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**THREE VERSIONS OF THE QUESTION,  
'WHY IS THERE SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?'**

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*Abstract.* In dialogue with Stephen Hawking, Martin Heidegger, and Thomas Aquinas, I argue that there are three different and compatible ways to understand the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (1) The scientific way asks about the origin of the cosmos. (2) The transcendental way asks about the origin of experience. (3) The metaphysical way asks about the origin of existence. The questions work independent of each other, so that answering one version of the question does not affect the other two versions. Hawking and Heidegger are therefore mistaken to think that the scientific and transcendental questions render otiose the metaphysical question concerning the origin of existence.

SINCE 2010, THERE HAS BEEN A VERITABLE EXPLOSION OF INTEREST in the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss's 2010 two-hour special on the topic has been viewed 2.5 million times on Youtube. Krauss's 2012 book, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing*, carried an afterward by Dawkins who said the text did for physics what Darwin did for biology.<sup>1</sup> Journalist Jim Holt's 2014 TED talk, "Why does the universe exist?" has scored 6 million views. In his New York Times bestseller, *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story*, he says he came across the question in Martin Heidegger: "I can still recall being bowled over by its starkness, its purity, its sheer power. Here was the super-ultimate *why* question, the one that loomed behind all the others that mankind had ever asked."<sup>2</sup> It's not just scientists and journalists taken by the question but philosophers too. John Wippel edited *The Ultimate Why Question*, Tyron Goldschmidt edited *Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?*, and John Leslie and Robert

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<sup>1</sup> *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012), 4.

Lawrence Kuhn produced an anthology, entitled *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?*<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I focus on the ultimate why question but with no intention of answering it. Instead, I will do some preliminary work of clarification. And the principal thing I will argue is that there is not just one question but three—the scientific, the transcendental, and the metaphysical—even though the three can be expressed with the exact same wording. The questions have the same syntax, but in truth they have different semantics: what is indicated by “something” and “nothing” shifts in each asking. Why is it necessary to distinguish these three versions of the question? One advocate of the scientific question of origin, Stephen Hawking, thinks that answering the scientific question the way he does discounts the transcendental and metaphysical.<sup>4</sup> And one advocate of the transcendental question of origin, Martin Heidegger, thinks that answering the transcendental question the way he does discounts the metaphysical.<sup>5</sup> Both think that answering the question of origin that they pose somehow undermines a philosophical approach to God the creator.

This paper exposes the equivocations and confusions operative in the way that influential thinkers are asking the question of origin. To do so, it advocates several theses:

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<sup>3</sup> John Wippel, *The Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011); Tyron Goldschmidt, *Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and John Leslie and Robert Lawrence, *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Hawking wavers between two claims: (1) science makes God an unnecessary hypothesis; and (2) science nullifies God as a hypothesis. This paper argues that, even granting the truth of all of Hawking’s more speculative scientific claims, both propositions are false. See Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodninow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 8. The earlier Hawking was more perspicacious about the limits of science for explaining what is. In *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking pointed out that science can only model existence; it cannot explain what makes it be; it falls to philosophy instead to ask these questions. See *A Brief History of Time* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 174-175.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger asserts two contradictory propositions: (1) Belief in creation disqualifies one from asking the transcendental question; and (2) creation is not an answer to the transcendental question. This paper argues that the first proposition is false and the second one is true. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New York: Yale University Press, 2000), 7-8.

1. There are three ways to understand the question and three ways to answer it: the scientific, the transcendental, and the metaphysical.
2. These ways are independent of each other, so that answering one does not answer another.
3. These ways are rooted in three different dimensions of experience. As such, expertise in one domain does not entail expertise in others.

What I would like to do is to open up the full wealth of experience before our very eyes so that, despite the opinions of Hawking and Heidegger, the question of God the creator can again be posed philosophically.

