3. Global Absences and the Question

It is an interesting question whether there are general patterns to our use of quantificational expressions that can be distilled to and so expressed in the form of explicit conditionals that link whether some situation obtains with whether something exists. It seems to me that there are such patterns, given the strong tendency we have to engaging in reification. Here are some illustrative examples of sentences we all endorse that illustrate this tendency. If you and I are both heading north, *there is* a direction that we are both heading in. If you have as many socks as I have guitars, *there is* a number that is the number of your socks and my guitars. If you believe that God exists and I do not, *there is* something that you believe that I reject. And so forth.

As I said, each of these sentences just mentioned is true. In fact, something stronger is the case: each of these sentences is *obviously* true. Moreover, these antecedents of many of these kinds of sentences are clearly true as well. And who would dare to deny modus ponens? It is clear and obvious that there are directions, numbers, and contents of beliefs, i.e., propositions. Of course, many clever philosophers have contorted themselves or at least the words that they speak by attempting various “paraphrase” strategies for doing away with these entities, but none of these strategies has been successful. In fact, the same sort of reason why finite, embodied beings like ourselves cannot do away with talk of holes also explains why we are not in the position to do away with talk of these other entities.

Does this mean that there are really are such entities as directions, numbers, and propositions? Yes, there really are such entities – that is, there are such entities. Often, the word “really” serves mainly as a means to emphasizing the point the speaker means to convey, as when one says, “yes, tax cuts for the extremely wealthy really don’t contribute to economic growth.” That said, it might be that there is also a *metaphysical* use for the word “really” – when one asks whether there are *really* numbers, what one might have in mind is whether numbers are *fully real*, whether a kind of quantification that encompasses numbers in its domain might be a fundamental kind of quantification. And as I see things, the jury is still out on the question of whether there *really* are directions, numbers, or propositions. That is, in my terminology, it is clear that such entities exist, but it is less clear whether they fully exist.

As mentioned earlier, there is a kind of systematicity to our pattern of reification, that is, our use of quantificational expressions. And this is partly why the semantic value of these quantifier expressions helps ensure that certain bridge principles connecting the obtaining of certain situations with the existence of certain entities. Sometimes these bridge principles take the form of biconditionals as well. One of the most celebrated cases of such a biconditional was championed by Frege, and states that the number of Fs = the number of Gs if and

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<sup>4</sup> Compare with Sider (2012), especially chapters four and twelve. I am deeply indebted to Sider’s work on this topic.

only if there are exactly as many Fs as there are Gs. The left hand side of the biconditional is “ontologically committed” to the existence of numbers. But for our purposes here, we will focus on a much more ignominious biconditional, which links the existence of things to the absence of others.

I suspect that, given the way in which we use quantificational expressions and other attendant vocabulary, the following is true: the absence of Fs exists if and only if there are no Fs. In general, we freely and happily traffic in absences. We count them, we dwell on them, we mourn because of them. We even attribute causal relevance to them. Causation by absence must be admitted. Omissions cannot be omitted. Moreover, we treat absences with sufficient seriousness to classify them into kinds: shadows are certain kinds of absences of light, holes are certain kinds of absences of matter, droughts are absences of rain, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Now for the purposes of considering the Question, it is important to assess whether or not a full description of our ordinary practices of quantifying over, predicating properties of, and classifying distinct kinds of absences would provide a compelling reason to attribute the biconditional mentioned earlier, namely, that the absence of Fs exist if and only if there are no Fs. For if it does, we have an answer as to why there is something rather than nothing. Even if there were nothing else, the absence of everything else would exist, and hence would be something. (Note that these sorts of biconditionals that encapsulate our reificatory practices are not plausibly taken to be merely contingently true. For example, if there are numbers whenever there are equinumerous groups, then it is not a contingent fact that there are numbers whenever there are equinumerous groups.)

