

Why Does Anything Exist? In Search of the Best Possible Answer

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Abstract: Rasmussen develops a new answer to the question, "Why does anything exist?" He begins by describing a puzzle about how anything can exist. The puzzle motivates the quest to explain things as far as one can. To solve the puzzle, Rasmussen describes a sequence of scenes in a story about existence. The story brings to light a three-pronged explanation of existence: (i) things exist because it is impossible for nothing to have existed, (ii) it is impossible for nothing to have existed because there is a foundational reality that cannot not exist, and (iii) such a foundation would have a certain nature—to be specified—that allows it to be foundational. Rasmussen considers how this theory of fundamental reality can incorporate other large scale theories, including Platonism, axiarchism, and naturalism.

Keywords: Puzzle of existence, Argument from contingency, Principle of sufficient reason, Naturalism, Absolute perfection

1. Puzzle

The purpose of this essay is to seek a deep explanation of why *anything* exists.¹ Toward that end, I will build upon recent work to develop a multi-part story about reality. My hope is that this story will have two great-making features. First, the story will display the deepest possible explanation of existence. Second, in view of the purpose of this volume, I hope this story will especially please Dean Zimmerman (among other philosophers).

Before we get to the story, I will set the stage by describing a classic puzzle of existence that inspires the story. This puzzle arises from the attempt to explain things as far as we can. In general, you might think we can expect an explanation of things, whatever they are. For example, to borrow an example from Richard Taylor (1992), if we see a sphere in a forest, we can expect some explanation of its existence, even if we have no idea what it is. But the general expectation of an explanation leads to the puzzle: the expectation of an explanation seems to *break* when applied to reality as a whole. For there is nothing beyond *all* of reality that could explain why there is a reality at all. But how can a reality exist without any explanation? The puzzle is in seeing how to answer this question in a satisfying way.

We can divide this puzzle into two pieces:

¹ While the question has ancient roots, it continues to invite attention in contemporary philosophy. Some recent treatments include Bede (2004), Goldschmidt (2013), and Rasmussen & Weaver (2019).

1. Principle of Universal Explanation: whatever exists, individual or plural, has some explanation (in terms of prior causes or conditions).
2. Principle of Unexplained Existence: there is no explanation of the total of all that exists.

These pieces cannot go together, of course: it is not possible that reality has and does not have an explanation. Instead, our total reality somehow exists on its own, without any prior cause or condition that might explain its existence. The puzzle of existence, then, is about seeing how *any* reality could exist without any outside explanation. We can grant that reality has a whole has no outside explanation. But that invites the question: *how* can any reality, big or small, exist without depending on anything prior?

In what follows, I will develop a multi-part solution to this puzzle of existence. First, I'll tell a story that explains why certain things exist in terms of a foundational reality. Second, I will extend this story to explain how a foundational reality can itself avoid the need for a further explanation. Finally, I will consider how my story compares with other attempts to explain existence, and I'll seek to show that my story has a certain explanatory advantage—or to put it less modestly, that my story is the best.

2. The Foundation Story

The first part of my solution is to motivate the following story about a *foundational* reality:

Once upon a time, at the foundation of all reality lived what we may call, “Stuff.” The name “Stuff” does not signify anything in particular, except this: Stuff does not depend on anything prior. In this sense, Stuff is *self-existent*: there is nothing prior to Stuff that explains, grounds, or produces it. In the fullness of time, Stuff gives rise to everything else. End of scene.

Call this story, “The Foundation Story.”

In the interest of neutrality, I say nothing yet about the nature or contents of Stuff, whether it includes one thing or many, matter or energy, concreta or abstracta. All I say here is that Stuff includes *whatever* is self-existent (i.e., non-dependent on anything prior). Moreover, The Foundation Story leaves open theories of how Stuff may give rise to other things, whether via causation, grounding, or some other relation.²

I will now offer two reasons one might like The Foundation Story. My interest here is not to suggest that there cannot be any reasons to dislike the story. Rather, I want to offer some considerations that can weigh in the balance of one's total considerations.