### **PRELUDE: THREE DIMENSIONS OF THINKING**

Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked, “It often happens that we only become aware of the important *facts*, if we suppress the question ‘why?’; and then in the course of our investigations these facts lead us to an answer.”<sup>6</sup> Before diving into the question why, I would like to pause and assess the facts at hand. Now, according to some physicists, there are 10 dimensions to reality. Even though height, breadth, depth, and time are the only ones that show up in experience, there are six more that are “curled up” and so are hidden to experience. In this prelude, I would like to identify three dimensions of experience other than the ten physical dimensions.<sup>7</sup> And, unlike string theory, I don’t think these dimensions are hidden to experience. We need philosophy to call them to mind precisely because they are ever present to experience, right there in front of us. To see what’s so manifest would seem to be easy, but it is in fact extraordinarily difficult.

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<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2d ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1958), n. 471.

<sup>7</sup> For a probing philosophical exploration of other dimensions of experience, see Robert Wood, *Being and the Cosmos: From Seeing to Indwelling* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

Wittgenstein even calls upon God for help: “May God give the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone’s eyes.”<sup>8</sup>

The three ways of asking the ultimate why question relate to three non-physical dimensions of ordinary experience: number, intelligibility, and existence. The three ways are rooted in three dimensions present in experience, and it is from these dimensions that we arrive at the motive and means for posing three versions of the ultimate why question. To make this plain, I will call attention to the advent of these dimensions in three very pedestrian childhood discoveries that involve dimensional differences. I’ll take them in reverse developmental order.

(1) *The discovery of number.* Number seems so obvious to us now but at first it was positively mystifying. For the young child, numbering is like an incantation; it is completely unclear what the words spoken have to do with things. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ...” But through recognizing the part-whole nature of number, the fact that it involves a kind of gathering and ordering, an understanding of number comes through. Then something new arises: the ability to quantify all material things, to enumerate, to group, to arrange. A child begins to record and announce new facts about the world, “I have ten toes!” The discovery that everything can be counted opens a new way of being in the world.

(2) *The discovery of intelligibility.* Counting builds on an earlier discovery: names. Around nine months, the infant begins to point to things and thereby direct the attention of its caregivers.<sup>9</sup> The infant learns toward share the world freely with others by directing their attentions not only toward items of need but to items of wonder, to learn the words for things. “Airplane. That is an airplane.” Naming again seems so obvious to us but remember what it is

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<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 63. Translation modified.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

like to be on the outside of it, remember what it is like to be in the midst of foreign speech that is unintelligible.<sup>10</sup> Or consider the witness of Helen Keller, who said about the day she learned to speak: “I was born again that day. I had been a little ghost in a *no-world*. Now I knew my name. I was a person. I could understand people and make them understand me.”<sup>11</sup> Naming opens up a new world to experience.

(3) *The discovery of existence*. Naming builds on an earlier discovery: existence. This third dimension comes first and is as such most obscure but it is most important. As is well known, studies show that newborns that are not handled die at greater rates than newborns that are handled.<sup>12</sup> Right there when we are welcomed into the world we need bodily touch that reveals our being loved. Gratitude for being and being loved lies deep in the human heart. One might exist without being loved, but one cannot discern the goodness of being without that love.

Each of these three discoveries involves a dimensional difference, which opens up a kind of depth to things they would otherwise lack. Learning them is not a matter of acquiring new information about the world; it is a matter of acquiring new aspects to the world as a whole.<sup>13</sup> One could wander through life without counting, without speaking, or without being loved, but that would mean not tapping into the order of things, the truth of things, or the goodness of things. These depth-dimensions would be curled up or closed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It is for good reason that Wittgenstein found Augustine’s discussion in the *Confessions* to be thought-provoking. For commentary, see my *Ostension: Word Learning and the Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Helen Keller, quoted in Steward and Molly Anne Graff, *Helen Keller: Crusader for the Blind and Deaf* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991), 17.