Seriously think of how tempting this line of thought has been to generations and generations of teenagers who think about the question of why there is something rather than nothing. This line of thought is often their opening move! Often, they express this line of thought in a way that makes philosophers unhappy. Perhaps they utter the following words, “There must be something, for even if there were nothing, nothing would itself be something.” And perhaps philosophers are right to be unhappy, since the standard philosophically regimented use of the phrase “nothing” employs it as a quantifier rather than a name. Of course, expressions can be used in many ways, and even “nothing” can be used as a referring expression if one so desired – and the absence of everything else is as good a thing to be referred to by the word “nothing” as anything else could be. Perhaps the ordinary person thinking about the Question equivocates when she uses the word “nothing”; in its first appearance in the sentence above, it is functioning as a quantifier, but in its second appearance it functions as a referring expression for a global absence of everything else. Who knows for sure? But this is one way in which someone could use these words, and this way of using them would certainly fit with what seem to be our conventions governing the vocabulary of absences, namely, to say that an absence of Fs exists when there are no Fs.

Let me be clearly state that is not clear that the line of thought mentioned above is correct. But it is also not clearly incorrect. I suspect it is true, but I have no idea how to provide a conclusive argument for the claim that, given what we have ended up meaning by “there is”, this abstraction principle expresses a truth. But what I am relatively sure about is that there is little to be said that favors our actual way of using “there is” over this possible way of using “there is”, if these two uses do not in fact coincide. If anything, this putative alternative use of “there is” uniformly codifies the relevant abstraction principle, and so provides the basis for a principled account of when absences exist rather than the mere hodge podge we would be left with if this putative alternative use is genuinely an alternative use. So from a metaphysical perspective, this alternative e-quantifier might be in better shape with respect to naturalness than being itself, albeit perhaps only slightly better. It is hard to for me to see how the Question as standardly understood then could be a metaphysically deep question to be asking, since on either way of using expressions such as “there is” the question does not carve nature at the joints.

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<sup>5</sup> On seeing absences, see Sorensen (2008).

Of course, none of this shows that absences are *really* real, that is full existents, or that a scenario in which the only thing that existed would be the absence of everything else is a scenario containing a fully real being. I am certain that absences, even putative global absences, are not fully real beings, and that the notions of “something”, “there is”, and their like, are all doing very poorly on the naturalness scale. But nonetheless there are absences. And there is some evidence, which is of course inconclusive, that the notions of something and nothing that we use when asking the question are such that it follows from them that there must be something rather than nothing. But I think that once we see why this might be the case, we also see that we shouldn’t be as interested in the question of why there is something rather than nothing. If *this* is the reason why there must be something, then the question was not a question truly worth pursuing.

Are there better questions to be pursued? This of course remains to be seen. But we should note that many of those who claim to be interested in the question of why there is something rather than nothing are really interested in a more narrow question, such as the question of why there are “concrete material things” rather than no “concrete material things”. When asking this more narrow question, however, one still uses the ordinary quantifier expression, a device not well-suited for asking fundamental ontological questions. So I suspect we will be better served if we abandon this device, and stipulatively introduce new e-quantifiers that have as their semantic values whatever we take to be the fundamental modes of being. (If it turns out that such modes of being already have a linguistic home in ordinary language, so much the better, but I am doubtful that this is the case.) Then, once we have done this, we can see whether for each such e-quantifier  $E_n$ , there is an interesting, well-formed question of why  $E_n x E_n y (x=y)$  rather than  $\sim E_n x E_n y (x=y)$ . Call a question of this sort a *Narrow Question*. Of course, it will be very hard to assess whether there are better Narrow Questions without having good evidence as to what the fundamental modes of being are, and acquiring such evidence is an arduous task indeed. And frankly it’s not a task that I have completed. Accordingly, what follows will be both highly speculative and provisional. I will focus on ontological schemes that have the following features: first, they enjoy some independent plausibility and are supported by arguments to be found in the contemporary philosophical literature, and second, they seem to generate potential roadblocks to the possibility of interesting Narrow Questions being formed.

#### 4. Possibility and Actuality as Mode of Beings

Here we will consider an ontological scheme according to which the merely possible and the actual enjoy different modes of being, both of which are fundamental modes of being. On this view, there are talking donkeys and there are ordinary zebras, but the way in which there are talking donkeys is not the way in which there are zebras. This is a bare bones statement of the view, but it will be helpful to put some flesh on these bare bones. Behold the meat of modal realism!

