Why is There Something Rather than Nothing? The Substantivity of the Question for Quantifier Pluralists

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Abstract

Many have argued that the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (henceforth: the Question) is defective in some way. While much of the literature on the Question rightly attends to questions about the nature and limits of explanation, little attention has been paid to how new work in metaontology might shed light on the matter. In this paper I discuss how best to understand the Question in light of the now common metaontological commitment to quantifiers that vary in metaphysical naturalness. I show that proponents of this view have arguments at their disposal that appear to challenge the metaphysical substantivity of the Question. Then I argue that, not only are there ways to resist these arguments, the arguments do not pose a challenge to the Question if it is construed in a way that makes reference to many quantifiers. Rendering the Question with multiple quantifiers not only allows one to grant the prima facie substantivity of the Question, but allows us to express it in a way that is mode-of-being-neutral and ontology-neutral—an independently desirable aim.

1 Introduction

Many have argued that the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (henceforth: the Question) is defective in some way.[1] While much of the literature on the Question rightly attends to questions about the nature and limits of explanation, little attention has been paid to how new work in metaontology, an area concerned with characterizing substantive metaphysical inquiry and its limits, might shed light on the matter.

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[1] See Brenner (2016), Grunbaum (2004), Heylen (2017), McDaniel (2013), and Maitzen (2012) for discussion.

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In this paper, I discuss how best to understand the Question against the now common metaontological commitment to quantifiers that vary in *metaphysical naturalness*.[2] While usually treated as more or less primitive, the notion of metaphysical naturalness can be illustrated by contrasting properties such as *being negatively charged* and properties such as *being red and being an iPad*. One obvious difference, many philosophers hold, is that the property of *being negatively charged* carves nature "closer to the joints" than *being red and being an iPad*. Using predicates that pick out properties carving closer to the joints give us a more metaphysically perspicuous description of the world. Proponents of the view that there are more and less natural quantifiers—let us call them *quantifier pluralists*—hold that there are many candidate meanings for a quantifier expression which has the introduction and elimination rules of an unrestricted first-order existential quantifier. Quantified sentences like "there are tables" may be true relative to one of these candidate meanings and false relative to others. There are at least a few ways for quantifiers to differ with respect to metaphysical naturalness: they might differ with respect to carving at nature's joints; they might differ with respect to fundamentality; or they might differ with respect to the fundamentality of *the mode of being* they express. Often more than one of these characterizations is accepted. Further, it is common for quantifier pluralists to hold that debates and questions in metaphysics are substantive only if posed with perfectly natural vocabulary, and that ordinary English quantifier expressions are not perfectly natural.[3]

These claims provide support for the claim that the Question is not metaphysically substantive. The argument, roughly, is this:

(1) A claim or question is metaphysically substantive only if it is posed with perfectly natural vocabulary.
(2) The ordinary English quantifier is not perfectly natural.
(C) The Question posed with English quantifiers is not metaphysically substantive.

I show in Sects. 2 and 3 that the argument sketched here (henceforth: the Quick Argument) can and should be resisted by quantifier pluralists. Ultimately, the best translation of the Question into the pluralist framework is one that isn't neatly posed with just the English quantifier *or* a perfectly natural one. The best way to understand the Question, I'll argue, makes reference to many quantifiers. In Sect. 4, I challenge an alternative pluralist argument for the thesis that the Question posed in English is not substantive.

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[2] See, for example, Cameron (2010), Dorr (2005), Finocchiaro (2019), McDaniel (2013, 2017), Sider (2009, 2011), and Turner (2010).

[3] See, for example, Cameron (2010), McDaniel (2013, 2017), Sider (2009, 2011), and Turner (2010).

2 Accommodating the Substantivity of the Question

To begin, let me explain why we should be troubled by the conclusion of the Quick Argument. I suspect that when we ask the Question we want to know why something rather than nothing exists, *irrespective of mode of being*. We aren't *just* interested in fundamental modes of being when we ask the Question. This is particularly evident if we hold that the mode of being expressed by the ordinary English quantifier—a quantifier which ranges over button holes, shadows, and statues—is not fundamental. We want to ask the Question in such a way that the things ranged over by the English quantifier are not excluded, even if their mode of being is less fundamental. The trouble persists even if we eschew modes of being. We don't just want to know why something exists rather than nothing by the lights of the most natural, joint-carving, or fundamental construal of what exists. Even if the most natural quantifier doesn't range over button-holes, shadows, or statues, we want to ask the Question in such a way that the existence of such things is neither assumed nor precluded by our question.