<sup>12</sup> See Rene Spitz, “The Role of Ecological Factors in Emotional Development in Infancy,” *Child Development* 20 (1949): 145-155, and Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz, *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential—and Endangered* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> On aspect-perception, see Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> A way to get at the three dimensions non-developmentally is to consider three ways of understanding a face: (1) recognizing patterns: we can program a computer to “recognize” a face by means of the mathematical order of its features; (2) facing facts: we can identify someone thanks to their faces, in the way that a mug shot does, and

These three discoveries support three modalities of the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?<sup>15</sup> The discovery of number and order opens up the radical cosmological question, “What accounts for the fact that things are ordered in the way they are today?” The discovery of intelligibility opens up the radical transcendental question, “What accounts for the fact that things show up in experience as namable?” The discovery of existence opens up the metaphysical question, “What accounts for the fact that I and my loved ones together with this whole world should exist?” The question of origin can be posed for what is disclosed in each of the three dimensional differences: order, truth, and goodness.

## 1. THE SCIENTIFIC

I come now to the first formulation of the why-question, the scientific one. The elemental experience that provides the remote ground for the asking of this question concerns the discovery of number. The child learns that everything can be counted. Now the discovery of counting at first seems to relate to things in a static way. Plato tells us that number relates to a world of unchanging being. It does not seem particularly dynamic to say there are 40 chairs in the room—although we might add a chair or two, we affect only the chairs, not the number 40. However, mathematical operations allow us to predict, calculate, and control: if the present number of chairs includes twelve that were just added then there must have been 28 beforehand. In this way mathematics enables us to model changes. Using number, we can calculate forwards and

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together we can face the identities of things in the world; and (3) disclosing depths: in love, we can encounter another and regard the face as the display of the person’s singularity.

<sup>15</sup> Each of these questions involves some sort of history. That is one can very well tap into number but nonetheless fail to have a telescope and realize that the cosmos is expanding, implying the previous occurrence of a big bang event; similarly, one can very well carry on plenty of conversations with others about the truth of things without puzzling over the question of the condition for the possibility of these conversations with others about the truth of things; long historical reflection opens this possibility. Finally, one can experience the goodness of existence without for that matter raising the question of creation; for that the provocation of revelation appears, at least in most cases, necessary.

backwards in time, though the ability comes to us by means of treating time as though it behaved like a fourth dimension of space. Note, too, that the only motion that admits of modeling is regular mechanical motion, not the motion of a cat chasing a squirrel or the motion of a kitten growing into a cat but the motion of a planet about its sun or a bullet from its gun. If one knows the state of mechanical motion at any given time it remains possible to rewind or fast forward using numerical equations.

In the 1920s, something extraordinary was discovered about the cosmos, something that unsettled the modern conception of the cosmos as an eternal clockwork: the universe, it was discovered, is presently expanding. Running the equations backwards reveals a more and more condensed cosmos until some 13.7 billion years ago all the energy in the cosmos was concentrated at a single point. As Hawking observes, “If you trace the history of the universe backward into the past, it gets tinier and tinier until you come upon a creation event—what we now call the big bang.”<sup>16</sup> Why did this world come to unfurl itself in the big bang?

Rather than examine the merits of Hawking’s answer, I would like to point out what lies outside the scope of his question, something that is nonetheless essential for the asking of his question. I ask this while keeping in mind that Stephen Hawking begins his book, *The Grand Design*, by asserting that “philosophy is dead.”<sup>17</sup> The reason he gives for this demise is that philosophy has failed to keep up with recent discoveries in physics.<sup>18</sup> It now falls to science, Hawking tells us, to broach the ultimate philosophical questions about the world, where it all comes from, what it means, and why there is something rather than nothing.

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<sup>16</sup> *Grand Design*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> *Grand Design*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Compare this to Josef Pieper’s claim that philosophy in the modern period committed suicide when it forsook contemplation of creation as its proper end. “The Philosophical Act,” in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 91.