First, The Foundation Story lays a foundation for solving the puzzle of existence. The puzzle of existence, recall, presents a challenge with seeing how there can be *any* reality, given that nothing exists *outside* of our total reality to explain why or how anything exists at all. We may wonder, then: how can a reality—of any size or shape—exist? The Foundation

² This part of the story leaves open whether Stuff makes things ex nihilo or out of itself (e.g., per panentheism). For a non-causal, grounding version of The Foundation Story, see Kenneth (2017).

Story offers the beginning of an answer: a reality can exist by including something that exists *on its own*—i.e., something that does not depend on any outside explanation of its existence.

This isn't the complete solution. After all, we may still wonder how the self-existent Stuff itself can exist without any outside explanation. We will return to this question in the next section. For now, I offer The Foundation Story as a first part of a larger story.

A second, related reason one might like The Foundation Story is that it makes possible a deep explanation of dependent things. For if there is a foundational reality, then *all* dependent things—one or many—can have an explanation in terms of something more fundamental. The non-dependent (self-existent) Stuff would provide an ultimate basis for the existence of dependent things—of why any dependent things exist at all.

I will elaborate on this reason for The Foundation Theory. I will first consider two motivations for preferring explanatory depth. Then I will turn to some objections that help clarify what's at stake.

One motivation for preferring explanatory depth comes from instances of the following principle:

PE: Dependent things, one or many, have an external explanation of their existence, *ceteris paribus*.

This principle is relatively modest. PE is not as strong as the version of the principle of sufficient reason defended by Della Rocca (2010). Unlike that principle, PE does not require a fully *deterministic* explanation; it is compatible with PE that the explanation help reduce some mystery in terms of non-deterministic causes or conditions. PE also does not require that *everything* has an explanation. Instead, PE points to an explanatory advantage, other things being equal, of an external explanation of the existence of *dependent* things.

PE is itself supported by a successful track record of external explanations. There are many evident instances of an external explanation. For example, you might witness a fire contribute to an explanation of the burning of a house. Or if you see a set of boxes on a table, you can expect an explanation of their existence. Same if you see a set of turtles, blue cubes, or red blobs: none of these explain their own existence (if they are dependent), and all of them depend on explanations beyond themselves. Examples multiply.

My claim is not that the examples provide a conclusive proof of an exceptionless principle. To my knowledge, there are no exceptions to PE. However, even if there *are* exceptions somewhere (like a chain of blue beings somewhere that exists without any external explanation), one could still have reason to expect an external explanation of any given case, other things being equal. The idea here is that if we are to make an exception, we carry a burden to *motivate* the exception—to supply a reason to think that the exceptional case is different in some relevant way from all other totals of dependent things. In the absence of a reason to make an exception, the track record of experience supports a general expectation of an external explanation. If this is correct, then by the light of PE, we have some reason to expect an external explanation of the total of all dependent things in terms of something non-dependent—i.e., self-existent Stuff.

In the interest of modesty, I leave open the prospect of identifying a reason to make an exception to PE. Someone might have independent reasons to doubt that any self-existent

Stuff could exist or could bring about non-self-existent effects. Those reasons could then motivate making an exception to PE. This dialectical possibility is open.

Another type of motivation for preferring explanatory depth is a direct intuition. Consider this principle of dependence:

PD: Totals of dependent things are, by nature, dependent.

According to PD, dependent things cannot, just on their own, add up to some independent total. One might find this principle evident, not merely by a successful track record (a posteriori evidence), but also by insight into the relevant concepts (a priori evidence). For my part, this intuition comes to life in my mind when I consider examples that display obvious irrelevant differences between dependent totals. Take any total of dependent blue blobs, for example. Add them up. The total of the blue blobs, whether stacked on a desk or filling an infinite ocean, would also be dependent. Mere dependence is not enough to explain (make, determine, or result in) independence. I claim one can see this by insight into the nature of dependence. Anyone who shares my intuition on this point has an analytical (a priori-based) reason to favor The Foundation Story.³

I now turn to some objections. First, some philosophers have suggested that perhaps there is no need for an *external* explanation of dependent things in the case of an infinite regress.⁴ For example, maybe by explaining each state of reality in terms of prior states, we could thereby have a complete, *internal* explanation of the total of all dependent states.⁵ If the explanation can be internal, then perhaps reality could consist of a bottomless chain of explanations, without any external explanation. Then there is no foundational reality.