Prima facie, this breadth of the Question casts doubt on the conclusion of the Quick Argument: maybe the Question posed with English quantifiers is substantive. However, the thought here should not be taken to indicate that the Question posed with an English quantifier—rendered "why $\exists_{Eng}x\exists_{Eng}y(x=y)$ rather than $\sim\exists_{Eng}x\exists_{Eng}y(x=y)$?"—is substantive, but rather that we intend to ask the Question in a way that is mode-of-being-neutral and (fundamental) ontology-neutral. While it is true that when the Question is asked by an English speaker we can assume they take themselves to be using English expressions, quantifier pluralism makes this assumption less plausible. Recall that for pluralists the quantified sentence "there are tables" is true and "there is an object composed of my nose and the Eiffel tower" is false relative to the English quantifier.[4] It is true that in daily life most English speakers will treat these assignments of truth values to quantified sentences as correct. Typically, it will not matter if certain ontological assumptions are, in a sense, codified by our quantifier. But it is problematic at least in the case of posing the Question if we want to know why something exists, rather than nothing, *whatever* in fact exists, such that "whatever" isn't limited to what the English quantifier ranges over. Suppose there's some alien species whose quantifiers reflect different ontological assumptions, but whose language is otherwise relevantly similar to English, and then imagine them asking the Question. It would be absurd to insist that they are asking a different question from the one we ask.

If this is right, then it may be that if we are quantifier pluralists the Question is best posed by using a more ontologically permissive quantifier, even if that quantifier doesn't turn out to be perfectly natural. Maybe the Question is most perspicuously construed as the question of why something rather than nothing exists *for any candidate quantifiers* for which "something exists" is true, or for *all* candidate quantifiers. I won't defend a specific proposal here, but I do claim that at least one of

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[4] We might instead say *set* of quantifiers that are plausibly English quantifiers, if we doubt there's one that best fits use.

these strategies is needed for quantifier pluralists to construe the Question in a way that is mode-of-being-neutral or ontology-neutral.

Perhaps some folks are curious only about why there are some material or concrete things, rather than none, or only why some fundamental objects exist, rather than none. These narrower questions may be metaphysically substantive too, and perhaps just as interesting and worth pursuing. My claim is only that prima facie some wide construal of the Question like those proposed above is metaphysically substantive, and we should avoid accepting any package of views that commits us to claiming otherwise. To deny this claim is akin to holding the more traditional view of quantification on which there is only *one* unrestricted existential quantifier meaning and then claiming that the Question is only substantive if we specify what sorts of objects exist, or what the correct ontology of the world is like. It is to say that if we are committed to some ontology according to which only concreta exist, we can ask why some concreta exist, rather than none. And if we hold that only fundamental objects exist, we can ask why some fundamental objects exist, rather than none. And if we hold that only necessary existents exist, we can ask why there are some necessary existents, rather than none. But never could we (substantively) ask why something rather than nothing exists without stipulating (or assuming) at the outset that it is equivalent to one of these ontology-specific questions.

This commitment would be absurd. I do not deny that if one of these views of ontology turned out to be correct the wider ontology-neutral question would in some important sense be equivalent to it. But this would not mean that the ontology-neutral question cannot be asked, nor that it is non-substantive. Likewise, quantifier pluralists should countenance a wider ontology-neutral construal of the Question (however clunky it must be when expressed perspicuously in light of their view), and be sure that they are not committed to further claims that would entail this question is non-substantive.

But acknowledging a more ontology-neutral translation of the Question does not yet settle whether it is metaphysically substantive. For that we need to discuss just what metaphysical substantivity *is*. As noted in the introduction, quantifier pluralists usually claim that metaphysical substantivity demands joint-carving vocabulary.[5] According to Ted Sider:

> A nonsubstantive question is one containing an expression E whose [candidate meanings] are such that i) each opposing view about the question comes out true on some candidate; and ii) no candidate carves at the joints in the right way for E better than the rest (2011: 49).

For our purposes here we can take Sider's notion of carving at the joints to correspond to what we've been calling *relative naturalness*.