Though philosophy is dead, wonder about the cosmos is very much alive. Hawking opens his book in an Aristotelian fashion by remarking that we are metaphysical animals who wonder about the whole:

We each exist for but a short time, and in that time explore but a small part of the whole cosmos. But humans are a curious species. We wonder, we seek answers. Living in this vast world that is by turns kind and cruel, and gazing at the immense heavens above, people have always asked a multitude of questions: How can we understand the world in which we find ourselves? How does the universe behave? What is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator?<sup>19</sup>

But when one digs a bit deeper and asks Hawking about the origin of this wonder, he is silent. Hawking points out that unlike other animals we are curious, we wonder why, but he proceeds to say that all of us animals are just machines extrinsically connected by force laws acting on matter in motion. How one can wrest wonder from clockwork mechanisms is not something that it occurs to him to ask. That there could be something like truth, the fruit of experience, is something he ought to wonder about but does not.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. THE TRANSCENDENTAL

One of the great moments of parenting is when a child, charged with wonder, starts eagerly pointing to things to solicit the names for them. Imagine the excitement of Nietzsche's parents when the late bloomer Friedrich finally said his first word at age two and a half: "grandma."<sup>21</sup> The discovery of intelligibility, that things show up in our joint experience as nameable, opens another way of asking the ultimate why-question. For the name taps into the identity that things have whether they are seen or unseen. It allows us to posit things we could

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<sup>19</sup> *Grand Design*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> I pursue this theme in *Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), especially 3-6 and 139-161, and in "Heidegger and the Human Difference," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (2015): 175-193.

<sup>21</sup> *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*, ed. Sander Gilman, trans. David Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.



never see to explain the things we do: things like quarks and gravity. How can we transcend the visible by introducing the nameable? How does the nameable mark a new way of relating to the visible? How does this way come about? Names are not physical things yet they are intimately interwoven with them.

When Heidegger addresses scientists, he recommends they read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. What Heidegger wants them to see is that in order to have scientific objects, in order to have the sort of mathematical modeling of nature rightly prized by scientists, one needs the finite subject, one needs something other than another scientific object. The condition for the possibility of scientific objectivity is the subjectivity of the human. We are able to have science because we have human beings. Heidegger says, "The existence of each natural scientist, as well as of each human being in general, always argues against their own theory."<sup>22</sup> Heidegger deploys his version of the ultimate why question in order to alert scientists to the condition for the possibility of scientific inquiry, a condition that cannot be accounted for scientifically.

In making this point, Heidegger does not wish to undermine the value of science. Instead, he wishes to contextualize its achievement and to call to mind what cannot be accounted for scientifically: the possibility of truth and thus of science itself. For my present purposes, I think it is also worth mentioning that Heidegger recognizes that the condition for the possibility of modern science is the universal projection of the objectivity of objects. Only that which can count as an object, only that which can in some way be measured and thereby represented, can show up for contemporary science. There are serious consequences of only counting what can be counted. Heidegger points this out in a later essay: "The particularity, separation, and validity of

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<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 198.

the individual disappears at breakneck speed in favor of total uniformity.”<sup>23</sup> This point was dramatically brought home to me when my newborn was hospitalized with a fever. Near the end of that hospitalization, a group of nursing students came in and wanted to run a catheter on him; the explanation was that they had never done one on a newborn before and it would be a good experience for them. My wife and I pointed out he didn’t need it and was in fact about to be discharged, and they said that’s why he would make good practice. My wife and I refused on the grounds that our child is not a specimen; he is a person. The universal projection of objectivity lacks the categories appropriate to the subjects who do the projecting.

Modern science wonderfully measures and models the world. In doing so, however, it all too easily makes us blind to what cannot be so measured and modeled: truth and subjectivity. Heidegger gave an infamous inaugural lecture at Freiburg entitled, “What Is Metaphysics?” I say infamous, for it bears some responsibility for engendering the rift between analytic and continental philosophy that plagues professional philosophy to this day. The analytic philosopher Rudolf Carnap flagged Heidegger’s rhetorically charged formulations as particularly egregious instances of metaphysical pseudo statements, and Carnap advocated the elimination of metaphysics. Heidegger, however, was not engaged in metaphysics understood as a causal account of how the world hangs together. He was instead giving an account of the condition for the possibility of science to a university community passionate about science.<sup>24</sup> Heidegger alerted his listeners to the need to shift into a different grammar when reflecting on the very possibility of reflection, and he sought, in a rhetorically charged way, perhaps appropriate for a public lecture, to turn the hearers from their objects of inquiry in order to think about how there

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<sup>23</sup> *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>24</sup> “What is happening to us, essentially, in the grounds of our existence, when science has become our passion?” Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” trans. David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82.

can be objects of inquiry. And there can be objects of inquiry because mind and things meet in the world, which is itself quite nothing when compared to what meets there, namely mind and things.