I have two points to make in response. First, as Brenner (2016) argues, there are different types of explanation that need not preclude each other. We can concede the possibility of internal explanations, at least for sake of argument. We do not need to rule out the conceivability of an internal explanation (of a certain type) to see that an *external* explanation would still contribute a deeper explanation.

It is important to note that The Foundation Story allows for an infinite regress. As Rowe (1997) observes, the mere *age* of a thing, even an infinite age, does not by itself explain the existence of that thing. He illustrates this point with the example of an eternal light, which might have a more fundamental explanation in terms of an eternal light source. In the same way, an infinite chain of dependent things might, in total, have a more fundamental explanation in terms of some foundational reality. That isn't ruled out. What is ruled out, rather, is a *bottomless* (ungrounded and unexplained) chain of dependent things.

Second, and are more fundamentally, I think there is a good reason to expect an external explanation, *ceteris paribus*. To illustrate the value of a deeper explanation, consider the following scenario. Imagine that an infinite stack of turtles appears in the sky. As it happens, this turtle stack emerged via a supertask, where each turtle gave birth to the one above at increasingly fast rates: the first birth took 1 second, the second took 0.5 seconds, the third

³ I develop additional supports for PD in Rasmussen (2018: 19–34).

⁴ For developments of this thought, see Hume (1779), Edwards (1959), Maitzen (2022), and Oberle (2022).

⁵ Maitzen (2022) and Cameron (2022) each develop versions of this idea.

took 0.25 seconds, and so on, with each turtle emerging twice as quickly as the one before. In this case, the event of all infinite turtles emerging occurs in just 2 seconds. Let us grant that in some sense the event would be internally explained, since each member is explained by another. Still, it does not follow that the event of infinitely many turtles emerging would *thereby* have no external explanation. On the contrary, if there could be such an infinite chain, one could still expect an external explanation of its occurrence (whether the chain exists in finite time or is spread across infinite time).⁶

While the turtle scenario may be outlandish, it points to the value of explanatory depth. An external explanation of dependent things, whether finite or infinite, predicts that chains of turtles will never inexplicably appear in front of you. This prediction matches observation. It isn't just turtles, of course. If there were blue cubes that emerged from other blue cubes in an infinite sequence, we could wonder why there are any blue cubes at all. Why not instead red ones, or none at all? Another example comes from Leibniz (1697): if geometry books were copied from other geometry books, ad infinitum, we could surely still wonder why there are any geometry books at all. In general, it may appear to make no difference what dependent things the chain includes, or how long the chain is. Unless we can identify a relevant difference between some particular chain in question, there is an advantage in explaining the chain in terms of something outside that same chain.⁷

Another type of objection is that we can explain things by abstract principles instead. For example, we might explain the existence of our universe by some laws of physics or by the improbability of no universe.⁸ Perhaps, then, there is no need for a foundational reality.

⁶ Maitzen suggested to me in correspondence that, while my turtle case calls for an external explanation, a complete internal explanation is available in infinite chains that traverse infinitely many kinds across infinite time, since otherwise there is something left unexplained (such as why that kind was instantiated, or why the chain started when it did). For our purposes here, I will grant that there can be a complete internal explanation of the type Maitzen describes (cf. Maitzen 2013). My thought is that, still, there is an advantage to having a deeper, external explanation, whether the chain spans finite time or infinite time. I say more to motivate this thought next.

⁷ This point about relevant differences is relevant to Maitzen's argument that an eternal chain could be entirely internally explained. While I grant the possibility of an internal explanation (for sake of argument, at least), that possibility does not rule out the advantage of also having an external explanation. As we have seen, even a chain that spans infinite time could still call for a more fundamental explanation (e.g., a light source of eternal light). We can break this call if we can identify some *relevantly difference* (e.g., it includes self-existent Stuff). But merely extending the chain out to infinity, whether in a supertask or spread across infinite time, does not by itself display a relevant difference with respect to the call for an external explanation. More generally, if a chain C depends on an external explanation, and chain C* does not differ from C in any intrinsic respect, then we can expect C* would also depend on an external explanation. This principle indicates an advantage of a foundation of any universe of any length: even infinitely many kinds spread across infinite time would, according to this principle, depend on an external explanation, if those same kinds would depend on an external explanation in a supertask occurring in finite time.

