

Review of: "Why Existence? An Explanation with No Remainder"

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I accepted to review this paper because the author and I share a common interest in the dual structure of the why-question. Indeed, I have somewhat recently published a series of articles on the subject on *Qeios*, which deal with what we can reasonably say about the practical why question and how it is connected to its theoretical counterpart. Especially the third article of these may be of interest for the author. If interested, I would like to cordially invite the author to take a look at this article (and possibly review it) at <https://www.qeios.com/read/BZZVZ4> (it is the third but can be read as an independent piece without difficulty). I take a much more materialist-rational approach to the same question that the author deals with in this article and our considerations diverge strongly at times. However, I found this paper to be a most interesting and stimulating read in spite of our differences. It is fascinating to see how researchers from different backgrounds come to consider the same question(s) at times.

It should be noted that my comments are referring mostly to the first version of the article (v1). My comments should not be regarded as mandatory revisions, but rather as thoughts on the subject and questions where I felt that it was not all that easy to follow the argument.

Abstract

This is one of those abstracts that intrigues one while at the same time stating what the article argues concisely. The article's argument seems clearly articulated. And yet, one does not really understand it (at least I didn't). This, however, is not necessarily a point for criticism. With highly abstract philosophical arguments, it is oftentimes the case that what an author says can be easily summarized in a couple of sentences but one only really understands this summary after having looked into the argument in (much) more detail. Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche etc. can all be easily summarized in a couple of sentences and yet this does not necessarily help the uninitiated. I liked the opening quote as well.

1.1

While I agree with the author that it is not a satisfying answer, I think it might be good to address why an eternal recurrence, i.e., a cyclical picture of cosmological history, leaves the why-question ultimately unanswered also.

The chapter provides a stimulating review of the various answers to the old Leibniz question why there is something rather than nothing, which does not go into unnecessary detail or loses itself in particular discussions.

It is very sensible to point out that "being," while intuitively clear to us, is upon analysis actually a very difficult concept.

I believe there is a difference between a circle and what the author calls an “actualization.”

1.2

Some time ago, I have published a paper in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* that deals precisely with the double structure of the why-question that the author deals with in this chapter. In that paper I argue that the root of religious and ideological belief structures may lie in the second, practical why (at least) as much as it lies in cosmological creation myths (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11153-021-09812-z>). One thing that I would like the author to consider is that, to my mind, it is not merely the monotheistic God that provides an answer to both why-questions, but more generally every religion and (possibly) ideologies as well. After all, one can have an over-individual value system derived from philosophies that do not claim to have the answer to the cosmological why-question (e.g., Marxism). The dividing line, I think, is somewhat blurry.

1.3

The chapter provides a good, clear outline of what is to come but the first paragraph contains some orthographical mistakes, which the author may want to fix.

2.1

The “cartographic analogy” is fascinating. I am not entirely sure if I agree with it though. In the real world, the gaps are not the condition for anything. They only appear as a mirage on paper. On paper, however, they are just that: paper. Paper, however, is not a condition for the world and neither are the gaps. They are a condition for the map only. Thus, they have no validity in the real world, only in its representation. Is what the author wants to argue about values not the opposite (i.e., that they are a fundamental condition of being and not just something artificial that appears out of our social constructions of reality)? Anyway, fascinating still.

2.2

I approach the questions this article deals with through different authors, which makes it very interesting to read the discussion of Leslie and the Kabbalists. I do understand the point, though I think it is not indisputable.

2.3

If logic and mathematics are multiversal is a fascinating question indeed, which I have dealt with in an article I recently uploaded on *Qeios* lately also (the one I recommended to the author in the introduction). My answer is that, ultimately, we cannot know the answer. However, I agree with the author that they are in any case more imperative for being than the clearly mutable laws of physics. I think the question if moral norms are equally foundational is yet more difficult to answer. The Phoenicians, after all, did sacrifice their children to their gods. So did the Aztecs. And yet, there seem to be some norms that are universal for the functioning of a common good (‘suum cuique’). As Aristotle pointed out, however, these most universal norms can be interpreted very widely depending on how one defines merit. The question is how much of

our value system remains when we go back to these fundamental basics of society. However, one needs to take the author's point here to go on, I guess.