“What Is Metaphysics?” ends with the question, “Why are there beings at all, and why not far rather Nothing?”<sup>25</sup> Here he is not asking the scientific question: what model explains the present arrangement of matter? He is not asking the metaphysical question either. Instead he is asking how experience unfolds. He is asking about the possibility of intentionality, the possibility of experience. He wants to say it is transcendence, being held out into the comparative “nothingness” of the world, that allows us to meet with or encounter the otherness of entities. Temporally constituted transcendence, which opens the interplay of presence and absence, is the very dynamism that explains Hawking’s unexplained wonder. Heidegger is asking and suggesting an answer to the transcendental question concerning the condition for the possibility of experience.<sup>26</sup>

I would like to locate in Heidegger’s thought an opening upon a different question.<sup>27</sup> In unfolding the transcendental question about the possibility of experience, Heidegger mentions joy: “Another possibility of such manifestation is concealed in our joy in the presence of the Dasein — and not simply the person — of a human being whom we love.”<sup>28</sup> What does

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<sup>25</sup> “What Is Metaphysics?,” 96. This text should be read in consort with “On the Essence of Ground,” “Postscript to ‘What Is Metaphysics?’,” and “Introduction to ‘What Is Metaphysics?’,” all of which can be found in *Pathmarks*. For commentary, see Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 1-3 and 121-126.

<sup>26</sup> For an extended defense of this reading of Heidegger, see my *Heidegger’s Shadow: Husserl, Kant, and the Transcendental Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Note that Heidegger acknowledges the difference between his question and that of metaphysics, but he wrongly identifies metaphysics with its modern rationalistic instantiation in figures such as Descartes and Leibniz, and he thereby obscures the true nature of the medieval thinking of creation *ex nihilo*. See *Pathmarks*, 270.

<sup>28</sup> “What Is Metaphysics?” 87. “Along with sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our own individualized potentiality-for-Being, there goes an unshakable joy in this possibility.” *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 358. See also 395.

Heidegger mean by this strange aside in the midst of a protracted discussion of more existential passions such as anxiety and profound boredom?

The discussion of friendship in books eight and nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is likely the source of Heidegger's claim here. Aristotle says that joy in the presence of the friend is the mark of friendship. Now, Heidegger's affection for book six of the *Ethics* is well known. He reads it as an analysis of the various modes of disclosive comportment characteristic of our being-in-the-world.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle thinks these intellectual virtues, together with moral virtues, constitute the very possibility of achieving the human good. The best of friends enable us to activate our virtues and thus take in the world of action and intelligibility. When we delight in the presence of a friend, we delight in someone who acts in and knows the world. We delight in that friend not as an object in our perceptual field but as a fellow perceiver of the world. Heidegger's point, following Aristotle, is that the friend brings us face to face with what it is to be in the midst of beings.

I would now like to challenge Heidegger's horizon by taking on board a bit more of Aristotle's analysis of friendship. When we are in the presence of our friends, their goodness is palpable and with it we experience the very goodness of their being and, with that, the goodness of being itself. The good friend reveals the goodness of existence. Thomas Aquinas develops this in terms of the difference between knowing and loving. When we know someone, we know about them, and we do so in terms of features that are not necessarily unique to them. Ava loves dogs, hails from Pittsburg, and cannot stand Taylor Swift's new album. But lots of people love dogs, hail from Pittsburg, and cannot stand Taylor Swift's new album. So these features, by definition able to characterize many, do not capture Ava in her uniqueness. Thomas thinks that's

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<sup>29</sup> See Heidegger, *Plato's 'Sophist'*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 15-134.

just a necessary limitation of understanding; it can never arrive at what is unique to a person. But when we love someone we target the person's particularity. The will loves the person's very existence: "the act of the will consists in this—that the will is inclined to the thing itself as existing in itself [*ad ipsam rem prout in se est*]." <sup>30</sup>

When Terence loves Ava, truly loves Ava, he loves her very being. One might wish all sorts of things for one's friend: that she was a little more patient, a little more forgiving, a little less interested in dogs, etc. but one doesn't wish that the friend was another person; that's non-negotiable. Love targets the non-negotiable part of a person. According to Thomas, goodness is in a sense more interior to a thing than its truth. To latch on to goodness is to confront the marvelousness of someone's existence. Thomas's position here might seem extreme. But consider what is behind the birthday present. To give a gift to someone on her birthday is to acknowledge that that person's very existence, her having been born, is itself a gift worth celebrating.