⁸ See van Inwagen's proposal (1996) that we can explain why anything exists in terms of the improbability that there is instead nothing at all.

My response here is like my previous response. We can recognize different types of explanation. Rather than choose between explanations, we can grant that abstract principles may provide a type of explanation. Abstracta may even be part of the total foundational explanation. (I will return to this point later when I discuss how my theory can incorporate Platonism.) More fundamentally, there is value in having an explanation that goes beyond merely abstract laws and probabilities. Consider that abstract principles, on their own, are powerless to provide prior causal conditions for the existence of dependent things. For example, the principle that positively charged particles repel does not itself bring particles into existence. While abstract principles may indeed provide some kind of explanation, PE and PD invite us to pursue an explanation that goes deeper than mere principles themselves.⁹

The Foundation Story supplies the materials for a deeper explanation. It supplies the Stuff. If self-existent Stuff exists, then we can—in principle—have an explanation of *all* chains, collections, and series of dependent things: all come from the self-existent Stuff (ultimately).

This completes my presentation of the first part of the story. Again, I do not claim to have made a decisive case, or that there are no other relevant considerations.¹⁰ But I hope I have displayed some significant reasons one might be attracted to The Foundation Story.

3. The Story of Great Stuff

We are now ready for the second part of my story, which I call, “The Great Story.” The purpose of The Great Story is to provide a more complete explanation of existence. Following William Rowe (1997), we can divide stories that attempt to explain existence into two stages. The first stage introduces the existence of a *foundational* reality—e.g., that there is some self-existent ground of existence. The second stage tells us more about the nature of this foundational reality.

I shall divide The Great Story into five scenes. Each scene highlights a different attribute of Stuff. The final scene puts the attributes together into a picture that displays Stuff’s greatness.

Let us consider each scene in turn.

Scene 1: *Self-existence*. In this scene, the self-existence of fundamental reality comes into greater light. By “self-existent,” I mean that its existence has no cause, ground, or explanation

⁹ In this note, I will draw out the application of this distinction to van Inwagen’s proposed explanation in terms of *probability*. Suppose it is probable that there are some (dependent) things, and that this probability provides some kind of explanation of their existence. Nevertheless, there could *also* be reason to expect a deeper, more concrete explanation of the dependent total. Compare: even if God were likely to create us, that does not preclude an explanation of our existence in terms of prior causes or concrete conditions. To use a more mundane example, suppose it is likely that an ocean has waves. Still, we can also expect an explanation of the waves of an ocean in terms of prior causes and conditions. These examples illustrate an explanatory advantage of treating all totals of dependent things as explanatorily uniform: whether it is a stack of dependent turtles or cluster of dependent galaxies, there is an advantage in having an external explanation in terms of prior causes or conditions. The Foundation Story retains this specific explanatory advantage.

¹⁰ For a fuller treatment of arguments for and against a foundational (and necessarily existent) reality, see Pruss and Rasmussen (2018).

in terms of anything else. In this sense, the self-existent Stuff exists on its own, like a fire that burns by its own energy.

For sake of neutrality, I do not say that a self-existent thing would be *self-explained*. It is consistent with my story that Stuff internally explains its own existence (or even is self-caused in some sense). It is also consistent with my story that Stuff has no explanation (and is uncaused), whether internal or external. Either way, Stuff has no external explanation in terms of any prior conditions or causes. That's what makes it self-existent.

The concept of self-existence can help us pursue a more complete solution to the puzzle of existence. For we can ask *why* Stuff is self-existent. This question points to a strategy for identifying other attributes of Stuff. The strategy is to seek to reduce unnecessary calls for an explanation. Since Stuff is self-existent (by definition), it cannot have any attributes that would imply that Stuff is *not* self-existent. We can employ this logical truth in a “clearing away” strategy: we clear away attributes that would imply that Stuff depends on some external explanation. The nature of Stuff can come into clearer light after we clear away all dependence-implying attributes. I will illustrate this strategy as we continue in the next scenes.

Scene 2: *Necessary Existence*. The Great Story continues. Stuff is not only self-existent, but it also provides the *sturdiest possible* foundation for all other things.