The version of modal realism to be discussed is a refinement of Phillip Bricker’s modal realism with absolute actuality.<sup>6</sup> On this view, the difference between the merely possible and the actual is not some property that the actual possesses but the merely possible lacks, or vice-versa. In fact, possible objects can be qualitative duplicates of actual objects. Just as some actual objects are individuals or substances (rather than sets, or properties, or propositions), among the merely possible are individuals or substances. Possible objects can stand in various relations to one another, including the relation of part to whole. Call a relation an *external* relation just in case it does not supervene on the intrinsic properties of the things it relates, but does supervene on the intrinsic properties of the whole composed of the things it relates. (Perhaps distance relations are external relations in this sense.) Say that some things are *externally related to each other* just in case they are the relata of some external

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<sup>6</sup> See Bricker (1996), (2001), and (2006) for articulations and defenses of his version of modal realism with absolute actuality.

relation. Perhaps *being related to each other* is a transitive relation, but perhaps not. But in any event, the transitive closure of this relation is a transitive relation; call this relation the *C* relation. Say that some things the *T*s are *maximally C related* just in case each of the *T*s is *C*-related to each of the *T*s, and none of the *T*s are *C*-related to anything that is not one of the *T*s. Finally, say that a *possible world* is a whole that is composed of maximally *C*-related things.

Once we have possible worlds in our picture it seems that we can offer a standard account of metaphysical (de dicto) possibility in terms of truth at some world and metaphysical (de dicto) necessity in terms of truth at all worlds. But let's note that, although one important motivation for embracing possibilism is to provide an analysis of modal notions, it is not the only one. Perhaps it is not even the most important motivation. For the sake of reflection on the Question, and the possibility of interesting variants, we'll consider a version of possibilism that doesn't try to *reduce* metaphysical modality to quantification over possible worlds, but still accepts that the biconditionals linking possibility and necessity to truth at a world or all worlds are true.<sup>7</sup> But since we are formulating a version of modal realism in the context of ontological pluralism, we need to be careful when using words like "some" or "all" when stating these biconditionals. There are two fundamental e-quantifiers in play, one of which ranges over the merely possible, and will accordingly be designated by " $E_p$ ", and one of which ranges over the actual, and will accordingly be designated by " $E_a$ ". Any "unrestricted" quantifier that ranges over the domains of both of these quantifiers is less natural than either quantifier. If one of our projects is to give an account of a modal operator that can preface one of these quantifiers, it is clear that " $E_a$ " is one we want to have prefaced. *But it is not clear that it even makes sense to preface the possibilist quantifier with a modal operator.* This is important, because if it doesn't make sense to preface the possibilist quantifier with a modal operator, then the narrow question of  $E_p x E_p y (x=y)$  rather than  $\sim E_p x E_p y (x=y)$  is not a legitimate question. That narrow question is a legitimate question only if the presupposition that it makes sense to assert that the alternatives are genuinely possible.

In general, if there is a mode of being such that modal notions do not even apply to it – if, to speak metaphorically, the things enjoying this mode of being are *amodal* rather than denizens of modal space – then the narrow question of why there are things having this mode being rather than not is an illegitimate, and in fact, ill-formed question.

Let's sharpen the idea that there might be an e-quantifier such that it is in principle not capable of conjoining with a modal operator to form a well-formed sentence. In section 2, I explained the view that there are modes of being – ontological pluralism – but way of there being an objective naturalness ranking that applies to the metaphysical correlates of quantifier expressions. But if we liked, we could state ontological pluralism as the view that there are possible languages containing semantically primitive quantifiers (e-quantifiers) that are maximally natural expressions, and hence are at least as natural as the unrestricted quantifier.<sup>8</sup> This formulation sets aside the question of whether natural expressions need to derive their naturalness from their corresponding semantic values; this is an interesting question, but we won't pursue it here, and it might well be that the two formulations of ontological pluralism are harmlessly interchangeable if

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<sup>7</sup> Note that I am focusing on this version of possibilism not because it is the version I find most plausible, but because consideration of this version provides a route to seeing how certain ways of replacing the Question with more narrow versions of it will not succeed. In the next section, we will discuss the consequences for the Question if modal notions are in some way reduced, and hence, are non-fundamental.

