

The World's Haecceity is the Dual of My Thrownness

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1 Introduction

We live in a contingent world, a world that could have been different. A common way to deal with this contingency is by positing the existence of all possibilities. This, however, doesn't get rid of the contingency – it merely moves it from the third-person view to the first-person view.

2 Haecceity

The haecceity of the world is its contingent thisness – the fact that is it what it is, even though it could have been different. One way to account for it is by **bloating**, i.e. postulating a total encapsulating the other options. Some examples of bloating:

- Albert Einstein and Hermann Minkowski extended the actual world to include the past and future by adding a time dimension.
- Hugh Everett III (1957) posited the existence of all possible outcomes of a quantum collapse in his many-worlds interpretation.
- David Kellogg Lewis (1986) posited the existence of all modally possible worlds, thereby removing the special status of our world relative to others.
- Many people have proposed a multiverse, for instance to explain the anthropic effect.
- Max Tegmark (2014) has proposed that all finitely-describable mathematical structures exist.

All these approaches have as their effect that the third-person contingency, the haecceity, of the total thus posited disappears. And as science can only deal with third-person information, superficially it may seem that all contingency has disappeared.

(As an aside, it may be remarked that this strategy potentially goes very far. Instead of finding an explanation for the lawfulness of our world, we may posit **total bloat**: that given enough worlds, there must be some where a seemingly lawful sequence like the one we experience occurs. It is just part of our address that we live in such a world. This, of course, means the end of induction².

In fact, total bloat would be the simplest proposal of all: all there is is an infinite amount of randomness. Any fully random sequence contains arbitrarily large subsequences of order, so any possible finite universe would be “out there”. That is easier than accepting that all mathematical structures necessarily exist, or that fundamental laws exist that lead to orderly universes or multiverses.

Any theory proposing lesser forms of bloat has the burden of explaining why it stops before taking the ultimate step.)

3 Thrownness

I am placed in this world, in this place and time, with this mind and body, without having a choice about it. That is my existential given, and the place from where I must live my life. Martin Heidegger called this my *Geworfenheit*, my “thrownness”. Though I see others, and can imagine myself, in different situations, I shall have to come to terms with me being what I am, and from there to become what I ought or want to be. I have no other option.

The characteristic features of my thrownness are inaccessible from the third-person perspective – and so to science. Consciousness, qualia, moral obligations, conscience, freedom, religious experience – all of those are subjective, and hidden from objective investigation. Yet subjectively they are the most important aspects of reality.

Of course *reports* of these subjective features, or *physical correlates* of them can be investigated scientifically, but not *as* phenomenal, *as* existential, me-related.

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2 All order being accidental, even our spatial and temporal intuitions almost certainly won't correspond to any actuality: it would be vanishingly unlikely that we are anything but Boltzmann brains. Why posit a seemingly orderly past and environment, if positing some false memories and perceptions will do the trick?

4 Duality

Max Tegmark has introduced the useful concept of our *address* in the multiverse: we are here, and not elsewhere. The more we bloat, the larger the multiverse, and the larger also our address. But that address is precisely the third-person representation of my thrownness – it describes what I am relative to what I could or might have been.

My thrownness is the very contingency that matters to me – and it still bears all the philosophical questions that apply to third-person contingency, only with a “me” pointer in them. “Why is³ the world this way (of all the ways it could have been)?” merely becomes “Why do I have⁴ this address (of all the addresses I could have had)?”

The fact that with most other addresses I would not have been a rational, living, or even physical being is hardly an answer – it answers why *given the fact that I can ask this question* I am here, but that given is already part of the question itself. If a platoon of twenty sharp-shooters shoot at me from close range and I survive, I have all reason to be amazed, and the fact that if I hadn’t survived I wouldn’t have been there to be *not* amazed doesn’t change that.

Given the questionable meaning of “existence” when applied to worlds one cannot even in principle observe (and that is what bloating produces), the first-person question is the more important one, and what positing many worlds – whatever their factual status – does, is to move contingency from third-person to first-person, and thereby outside the scope of science. It does not eliminate it, but it helps bring the question of our thrownness into focus.

5 Some options for contingency

Now let us consider the execution squad thought experiment again. In version 1, am to be executed by a squad of, say, 25 sharp-shooters, each of which has an independent probability of 1% of missing me (or else killing me instantly). At the command they all shoot, and I find myself still alive. Obviously, I am amazed.

When I am told my amazement is misplaced, since there would have been no me to be *not* amazed, I don’t buy that argument. Suppose there were a chance of one in a million that the sharpshooters would have been bribed, it would have been exceedingly likely that that such a bribe is indeed the reason for my still being alive, and learning that is was in fact purely by accident would be cause for amazement, and removing the bribe explanation does not make what happened less amazing – and nor does the fact the lots of other executions had happened, enough to make it probable that *someone* would survive. That is precisely the difference between the third- and first-person perspective, the difference that makes is banal that *someone* won the lottery, but amazing that *I* did.

In version 2, the squad shoots not at a conscious me, but at a developing but not yet conscious me – maybe the ovule+spermatozoid pair that is about to merge. Having better weapons, each one still only has a 1% probability of missing. They all miss, and I come into existence. Upon learning about my fate, I am still rightly amazed to have survived that ordeal.

In version 3, consciousness is linked to a *soul*, and occurs when it is joined to a (any) body. A firing squad shoots at a huge number of zombies, and the survivors then receive one of the souls from a collection, each soul in the collection receiving a body. Upon learning *that* I am no longer amazed to exist (as a soul), and the fact that I indwell specifically *this* body is a curiosity, but no longer a source of huge amazement. After all, I had to indwell *some* body. To the extent that my body is exceptional I might still be amazed, or grateful to whoever joined me with this specific body.

If I don’t know which of 2 and 3 is true, I must have a strong *a priori* bias towards 2 to make its *a posteriori* probability not vanish before the *a posteriori* probability of 3 (just like the bribe option must have a vanishing *a priori* probability to make the probability of sheer luck not vanish *a posteriori*).

6 Actual contingency

Our actual situation has much in common with the firing squad experiments. Even foregoing bloating, each of us only exists because since the dawn of life, time and again our ancestors (including individual spermatozoids and ova) survived and managed to procreate. That unlikelihood dwarfs any firing squad survival unlikelihood, and constitutes a strong argument against any account that makes the existence of my consciousness as unlikely as the existence of my body. So theories that ground consciousness in the body would be ruled out that way. And bloating merely strengthens that argument.

³ Or “did God make”, and so on.

⁴ Or “did God give me”, and so on.

7 References

- Everett, Hugh (1957). *On the foundations of quantum mechanics*.
- Lewis, David Kellogg (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell.
- Tegmark, Max (2014). *Our Mathematical Universe*. Vintage Books.