Here is how. Stuff has necessary existence: it cannot not exist. As such, it can provide an external foundational condition for all contingent things—things that could possibly not exist. To avoid circularity, the foundational condition for contingent things cannot itself be contingent. Instead, the foundational condition has necessary existence.

This scene is inspired by the “clearing away” strategy, which reduces unnecessary calls for an explanation. Here is why. Consider again that Stuff is self-existent. So, Stuff cannot have any attributes that would imply that it is *not* self-existent. But if Stuff is *contingent*, then its existence calls for an explanation. Whatever the contingent thing happens to be, whether a blue sphere or a cluster of colorless blobs, its existence is not guaranteed. For this reason, we might wonder why it happens to exist. It didn't have to exist. So why does it? But Stuff has no external explanation (because it is self-existent). So, we may surmise that Stuff is *not* itself contingent.

If instead we say that Stuff is contingent, then we face a problem of irrelevant differences. The problem is that differences between contingent things do not appear relevant to account for a difference with respect to being self-existent. To illustrate the problem, take any contingent portion of reality, whether a shoe, a planet, or a large cluster of galaxies. We may wonder why this portion of reality exists. But suppose we make an exception in this case: we say this portion is self-existent. Then presumably there is some *relevant difference* between this contingent portion and every other contingent portion. The challenge, then, is to identify that difference. What could it be? Not shape. Not size. Not color. Not number of parts. It could have any shape, size, color, or number of parts, and we could still conceive of it having some external explanation. Then what? Unless we have some reason to think that a certain contingent portion of reality is relevantly different from all other contingent portions, we are in position to treat contingent things uniformly: all have an external explanation.

A principle at work here is this principle of relevant differences:

PR: for any purely contingent portion of reality *C* (individual or collection), if *C* does not differ from other dependent (non-self-existent) things in some identifiable respect, then we have reason to expect *C* is also dependent on something prior, *ceteris paribus*.

According to PR, if we do not in fact see some relevant difference, we have reason to infer that whatever is contingent is dependent—and so not self-existent.

We can put these ideas together into the following argument for the necessity of Stuff.

1. Stuff is self-existent.
2. Whatever is contingent is not self-existent.
3. Therefore, Stuff is not contingent.
4. Therefore, Stuff has necessary existence.

As we have seen, the seed motivation for both (1) and (2) is a general expectation of an explanation: explain things as far as one can. This seed sprouts into the explanatory principles, PE and PR, which invite us to explain dependent, contingent portions of reality—individuals and collections—in terms of a non-dependent, non-contingent foundation. Together these principles bring to light a reason to think that the self-existent Stuff (the foundation) has necessary existence.¹¹

As before, my goal is not to close off all other dialectical possibilities. Someone could have reasons to make exceptions to the explanatory principles, for example, by offering reasons to think that certain contingent things are relevantly different from others.¹² Still, I hope the principles highlight some helpful steps on a path: by clearing away contingency from our theory of the foundational Stuff, we remove a certain call for an explanation and provide a deeper explanation of contingent existence.

If these considerations are on the right track, then we have at least some reason to clear away contingency from the nature of Stuff. To review, the reason is this. Contingent things, big and small, call for a further explanation. Stuff has no further explanation; it is self-existent. For this reason, we can clear away an unnecessary call for a further explanation if we clear away contingency from Stuff. The result is that Stuff has necessary existence.

Scene 3: *Lacking Arbitrary Limits*. As I argue in Rasmussen 2019, we can extend this reasoning by clearing away other attributes that call for an explanation, including *arbitrary limits*. This idea inspires me to add the following piece to the story: Stuff lacks arbitrary (i.e.,

¹¹ These principles avoid a certain bootstrapping objection to similar types of arguments (cf. Ross 1969: 295–304; Rowe 1975; van Inwagen 1983: 202–204). The objection focuses on the *connection* between a necessary explanation and contingent effects. If the principle of explanation that governs this connection is too strong, then all effects are necessary (resulting in “modal collapse”). In response, it has been argued that there can be a non-deterministic explanation in terms of more fundamental facts (Pruss 2006: 97–125). But for our purposes, we can also allow for spontaneous acts or connections; that’s consistent with having a reason to expect an explanation of contingent things in terms of the activities of a non-contingent foundation.