<sup>8</sup> This is the 'minimal' version of ontological pluralism; McDaniel (2009, 2010a) also discusses an Aristotelian version of ontological pluralism according to which some semantically primitive quantifiers are *more* natural than the unrestricted quantifier.

the natural of an expression must derive from the naturalness of its semantic content. But in any event, for the purposes of this section, it is worth bringing into the forefront the vehicles that carry these semantic values.

Let us call a language that contains only perfectly natural expressions a metaphysically perfect language. Given ontological pluralism, a metaphysically perfect language will contain multiple quantifiers. Given a commitment to multiple fundamental quantifiers, it is natural (but of course not mandatory) to hold that there are distinct sets of variables associated with these quantifiers. That is, the metaphysically perfect language is multi-sorted.<sup>9</sup> For each set of variables, there will be a maximal set of terms that are their possible substitution-instances. These sets will not overlap.

Once we have sorted variables, we need to think about what sort of predicates are in the metaphysically perfect language. Broadly speaking, it will contain two kinds of predicates, *intra-categorical* predicates and *inter-categorical* predicates. An intra-categorical predicate is such that it can meaningfully prefix only terms from exactly one maximal set of terms. An inter-categorical predicate can meaningfully prefix terms from more than one maximal set, but for each such predicate, there will be syntactic rules governing how that predicate can combine with these terms. Whether a predicate is an intra-categorical predicate or an inter-categorical predicate is as much a function of its logical form as whether that predicate is, e.g., a one-place or two-place predicate.

The logical form of predicate is shown by the range of open sentences one can construct with the predicate. ‘x1 is to the left of x2’ is an open sentence in which the predicate ‘is to the left of’ appears. ‘x1 is to the left of’ fails to be an open sentence. On the view under consideration, the *sort* of variables matters as much as the number of variables. One can begin with an open sentence, replace a variable of one sort with a variable from another sort, and end with something that fails to be an open sentence.

Now we’ve been talking about the logical form of predicates, but in principle there is no barrier to distinguishing sentence-operators in a similar way. So as before, we can distinguish two kinds of operators. Let us call an operator a *broad* operator just in case it can yield a grammatically well-formed sentence when it prefaces any closed sentence, regardless of the kinds of quantifiers, variables, predicates, or names contained within that sentence. Let us call an operator a *narrow* operator just in case it is not broad.<sup>10</sup> Probably purely logical operations such as sentential negation will be broad operators. But *if* there is an operator for metaphysical modality in the perfectly natural language – and it is far from clear that there is – it is still an open question whether it is a broad or a narrow operator.

Now I haven’t given an argument that such an operator would be a narrow operator. But we can now see how it might fail to be intelligible to ask why  $E_p x E_p y (x=y)$  rather than  $\sim E_p x E_p y (x=y)$ . Such a

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<sup>9</sup> In my previous work, I did not discuss the possibility of sorting. Turner (2010) explicitly discusses this issue, but opts to focus on a version of ontological pluralism that makes use of single-sorted variables. In McDaniel (manuscript-2), I explore in more detail the consequences of multi-sorted fundamental languages for principles of recombination.

<sup>10</sup> I’m being somewhat lazy here and only focusing on “one-place” sentence operators; more complicated distinctions could and probably should be drawn once we stop being lazy.

question is intelligible only if we can produce a well-formed sentence by prefacing “ $E_p x E_p y (x=y)$ ” with a modal operator. It might be that we can sensibly why ask why  $E_a x E_a y (x=y)$  rather than  $\sim E_a x E_a y (x=y)$ , since the “actualist e-quantifier” is one to which a fundamental modal operator can be attached. And certainly, if there is such a fundamental operator that can be attached to a perfectly natural e-quantifier, then there is at least one deep question that we can ask instead of the question of why there is something rather than nothing. But we still must be cautious, since there are other modes of being for which the question of why some things enjoy that mode might not even be sensibly asked. This version of possibilism discussed here is one such view. There might be others.