Now, it might seem obvious that the Question is non-substantive on this construal of substantivity. But on closer inspection it is not so clear. First, we should not be confident the first condition is satisfied. It is not clear what the rival answers to the Question even are (exacerbated no doubt by the fact that it is a "why" question),

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[5] For example, Cameron (2010), McDaniel (2013, 2017), Sider (2009, 2011), and Turner (2010).

especially if we suppose that a discovery that some objects necessarily exist does not fully answer the question without some indication of *why* those things exist. Second, "in the right way for E" is a tricky qualification. Sider explains what he has in mind by this through the distinction between theoretical and non-theoretical terms. If the quantifier for asking the Question is a theoretical term, and the theory in question is, say, a general theory of the world, then a candidate meaning carves at the joints *in the right way* for the quantifier expressions in the Question if it is the most joint-carving, i.e., perfectly natural, meaning simpliciter. But above I suggested that there's an important version of the Question that is ontology-neutral or mode-of-being-neutral. If this is correct, the most perspicuous rendering of this question for quantifier pluralists generally will not be "why $\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$ rather than $\sim \exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$?", where n is some particular quantifier (a perfectly natural one or some other). Rather, it will be something like: "For any (all) candidate n on which $\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$ is true, why $\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$ rather than $\sim \exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$?",[6] [7] If this is right, then the Question *can* be substantive even on Sider's account of substantivity.

If other quantifier pluralists understand metaphysical substantivity as Sider does, this means the Quick Argument is not as troubling as one might have thought: the Question can be rendered perspicuously and be metaphysically substantive. Where quantifier pluralists do not explicitly endorse something like Sider's account of substantivity, they have left us to rely on an implicit understanding of the notion. That pluralists do not always offer an explicit account is less surprising than it appears. Quantifier pluralists often express the idea that substantive questions require joint carving vocabulary in the context of a broader proposal about the nature of metaphysical inquiry. They claim that metaphysics is, or ought to be, concerned with giving a most joint-carving description of reality or describing reality as it is fundamentally.[8] Interestingly, this broader metaontological claim is threatened if the Question falls under the purview of metaphysics and I'm right that there is an important version of the Question that is ontology-neutral. These pluralists face a serious challenge: either explain how their metaontological views can be refined to accommodate the Question, show why an ontology-neutral rendering of the Question is reasonably regarded as outside the scope of metaphysical inquiry, or show that the Question is defective in some way.

Maybe this challenge looks easily met. Here is one idea: on some views of what sorts of things exist, some things exist necessarily. So there can't be a substantive question about whether *those* sorts of things exist. And if some things exist

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[6] This formulation seems to presuppose that there are abstract objects, since it quantifies over quantifiers. If we wanted to avoid that presupposition, we might go for something more unwieldy like this: why $(\exists_1 x \exists_1 y(x = y)$ or $\exists_2 x \exists_2 y(x = y)$ or $\exists_3 x \exists_3 y(x = y)\ldots)$ rather than $(\sim \exists_1 x \exists_1 y(x = y)$ or $\sim \exists_2 x \exists_2 y(x = y)$ or $\sim \exists_3 x \exists_3 y(x = y)\ldots)$? This disjunctive formulation also circumvents the first horn of the dilemma raised for the non-disjunctive formulation of the Question in section V.

[7] There is a question for the quantifier pluralist taking this approach as to which quantifiers are included. We may want to ensure that restricted domain quantifiers (such as when we say "everyone was at the party) are not included. Carefully excluding these quantifiers is already a challenge quantifier pluralists face in carefully explicating their view, but whatever approach they choose will give them the resources to make sure the right quantifiers are included.

[8] See for example, Sider (2011).

necessarily, the Question is easily answered in a way that renders it non-substantive: there is something rather than nothing, because ____ exists necessarily.

But even if some objects necessarily exist, e.g., abstract objects, it seems to me we may reasonably wonder *why* these necessary existents exist. Necessary existents may make the Question harder to answer and more perplexing in certain ways, but that gets us no closer to showing that the Question is non-substantive. In fact, insofar as quantifier pluralists admit possible quantifiers that do not quantify over what exists by the lights of another quantifier, their view speaks in favor of substantivity in this regard. Things that plausibly necessarily exist given one quantifier and its associated language may not plausibly necessarily exist given another. And pluralists generally do hold this—only a pluralist who claims that a maximally ontologically permissive quantifier is the most natural quantifier or is a conventionalist about modality is in a position to deny it.