The atheist humanist Ludwig Feuerbach, in his wonderful efforts to be more Christian than Christianity, calls attention to love as a perception of the goodness of existence: Love makes the difference between being and non-being become significant for us: "Only in feeling and in love does 'this'—as in 'this person' or 'this object,' that is, the particular—have absolute value .... Love means nothing other than becoming aware of this difference [between being and nonbeing]. To him who loves nothing—let the object be whatever one wishes—it is all the same whether something does or does not exist."<sup>31</sup> This is exactly Thomas's point: love perceives the goodness of the beloved's existence. And it is on the basis of this love that one can hazard a

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<sup>30</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominicans (New York: Benziger, 1947), I, q. 82, a. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1986), n. 33.

posing of the ultimate why question that goes beyond Hawking and Heidegger, beyond science and transcendental philosophy.

The Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper notes the rhetorical ambiguity of Heidegger's asking of the why-question. "The explosive character of Heidegger's philosophy ... is simply due to the fact that it asks challenging questions, and his questions are challenging because their source and impetus is theological, and so too should their answers be—though it is true that the theological answer is flatly rejected by Heidegger. But quite suddenly, once again, one could taste the salt of theology on one's tongue."<sup>32</sup> What Pieper does not quite realize is that Heidegger has repurposed a theological question for a non-theological end. Heidegger asks about the condition for the possibility of experience. He does not ask the metaphysical question, and that's why he is quite adamant about rejecting the metaphysical answer: it doesn't answer the transcendental question.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. THE METAPHYSICAL

The third but most fundamental discovery concerns the goodness of existence. The infant needs to experience the touch of love to desire to persist in being. This discovery, embedded deeply in the lives of each one of us, opens up a third way of asking the ultimate why-question. It is hard to think of something more fundamental and yet for that very reason more inconspicuous than our perception of the goodness of being. It constitutes the very health of the soul. But in yearning for this perception and in achieving it, whether in one's own case or the case of a loved one, a question opens up: whence this perceived goodness? For it is foundational and yet stands,

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<sup>32</sup> "Philosophical Act," in *Leisure*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Note that the charge of ontotheology applies to answers to the transcendental question that invoke a supreme object to explain how experiencing objects is possible. For a brief but clear account of "ontotheology," see Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, 2d ed., trans. Thomas A Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 202-205.

curiously, without foundation in our experience. As a fact, it is there evident enough, but from where does it arise?

And we moderns, if we cannot answer the question of origin, or if we don't like the answer to the question of origin, turn back upon the truth of love and become suspicious of it. Nietzsche writes, "In the end one loves one's desire and not what is desired."<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the perception is there or has been there for each of us or we wouldn't be here. That goodness of existence, whence does it come? Why is there this very good someone rather than not?

Here is a loved one, a child, a sibling, a spouse, a friend. In love, we access the beloved in the beloved's own particular act of existence. The beloved, as a human being, takes in the whole world. The beloved is one of the hubs of the many-spoked world of experience, and we rightly celebrate the beloved's existence. Now, numbered motion does not explain *this* beloved's existence although it might describe the way the cosmos hangs together. The intelligibility of experience does not explain *this* beloved's existence although it might describe the way things show up in experience. What will explain *this* beloved's existence? Why is there *this* something rather than not this something? Why is there someone rather than not?

Thomas does not ask explicitly, "Why is there something rather than nothing?," although it was asked by one of his contemporaries, Siger of Brabant.<sup>35</sup> Despite the absence of an explicit formulation, I think the question readily suggests itself on the basis of his thought.<sup>36</sup> Thomas thinks that metaphysics is the inquiry into the first cause of the beings of our experience. The

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<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 93.