2.4

The problem with Wheeler's interpretation of the observer effect is that it is very difficult to identify what counts as a conscious observer. In the end, I would and have argued, this leads to a picture in which the universe is posited in a final observation or reflection, an absolute point of consciousness in which the spatiotemporal world appears. Practically, however, this universe looks just like the material-physical continuum that we are more familiar with in theory from our subjective frame of reference. The value of life and emergence, then, would be to build up this future (from our illusionary frame of reference) reflection to posit its first creation. In a way, both are real then.

2.5

I am not too sure if only values can be the foundation of existence. Consider that a crook can collapse a wave function just like a saint. If idealism or solipsism or Wheeler's delayed choice creation by observership is true, does this actually mean that this mind cannot be "dissociated from value," as the author claims? I would certainly like to believe so, but frankly speaking I do not see the argument why this should be the case. Perhaps because any other society will not be able to build up this super-mind that makes reality? But seen as an end point of emergence, is it even valid to speak of such a "mind" in terms that reflect or societal norms? There are very few humans that care for the rights of primitive animals and none who care for the rights of microorganisms. Whatever the values that such a cosmic principle may have – if it is legitimate to speak of the "values" of such a thing at all – they will most likely not include human rights.

3.1

The problem here, it seems to me, is that it is not entirely clear that what the author calls "values" may not be reducible to "selfishness." I entirely agree that in order to do anything there must be some "good" to be expected from the action; I believe this is true all the way down to unicellular life. However, it is less clear why *moral* good beyond individual benefit would be required.

3.2

I wonder if the author is familiar with the Kantian claim that even a society of demons/devils would have to establish justice in their society. I must admit that I am not familiar with the work of John Leslie, which made this chapter interesting to read. However, I am not entirely sure if I can follow Leslie's argument. So the world exists because a good world should exist for ethical reasons? This argument, frankly speaking, seems flawed to me since the world that exists is clearly not a good, moral world (a sad fact, which I believe few would try to argue). But perhaps I am not understanding it correctly since I never read Leslie.

3.3

From a natural science perspective, I find "open teleology" problematic as it very much seems that the final end state of

the universe will not be the actualization of values no matter what. It seems to me that the universe is exactly *not* “analogous to human life” (as the author claims) because, other than the individual human being, the universe does *not* seem to have a choice what will happen in the long run.

4.1

I found the discussion of our “evil, tragic and absurd” world as “the best of all possible worlds” because only here can value be truly realized very interesting. If evil, however, is the dissipation of structure (as Goethe had his Mephisto say), then it seems that the “Holy Potential” cannot be realized in the final future according to all we know (since the universe, according to the second law of thermodynamics, is falling apart). But then again, perhaps this is why the author mentions the multiverse? Perhaps its just not this branch that will do it and its sufficient if it happens in one of them (even if it's not ours)?

4.2

I would generally agree with the “first asymmetry” between “value” and “disvalue.” However, it again seems that this “value” may be reduced to selfishness, as the author shows with his sadist example (who is most definitely not promoting any other good than his own perverse pleasure). This, however, may not be an argument against the author’s thesis here. Perhaps, it’s Kant’s “kingdom of ends” that must be realized and thus value ultimately follows from the selfishness of all agents (as all are justified to be selfish)?

4.3

I am still not completely sure if I understand how the axiological demand for the realization of value would create the universe in the first place. To my mind, what is missing here is for the author to suggest a *mechanism* of how this could possibly happen. I find the author’s discussion here very interesting but I don’t quite get what the argument behind it is.

4.4

I do agree with the author that we always look out into the world in terms of what he calls “values” and “meanings” – as Heidegger also stressed, we perceive objects in terms of what they are good for and so do we perceive the universe. We interrogate being for its usefulness and we want it to be good or become good, if needs by our doing. That’s all true. However, I still wonder if this may not be reduced to selfishness. Or is this what the author actually means by “value” at the end of the day? Do we want the universe to be *good for us* or do we want it to be *moral*? I have a feeling that the author means the latter but the difference is not clearly defined.

5.1

What the author means here, I take it, is that there is something so that this something can ask why there is something. Then, the question is the answer indeed. But how is this connected to value?

5.2

I think it may not be such a good idea to end the article by introducing another author that has not been dealt with in the article at all. Generally, I think its too much quotes and names here. I would have liked a compact and intelligible summary of the article's main points better.

Footnote 45

As I have noted before, the author clearly seems to have a reference frame in mind of how to distinguish between “right” and “wrong” values. As far as I can tell, however, he never shares it with the reader. It does not seem to be utility, as becomes clear in this footnote. But what is it then?

Overall, a fascinating article which I very much enjoyed reading.