We've seen that if there is an important mode-of-being-neutral and ontology-neutral understanding of the Question best rendered with multiple quantifiers on the assumption of quantifier pluralism then the Quick Argument is not cause for concern. However, I think the Quick Argument can be resisted by quantifier pluralists without taking up this approach to rendering the Question, and it is important to resist it if they deny that the Question can or should be rendered in one of the ways I suggested. Even if these pluralists claim that the Question is never intended to be fully neutral about ontology or modes of being, surely it is true that we aren't *just* interested in fundamental modes of being when we ask the Question, and that we don't just want to know why something exists rather than nothing by the lights of the most natural, or fundamental description of what exists. If the most natural quantifier doesn't range over things like songs, shadows, and statues, we should be able to ask the Question in such a way that the existence of such things is neither assumed nor precluded. If this is right, these pluralists should find a way to respond to the Quick Argument. Maybe in the end pluralists would rather bite the bullet so to speak rather than give up any premises of the argument, but the premises and reasons to doubt them must be carefully considered first. In the next section, I'll show how pluralists can resist the premises of the Quick Argument.

3 Resisting the Quick Argument

One premise of the Quick Argument is that the ordinary English quantifier is not perfectly natural. I won't argue that this premise is *false* here, but I will show that it is surprisingly difficult to establish that the premise is true.

I suspect that many quantifier pluralists take the range of the English quantifier over non-fundamental things like holes and shadows to be evidence that the English quantifier is not perfectly natural.[9] But there is reason to doubt the assumption upon which this relies, namely, that perfectly joint-carving quantifiers range over

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[9] See, for example, McDaniel (2013, p. 274).

only (maximally) fundamental entities. Proponents of quantifier pluralism need not assume this. Korman (2015), for example argues:

> I see no good reason to suppose that the relative fundamentality of a quantifier is measured by the relative fundamentality of the items in its domain. After all, we don't think that a relation can only be as fundamental as its least funda-mental relata. We certainly would not deny that identity is fundamental simply because entities of all kinds—fundamental and nonfundamental—stand in this relation. Nor is it especially plausible that a restricted identity relation which relates only fundamental objects to themselves is more fundamental than iden-tity…By parity, it is hardly obvious that the most fundamental mode of being cannot be one that is enjoyed by nonfundamental objects, or that the most fun-damental quantifiers cannot range over nonfundamental objects. (2015: 305)

I'm sympathetic to Korman's line of reasoning. But that's not the only reason to doubt that perfectly natural quantifiers are those that only range over fundamental entities. There are more overarching concerns to consider—ones that depend on our reasons for accepting quantifier pluralism in the first place.

For example, one might be interested in resisting deflationist arguments against the substantivity of ontological disputes by claiming that we can stipulate that we use a most natural quantifier in these disputes. But this is compatible with a brand of quantifier pluralism for which it is not a brute unanalyzable fact which quantifier is most natural. To develop this kind of view we might say something like this: the most natural existential quantifier is whatever existential quantifier you find in the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world.[10] This variation of the view, suitably fleshed out, suggests that it is perhaps even *likely* that the most natural quantifier ranges over both fundamental and non-fundamental entities. At least, it will suggest this if we think that a most virtuous theory of the world is likely to mention some non-fundamental things, either because they have some important explanatory role in their own right, or perhaps in order to explain why humans behave the way they do. If we don't assume that the domain of a perfectly natural quantifier contains only things that are fundamental, or make some closely related assumption about the sta-tus of things in the domain, then it will be very challenging to argue that the existen-tial quantifier of English is not a perfectly natural quantifier.

One might think that we can take the slow and laborious path of settling first-order ontological disputes, which in turn will inform us about what sorts of things belong in the domain of a perfectly natural quantifier. This will then allow us to determine if the ordinary English quantifier is perfectly natural absent any assumptions to the effect that the perfectly natural quantifier only has fundamen-tal objects in its domain. But to take up this strategy, we'll need to stipulate that we are conducting these disputes with the most natural quantifier to avoid having those disputes be defective.[11] And once we take a closer look, we'll see this only

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[10] I develop a view along these lines elsewhere.

[11] The dispute may end up defective not only in light of deflationist arguments like that of Hirsch (2009), but also owing to the availability of commissive uses of the relevant vocabulary. See, for example, Parent (2015).

has the potential to give us a verdict on the naturalness of the English quantifier on a view like the one I just suggested (one where perfectly natural quantification is analyzed in other terms, perhaps in terms of the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world). If we take the alternative Siderian route, on which our grip on the meaning of a perfectly natural quantifier is exhausted by our stipulation that we're going to use the perfectly natural quantifier, it is not at all straightforward what first-order ontological debates can tell us about the domain of the perfectly natural quantifier, and in turn whether this quantifier likely to be the English quantifier.