<sup>35</sup> John Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas on the Ultimate Why Question: Why There Is Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever," in *The Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever*, 84-108.

<sup>36</sup> On this point, see Brian Davies, OP, "Why Is There Anything At All?", *Think* 2, Issue 4 (2003): 7-15.

world about us, the world perceived most intensively in love, is the world that shows itself to be gifted. Thomas thinks it is the job of metaphysics to ask about the first origin of this existence.

Thomas narrates a threefold history of being inviting us to shift into a radical reduction to pure giftedness. What needs to be explained is not only why matter is arranged in a certain way, Hawking's question, or why things show up in experience as having a certain intelligibility, Heidegger's question. What calls for explanation is the fact that there should be a world in which there are existent things at all. Thomas writes, "The ancient philosophers gradually, and as it were step by step, advanced to the knowledge of truth."<sup>37</sup> I don't think it does too much violence to the text to see it as articulating the three ways of asking the question about why. First, the Presocratic philosophers looked at the origin of order, accounting for accidental changes. This would be the horizon of questioning pursued by Hawking and contemporary cosmology today. Then figures such as Plato and Aristotle sought to account for the experience of intelligibility in terms of cosmic actuality or ideas. This would correspond very roughly to the horizon of inquiry that preoccupies Heidegger and contemporary transcendental thinkers. Third, there is the question about the origin of each being as a whole, excluding nothing at all, and this is the question pursued by Thomas and others. In this third horizon, there is no aspect of the creature that stands outside a relation of dependence on the creator; there is no aspect of the beloved that is not gifted by the creator. Hence, the perception that all is gift is at the heart of this third stage of metaphysical reflection.

### **RECAPITULATION: THREE SENSES OF NOTHING**

One way to separate off the three ways of asking the question is to attend to the meaning of nothing operative in each asking (see fig. 1). First, Hawking speaks of nothing in quasi pre-

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<sup>37</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 2.



Socratic fashion as a sort of privation constituted by the negativity of gravity, a negativity that balances the positivity required for the generation of materiality:

If the total energy of the universe must always remain zero, and it costs energy to create a body, how can a whole universe be created from nothing? ... Because gravity shapes space and time, it allows space-time to be locally stable but globally unstable. On the scale of the entire universe, the positive energy of the matter *can* be balanced by the negative gravitational energy, and so there is no restriction on the creation of whole universes.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, from the dimension of order, Hawking's scientific way of asking the question is to wonder why there is *something quantifiable* and not merely the negative void of law-governed fields.

Second, Heidegger speaks of nothing in quasi Platonic fashion as the empty field of experience constituted by time. As Plato's good is beyond being, so Heidegger's world is beyond things.<sup>39</sup> The world lets things be manifest as the things they are, so it is not an empty nothing but a fecund one: the play of presence and absence enables things to be made manifest in their intelligibility.

Insofar as we treat world at all, make it a problem and try to prove it is essential, for transcendence, it must be something. If it is a *nihil*, then it must not be a *nihil negativum*, i.e., not the simple pure empty negation of something. The world is nothing in the sense that it is nothing that is. It is nothing that is yet something that 'is there.' The 'there is' which is this not-a-being is itself not being, but is the self-bringing forth of timeliness. And what the latter, as ecstatic unity, brings forth is the unity of its horizon, the world. World is the nothing which brings itself forth originally, that which simply arises in and with the bringing forth. We therefore call it the *nihil originarium*.<sup>40</sup>

Hence, from the dimension of intelligibility, Heidegger's transcendental mode of asking is to wonder why there is this *meaningful something* and not merely the void of pure temporality itself.

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodnow, *The Grand Design*, 180.

<sup>39</sup> On the Platonic horizon of Heidegger's question, see *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 181-185.

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 210, translation modified.

Third, Aquinas speaks of nothing in terms of the negation of the entirety of a thing's being. Nothing is a way of speaking about the being as a whole, leaving out no part or dimension whatsoever.