¹² Alternatively, one might argue directly against the possibility of any necessary thing (see Swinburne 2012). I offer an assessment of this type of argument in Rasmussen (2016).

unexplained) limits, boundaries, or finite parameters that would call for a further explanation. Instead, Stuff is fundamentally non-limited.

The structure of reasoning here is the same as before:

1. Stuff is self-existent.
2. Limits (non-maximal quantities or degrees) are not self-existent.
3. Therefore, Stuff's attributes do not include fundamental limits.

Again, the motivation for (2) is the general expectation of an explanation. We can break this expectation if we can identify a relevant difference between one limit and other limits. For example, if we can see that having five sides would call explanation, while having six sides would call for no explanation, then we can see that the difference between being five-sided and being six-sided is a relevant difference. If instead we see no relevant difference between limits, then we are in position to explain all limits as far as we can, ultimately in terms of something that has no fundamental limits.

To be clear, this argument does not rule out *non-fundamental* limits or parameters. For example, the argument leaves open the possibility that Stuff could take on or cause itself to experience certain limited forms, or to sprout various personas in various states.¹³

Note also that merely removing limits does not by itself remove *every* possible call for an explanation. Even unlimited properties could call for a further explanation, such as being an unlimited number of turtles. Hence, the story is not over. (I will suggest how to remove all calls for an explanation in the final scene.)

Scene 4: *Being Great*. The next scene is short and sweet: Stuff is great.

¹³ This distinction steers us away from a “trinity” objection that some people have raised to a version of my argument from arbitrary limits (for an elaboration on this objection, see Leon & Rasmussen 71–97). The objection begins with the observation that if God is tri-personal (per the doctrine of the Trinity), then God has a limit in the number of persons within God. Those who accept the antecedent, then, face a dilemma: either admit that fundamental reality could have limits (contrary to my argument), or admit that God is not tri-personal (contrary to their view). My response is to offer a third way: grant that fundamental reality can have *non-fundamental* limits, which have a deeper explanation. A deeper explanation removes arbitrariness from the limit in question.

As a follow up, some philosophers have asked me if a *naturalist* could similarly explain certain limits in fundamental reality, such as a limit in causal power. My answer here is that, in principle, nothing in my argument so far specifies which limits in particular could have an explanation in terms of more fundamental properties of Stuff. But we should be careful: not all explanations are equal. In particular, if an explanation itself includes properties or parameters that themselves call for a further explanation (i.e., they are not evidently relevantly different from the limits they explain), then we have pushed back the mystery a step. (One could make this point about certain explanations of a diversity of personas, too, if they push back the mystery a step.) Thus, our explanatory project is not yet complete; I have more scenes to share from The Great Story. Once I have completed my whole story, I will revisit the naturalistic proposal and suggest how I think The Great Story can incorporate a version of naturalism.

By “great,” I mean that it has some quality that entails some value. For neutrality, I leave open a range of analyses of value. A realist may interpret “value” as expressing irreducibly positive attributes, like beauty, love, goodness, knowledge, and so on. Another option is that “value” expresses a relation to subjective states—for example, v has value if v can be valued or appreciated for its own sake (as an end). On this analysis, I assume that certain things can be valued for their own sake, whereas certain other things could only be valued as a means to other things.

Others may prefer a third option: replace my talk of value with talk of causal capacity. Then to say that Stuff is “great” is to say, minimally, that Stuff has great causal capacity. This is a backup version of The Great Story for those who are value nihilists.

Here, then, is a reason to think Stuff is great in at least some respect:

1. There are great things (e.g., knowledge, powers, beautiful flowers, etc.).
2. If there are great things, then Stuff has a capacity to help explain the existence of great things.
3. A capacity to help explain the existence of great things is itself great-making (value-entailing).
4. Therefore, Stuff is great (in some respect).¹⁴

Scene 5: *Perfection*. The final scene in The Great Story resolves a tension that builds from previous scenes. The tension climaxes in a battle between these two characters: (i) the self-existent Stuff, and (ii) the Force of Expectation of an Explanation. How can these characters co-exist?

