

Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing?

[Paul Williams, a specialist in Mahāyāna philosophy, called himself a “Buddhist” for many years, but then converted to Roman Catholicism, about which he wrote about in his book, *The Unexpected Way* (2002). Yet, he continued earning his living as a Buddhism scholar. Williams’ thesis for his book is “why there is something rather than nothing”: this is my response, a reflection originally published in Piya Tan, *Healing Words: Simple Joys 2*, Singapore: The Minding Centre, 2011: ch 22.]

One of the last engaging arguments for a creator-God centres around the question “Why is there something, rather than nothing?” In western philosophy, this is part of the contingency argument: the universe depends on an explanation outside of itself. The argument is that to make sense of something, we need to relate it to something else.

Horizontally, for example, we can only know pleasure in contrast with pain, or we compare something as being more beautiful than another, and so on. However, it should be borne in mind here that all this is subjective: each person has his or her own level or definition of pleasure, beauty, etc. So everyone is right in a way, but this is not helpful for our discussion.

Arguing vertically, we can say that I am here because I was born from my parents, and they from their parents and so on. We can also imagine the existence and origin of things, say our food, in this way. If we are eating a plate of food from the hawker, and the hawker got his ingredients from his suppliers, who in turn planted them or got them from elsewhere, and so on.

On a bigger scale, we can ask, but where do we ultimately come from, or how did the universe come into being? If everything is caused by a previous state, then we could, as it were, ask what would be come to ultimately, that is, the first cause? Some claim that this first cause is God or God’s actions.

Now we have a very serious problem. The moment we say that there IS a God, we have put Him (or Her) into time: whatever is in time is impermanent. Similarly, if God ACTS, an action occurs in time: again impermanence. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist.

For argument’s sake, must there be only ONE God as the first cause? Why not many Gods or gods? If all these Gods and gods exist, they must exist in time: they are all impermanent. Buddhist mythology is full of such beings. But have no significant role in our spiritual life.

Most theologians (God specialists) reject the notion of an impermanent God. Their God is eternal, they claim. Then they try to explain why: their holy books say so, they have miracles, God has changed their lives, etc.

More problems here. There are many holy books of different religions, and they all claim that only MY God is the true God: so we will leave it at that, not to be embroiled in any religious violence. Miracles are what you make of it: if miracles are true, they occur in all religions and also outside of religion. And what do we mean by a “miracle”?

The point is that God wouldn’t be God if there were an explanation for his existence. But we keep on trying to explain “who, what, how, why, and when” regarding God. It is most interesting that God himself has never spoken anything about himself, except for what others say about him.¹

But we have still not answered the question we began with: why something rather than nothing. First, we need to ask, what is this “something”? Philosophers have come with two possible answers.

¹ See Reflection, “Who what why how?” R277 2013: [link](#).

The first is that there is NO answer: existence is a brute fact without explanation. Something or other must exist. Not many people like such an answer, but we have to live it. The second is that at the “very beginning”—whatever that may mean—something was self-existing.

The essence of this something is its own existence. Philosophers and scientists generally favour this second answer, and include among the primordial “something” such things as matter-energy and space-time, natural laws of physics, or forms of consciousness or some general principle or value.

Informed Buddhists however would question the basics, like what really is this “something” we are talking about? The moment I point to something it is gone in space-time. The moment I am aware of a thought, it is gone. So can we really put a finger on any Thing at all? In simple terms, this is the characteristic of not-self, a lack of abiding thing in this space-time continuum.

Buddhists do not deny that the external universe exist, but we have no way of really knowing it, and it would be futile, even dangerous, to do so. We might wryly say that when we try to discuss the external world, we create philosophy; if we try define the world, we create religious violence. So it is best to leave the external world alone.

However, we can still KNOW things. The tools of our knowing—the only ones there are—are our five physical senses and the mind. And all that we can know is what is presented to us by our five physical senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches—and what our mind makes of these senses or “makes sense” of things.

In short, we can only experiences our senses, or more exactly, the six senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. This is EVERYTHING, the all that we can know. The Buddhist training is that of properly understanding these tools, and wisely using them, so that there comes a point when we are able to “see” beyond these senses directly into true reality.

If we try to do anything more than what our six senses are capable of, we become the veritable blind men (and women) pontificating about an elephant, or rather, that part of an elephant that is at hand. For now, we can only best live the moment; for that is where we will find true happiness, for now.

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