If the emanation of the whole universal being from the first principle be considered, it is impossible that any being should be presupposed before this emanation. For nothing is the same as no being. Therefore as the generation of a man is from the 'not-being' which is 'not-man,' so creation, which is the emanation of all being, is from the 'not-being' which is 'nothing.'<sup>41</sup>

Hence, from the dimension of existential goodness, Aquinas's metaphysical mode of asking the question is to wonder why there are these *beloved someones* and *somethings*.

Let me note that the standard form of the question is misleading, for it can be taken to imply that it would be possible to have nothing at all. Yet the undeniable starting point of our inquiry is that we are and thus something is; moreover, something cannot come to be from nothing. Hence, the question does *not* imply the search for a non-existent cause that could mysteriously bootstrap itself into existence. That would be a pseudo-question with no possible answer, a vain attempt to square the circle.<sup>42</sup> The question, as pressed by Hawking, Heidegger, and Aquinas, instead seeks the condition for the possibility of there being what there is, namely something rather than nothing. And that's going to be in virtue of something that is not an empty nothing or one more something; it will be in virtue of something of a special sort, something that may not even be properly referred to as something. Hence the question might be better put: "Why are there these finite somethings when, after all, they need not be?"

### **Fig. 1. Three Ways of Asking the Ultimate Why-Question**

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<sup>41</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45, a. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Jim Holt, for example, wrongly regards an appeal to a transcendent something as an evasion of the question; instead, it is the only possible way to keep the question from devolving into nonsense. Holt, *Why Does the World Exist?*, 4.

	<b>1 Hawking's Scientific</b>	<b>2 Heidegger's Transcendental</b>	<b>3 Thomas's Metaphysical</b>
<b>Depth-dimension</b>	Mathematical order	Intelligibility	Goodness of existence
<b>Event</b>	<i>13.7 billion years ago</i> : a quantifiable past continuous with the present	<i>Now</i> : a living present opened by projection and retention	<i>Trans-temporal</i> : continuous for as long as one exists
<b>Meaning of Something</b>	Quantifiable objects of scientific investigation	<i>This</i> experienced thing	People and things
<b>Meaning of Nothing</b>	<i>Privation</i> of matter from law-governed field	<i>Potentiality</i> of experiencing something	<i>Counterfactual negation</i> of the whole existent being
<b>The Question</b>	Why did empty quantum fields become populated with matter?	Why do things show up in our experience?	Why do we exist at all?

## CONCLUSION

Today there is a fascination with the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” I have argued contra Hawking and Heidegger that there are three independent but interrelated versions of the question. Yes, we can ask the scientific question about what arranged matter at first long ago; yes, we can ask the transcendental question about what enables experience right now; but we can also ask the metaphysical question about why our loved ones should find themselves existing in their particularity. That opens up a horizon of questioning, not about *what is given* or about *givenness to experience* but about *the very gift of existence*. It transcends the clock-time of physics and the temporality of experience to happen upon the trans-temporal character of the beloved’s being. Scientists, transcendental philosophers, and metaphysicians are hereby put on notice that there are two other origins to explain besides the one that is obvious to them.

At the start I outlined three theses:

1. There are three ways to understand the question and three ways to answer it: the scientific, the transcendental, and the metaphysical.
2. These ways are independent of each other, so that answering one does not answer another.
3. These ways are rooted in three different dimensions of experience.

I would like to add a fourth thesis:

4. The questions are interconnected.

Answering the scientific question raises the possibility of science and leads to the transcendental question. Answering the transcendental question raises the possibility of there being an agent of experience and a world populated with things to be experienced and leads to the metaphysical question.

Let me close by recalling joy in the presence of a loved one. What shows up in that experience but the goodness of that person in his or her particularity? Number cannot account for that goodness. The experience of intelligibility cannot account for that goodness. Only something transcending the whole world of motion and of intelligibility could account for that goodness. Anyone who loves implicitly gives thanks for the beloved's being. To ask the metaphysical why-question is to take seriously what is implicit in love and to make it explicit: to be thankful *for* someone requires being thankful *to* the giver of such a gift.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1982).

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