Consider a kind of classical theism, for example, in which God exists in a fundamentally different way from the ways in which all other things are. Perhaps for each non-divine mode of being, expressed by “ $E_n x$ ” it makes sense to ask why  $E_n x E_n y (x=y)$  rather than  $\sim E_n x E_n y (x=y)$ . But perhaps with respect to the divine mode of being, “ $E_d x$ ”, the question of why  $E_n x E_n y (x=y)$  rather than  $\sim E_n x E_n y (x=y)$  isn’t legitimate since claims about the possibility of one of these “alternatives” are not even well-formed. On this view, rather than saying “there no potentiality in God”, it really doesn’t even make sense, at a fundamental level, to ascribe potentiality to such a being.

In the previous section, I presented a reason to think that the question of why there is something rather than nothing was, from the metaphysical perspective, a surprisingly superficial question. Reflection on why this might be the case prompted us to see whether there were more narrow questions than the Question that might be metaphysically deep. It turns out that *being* itself ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. So this led us to the hope that we will do better if we focus on the fundamental modes of being rather than being itself. What we’ve seen in this section is that, given ontological pluralism, we need to be cautious in assuming that, for each fundamental mode of being, there is a correspondingly deep question as to why there are things enjoying that mode rather than not.

And we will see in the next section that there is a further complication: there might be grounds for thinking that there is no metaphysically fundamental notion of modality at all.

## 5. Non-fundamental Modality and the Purity of the Fully Real

The significance of the Question is also threatened if there is no metaphysically fundamental notion at all. In the previous section, we discussed a version of possibilism, which was a modified version of the form of modal realism defended by Bricker (1999, 2001, 2006) that took seriously the idea that the distinction between the possible and the actual is an existential distinction, i.e., a distinction between modes of being. In that discussion, we provisionally set aside that possibilists of this sort attempt to reduce modal notions to non-modal ones; a consequence of this sort of reduction is that modal notions are not fundamental or perfectly natural. We will now no longer provisionally set the reductive project aside, but take it in full to see its consequences for the Question.

One of the innovative ideas developed by Bricker is that we needn’t analyze modal operators in terms of quantifiers over possible worlds. If we like, we can analyze them in terms of *plural* quantifiers over worlds; on this view, a proposition is possible just in case it is true at some world or at some *worlds*. And in this way, we can reconcile the possibility of island universes with modal realism: although there is no world consisting of absolutely disconnected concrete chunks of reality, every pair of worlds consists of absolutely disconnected chunks of reality, and so the possibility of there being absolutely disconnected chunks of reality is thereby secured. An alternative proposal offered by Bricker is available for those unfamiliar with or squeamish about plural quantifiers; this proposal is to analyze modal operators in terms of what holds at sets of worlds rather than worlds: to be possible is to be true at some set of worlds. As before, the possibility of island universes is secured. Moreover, if we like,

we can also secure the possibility of there being absolutely nothing at all. We have a choice: we can say that a proposition is metaphysically possible just in case it is true at some non-empty set of worlds, or we can say that a proposition is metaphysically possible just in case it is true at some set of worlds, including the empty set. Let me stress that for the possibilist of this sort, whether the possibilist includes the empty set in the range of the quantifier to which the possibility operator is to be analyzed is a choice that is unconstrained by any “perfectly natural modal properties of propositions”, since on this reductionist view there are no such properties. What is *fundamentally* there, for this possibilists, are the actual things, the various possible worlds and sets thereof, and nothing else. So for this possibilist, the Question is not a deep question. The possibilist can select a meaning for the modal operator according to which the sentence “it is metaphysically possible that there be no actual things at all” expresses a truth, but she can also select a meaning according to which it expresses a falsehood, and *from a metaphysical perspective, neither choice is better than the other*. In this sense, “it is a matter of convention” whether there could be no actual things. It seems to me that the Question is much less exciting if it turns on what is “a matter of convention” in this sense.