Here is my answer (which follows a proposal given by Byerly 2019). Stuff has a nature that resists the Force of Expectation of an Explanation. This nature is special, for it is *relevantly different* from all natures of all dependent things. It is relevantly different in two ways. First, Stuff’s nature precludes attributes that call for a further explanation: it precludes contingency, quantities, limits, colors, and any other attribute that is not identifiably relevantly different from dependent things. Second, Stuff’s nature calls for no further explanation in virtue of entailing *perfection*. In this final scene, Stuff resists the Force of Expectation of an Explanation by being perfect.

To appreciate this scene, it will help to say more about what I mean by “perfect.” I have in mind an Anselmian inspired concept: a perfect thing is the greatest kind of thing that there could conceivably be (or such that no greater could be conceived). There are different ways to unpack this concept. In this context, I work with a minimal interpretation: the greatest kind of thing is something that is great without arbitrary, unexplained limit. As such, it *lacks* any basic attribute that entails some particular limit, and it has greatness.

On this account, perfection makes the difference. For if Stuff is supremely great (i.e. perfect), then its greatness explains why it must be fundamental. Only a fundamental thing could be the greatest kind of thing. Anything less, one might argue, would have an arbitrary limit in greatness that calls for further explanation in terms of something prior—and so could not be fundamental.

¹⁴ As a backup (for those who may doubt the path through value), I offer this more modest line: Stuff has at least some *causal capacity*, which enables it to explain the existence of contingent things.

We can summarize these considerations into an argument for The Great Story:

1. Whatever is less than perfect is explicable in terms of something more fundamental.
2. Nothing is more fundamental than the most fundamental reality (Stuff).
3. Therefore, the most fundamental reality is perfect.

4. Alternative Stories

I will now consider some alternative stories. These stories provide a different answer to the question of why anything exists. My aim in this section is to share why I think The Great Story is greater than these rivals.

Platonism. According to a certain Platonist story, there are necessarily existing abstract forms, like square, red, and human nature. These forms (let us suppose) do not have causal powers to produce anything (at least, not on their own); in that respect, they are very limited. Yet, their existence suffices to explain why anything at all exists. The explanation is this: there is something, rather than nothing, because the abstract forms *cannot not* exist.

Does Platonism cast doubt on the Great Story?

I don't think so, for two reasons. First, Platonism on its own does not actually compete with The Great Story. They can go together. The Great Story tells us that there is self-existent Stuff, but it does not specify all the contents of Stuff. The Stuff might include Platonic forms. Indeed, if there are self-existent Platonic forms, then Stuff must include them. From a Platonist perspective, one could argue, then, that Platonic forms are essential furniture in the nature (or mind) of the maximally great Stuff. The point is that there is no competition between Platonism and The Great Story. Plato's heaven could be part of The Great Story.

Second, and more fundamentally, The Great Story offers a more complete solution to the puzzle of existence. Platonism on its own does not explain why there are any *contingent* things. It only explains why there are necessary things. In order to explain why there are contingent things, I argued that we need something that has some capacity to produce (ground or make) contingent things. This is a reason to think that the self-existent Stuff includes more than abstract forms. It also includes something concrete to serve as a causal condition or ground of the rest of reality.

Moreover, The Great Story clears away other calls for a further explanation. Keep in mind that contingency is not the only attribute that may call for a further explanation. If prime numbers alone existed necessarily, we could still wonder why just *those* numbers are necessary and not others. Similarly, if the shape of a turtle were somehow necessarily instantiated, we could wonder why that shape in particular is necessary. Why not a snake shape instead? The Great Story gives a deeper explanation: the realm of the necessary, in total, fills out the realm of a maximally great foundation. The realm of the necessary does not include fundamental limits, parameters, or qualities that would call for a further explanation. On this account, if Plato's heaven exists, it shines lights of Reason and Goodness that contribute to the greatness of the great foundation. So, we can keep Platonism, if we like, while also having a deeper explanation of existence.

Axiarchism. This story is short and sweet: things exist because it is *good* that things exist. The End.

As before, I have two responses. First, Axiarchism on its own does not compete with The Great Story. If The Great Story is true, one could argue that the goodness of existence itself is a beacon of value in the nature (or mind) of a maximally great being. This value might in some sense help explain why Stuff is itself great. In this way, The Great Story could incorporate Axiarchism.

Second, The Great Story offers a more complete solution to the puzzle of existence. Axiarchism on its own does not tell us whether self-existent Stuff has arbitrary limits or boundaries. The Great Story tells more. Sure, maybe it is *good* that they emerge, but the goodness of something is not the same as a capacity to bring it about. According to The Great Story, the foundational reality has some capacity to being about contingent things. This capacity enables a deeper explanation. If we say that contingent particles exist *merely* because it is good that they exist, we can still wonder *how* they came to exist. The Great Story adds more explanatory resources: the great Stuff would be able to causally bring about particles that might be good to exist. These resources supplement the Axiarchist story.

Naturalism. According to Naturalism, nature is all there is. If nature is all there is, then Stuff is itself a foundational part of nature. It is not a supernatural being, but is instead a natural base from which reality unfolds. No further explanation is necessary (cf. Oppy 2009).

As you might anticipate, I think the Great Story improves upon the naturalist's story. Consider first that the Great Story can include the explanatory elements of Naturalism. According to The Great Story, the foundational stuff is perfect, but this story does not specify whether this perfect stuff could also qualify as "natural." In fact, Felipe Leon (2018) describes a version of Naturalism he calls "Liberal Naturalism," which is compatible with characterizing fundamental reality as perfect. In my dialogue with Leon, I suggest how we can integrate liberal Naturalism with a perfect-being theism to form a view I call "Supreme Naturalism." An advantage of Supreme Naturalism, I propose, is that it independently predicts Stuff's ability to be a source or ground of positive aspects of reality (consciousness, knowledge, beauty, order, goodness, etc.).¹⁵ So, a broad form of Naturalism is compatible with The Great Story.¹⁶

Second, The Great Story offers a more complete solution to the puzzle of existence. Naturalism on its own does not explain why there are any contingent things or why the necessary thing has the basic attributes it has. In order to explain why there are contingent things, I argued that we need something that has some capacity to produce (ground or make) contingent things. Furthermore, in order to avoid multiplying calls for an explanation, I argued that the fundamental nature of the necessary foundation would lack arbitrary limits and qualities that call for a further explanation. This is a reason to simplify our theory of a natural foundation: instead of positing diverse fundamental explanations, we can unify many things in terms of a more fundamental explanation that predicts them. As far as I am aware, at this date, there are no other proposals on offer that explain nearly as much in a more unified way.

In summary, The Great Story improves other stories by removing arbitrariness from their plots. For example, if we say Stuff is a Platonic One, we can still ask how much capacity does it ground. If it is limited, then that limit is arbitrary. If it is shaped like a turtle, then that

¹⁵ Felipe Leon and Joshua Rasmussen (2019, 253–72).

¹⁶ For a scientific defense of theistic Naturalism, see Forrest (1996).

shape is arbitrary. If it has the capacity to make 10^{80} particles *but no more*, then that number is arbitrary. Even if the fundamental reality has an *unlimited* capacity to make turtles, if it also lacks a capacity to make thoughts, then arbitrariness remains: why does it have turtle-making capacity, but no thought-making capacity? The Great Story offers a way to reduce arbitrary characterizations as far as possible by planting a flag with this message: “Stuff is perfect.” The perfection of fundamental reality gives us a deep explanation of why the fundamental stuff of existence cannot have a further explanation.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to review three benefits of The Great Story. First, The Great Story offers a deep solution to the puzzle of existence. This solution is three-pronged: (i) there is something rather than nothing because there couldn't have been nothing; (ii) there couldn't have been nothing because there is a self-existent something, Stuff, that couldn't have not been; (iii) Stuff couldn't have not been because it is purely and fundamentally perfect, thereby lacking any attributes that otherwise would, in virtue of their arbitrary specificity and limitation, call for a further explanation.

Second, The Great Story, offers a more complete solution than the rivals on offer. Instead of merely pushing the explanatory question back a step, The Great Story explains why the self-existent Stuff cannot have any further explanation.

Third, The Great Story is flexible. It can fit together with—and integrate—other largescale theories, including Platonism, Axiachism, and Naturalism. The Great Story provides a large stage with bright lights for many other stories, including a story of you discovering this article. If the Great Story is true, then it is not over, and there are more great scenes to come.

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