And of course this version of possibilism is not the only view in modality on which modal notions fail to carve at the joints: there are many varieties of “modal conventionalism”, “modal deflationism”, and the like.<sup>11</sup> But for our purposes we will set a detailed discussion of them aside, and focus on whether the view that being comes in degrees provides a reason to think that modal notions are not fundamental. I will present an interesting but highly speculative and inconclusive line of thought beginning with the thesis that being comes in degrees and terminating with the thesis that modality is nonfundamental.

I’ve argued elsewhere that a sufficient condition for being a fully real entity is enjoying a perfectly natural property. This sufficient condition is the contemporary analogy of the medieval principle that beings of reason cannot enjoy real accidents or stand in real relations. Let’s take this principle on board not because we are convinced that it is true, but rather to see where it leads. Very quickly we get an interesting result: any property shared by fully real entities and less than fully real entities is not a perfectly natural property. Consider *shape properties*, such as being cubical or being pyramid-shaped. A beach ball, to which I will provisionally grant the status of a full existent, can enjoy being cubical but so can a hole, and no hole is a full existent. So being cubical is not a perfectly natural property, given the just mentioned sufficient condition. Perhaps artifacts like pyramids enjoy full reality, but they also enjoy being pyramid shaped, a property that some weirdly situated lumps of trash might come to enjoy, and (so it seems to me) no arbitrary heap is a full existent. So being pyramid shaped is not a perfectly natural property. And so forth for other shape properties. As I mentioned, any property enjoyable by a less than fully real thing is not a perfectly natural property, and *this includes modal properties*. Any modal property enjoyed by less than fully real thing is not a perfectly natural property, and this includes the property of possibly not existing: holes can be filled, shadows can be eliminated by sufficient illumination, and heaps can be swept away by winds of fate and fortune (or just ordinary wind). These conditions in which nonfundamental objects can go out of existence also indicate conditions under which they never would have come into existence: being a contingent being is a property they enjoy and hence is not a perfectly natural property.

Of course, these are *de re* modal properties, but when we state the Question, the modal presupposition we make is a *de dicto* proposition. It is not that everything that there is a contingent thing (or every concrete thing, or every actual concrete thing, or whatnot). It is that it is metaphysically possible that there be nothing at all (or nothing concrete, or nothing actual and concrete, or whatnot). The latter claim entails the former, but it is not at all clear whether the former entails the latter. And more to the point, it is not clear what we should conclude

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Cameron (2009) and Sider (2012, chapter 12).

about whether a notion of de dicto metaphysical possibility fails to carve at the joints simply because many (or even all) de re modal predicates fail to carve at the joints.

There is one way I see for moving from the claim that some entities enjoy less than full reality towards reaching the conclusion that de dicto modality also fails to carve at the joints, but it is very contentious, although not without plausibility. First, it requires embracing the claim that linguistic expressions or concepts enjoy their degree of naturalness only derivatively, by standing for, referring to, or representing some entity or entities that enjoy that degree of naturalness directly. For example, one predicate is more natural than another predicate because the corresponding properties are correspondingly ranked. What then corresponds to sentence-operators, if we wish to ascribe some degree of naturalness to them? Plausibly, if entities must be invoked, then the entities to be invoked are properties of abstracta such as propositions. On this view, the de dicto possibility operator corresponds to a property of propositions.

Given the sufficient condition for full reality mentioned earlier, whether this property is perfectly natural then crucially depends on the ontological status of propositions. *Metaphysical possibility carves at the joints only if propositions are fully real entities.* Perhaps propositions are fully real entities, but debating this would take up more space than is available. I find it interesting that the debate about whether the Question is a metaphysically important question could turn on the ontological status of abstracta, and this is so *even if the Question is narrowed to explicitly be about the possibility of there being no concrete entities.* The interesting upshot is this: if there is no fundamental modality, there is no fundamental way to state an alternative to the Question.