To see why, consider an argument from Korman (2015), using a version of a puzzle about how a statue (Goliath) can be co-located with a particular piece of clay (Lump):

(A1) Goliath exists.
(A2) If Goliath exists, then Goliath is co-located with Lump.
(A3) If Goliath is co-located with Lump, then there exist distinct co-located objects.
(A4) There do not exist distinct co-located objects.

While there are many responses to this puzzle, many have reasonably thought that the best response is to accept nihilism—the view that there are no composite objects—and reject (A1). But accepting what Korman calls *deep nihilism*—the view that only simples exist$_o$ (no composites exist$_o$), where "exist$_o$" picks out perfectly natural quantification—isn't grounds for rejecting (A1) since (A1) is compatible with deep nihilism. What if we replace all instances of 'exist' with 'exist$_o$' in the above argument? Would that give us an argument that motivates deep nihilism, and in turn help us determine what is (or isn't) in the domain of the perfectly natural quantifier? To evaluate this we'll need to consider the plausibility of denying the correlate of (A1):

(A1o) Goliath exists$_o$.

If our grip on the meaning of the perfectly natural quantifier is exhausted by our stipulation introducing the quantifier, as on the Siderian view, it seems that the only way forward in assessing the plausibility of (A1$_o$) is to assess the plausibility of the view that statues like Goliath are in the domain of the perfectly natural quantifier. But it's not clear how to assess what might belong in this domain if our only grip on the meaning of the perfectly natural quantifier is the claim that it is perfectly natural and we don't claim that all and only fundamental entities are in its domain. Thus looking to first-order debates will not yield a viable method for determining whether the English quantifier is perfectly natural if we opt not to assume that a perfectly natural quantifier only ranges over fundamental entities.

Consider again the alternative view according to which the most natural existential quantifier is roughly whatever existential quantifier you find in the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world. On that view, the Goliath and Lump argument above can be stated in terms of existence$_o$. Existence$_o$, so understood, is the concept of existence found in the language that's ontologically best in virtue of permitting

the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world to be formulated. On this view, when ontologists ask whether "Goliath exists$_o$," is true, they effectively ask whether it is true on the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world. And to answer that question, ontologists do their best to assess ontological theories in the usual way with theoretical virtues in their toolkits. There's no special difficulty for how to reason about what exists according to the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world.

If this is right, then for pluralists with this view whether the English quantifier is perfectly natural depends on whether the most theoretically virtuous theory of the world can be stated with an ordinary English quantifier. I cannot explore that question here, but these considerations are enough to show that the claim that the ordinary English quantifier is not perfectly natural is not as easy or straightforward to defend as it might have appeared.

A related but more general way to challenge the Quick Argument involves rejecting the thesis that metaphysical questions are substantive only if posed with a quantifier that is not the quantifier of ordinary English. If metaphysically substantive claims cannot be posed with the English quantifier then arguably quantifier pluralists who accept this claim are faced with a dilemma. Either metaphysicians have been using a quantifier that is not the ordinary English quantifier when we ask questions all along, or we ought to be stipulating that we are using a special quantifier in our metaphysical discourse. As Korman (2015) shows, both options are troubling. If we accept the first horn, we'll be committed to dubious interpretive claims about what metaphysicians have meant all along in their discourse with one another. Surely many metaphysicians do not see themselves as debating about what exists fundamentally or even necessarily about nature's "joints." If we accept the second horn, we generate a tension between this stipulation, and our method for addressing first-order ontological disputes. As discussion of the toy argument for nihilism above shows, it's not obvious what these first-order arguments show and what replies are compelling if pluralists have no further analysis of perfectly natural quantification.

Finally, if a primary reason for wanting to avoid accepting the Quick Argument's conclusion is that the Question is best rendered with an English quantifier, we might just reject the first premise of the argument, the premise that a claim or question is metaphysically substantive only if it is posed with perfectly natural vocabulary. As observed above, much of the interest in accepting the thesis of premise (1) appears to stem from an interest defending a broader metaontological picture on which metaphysics is the enterprise of working out what exists fundamentally or describing the world in the most-joint carving way. If this metaontological picture is the primary motivation for accepting the claim of premise (1), then perhaps the best option is to reject this premise. It's not clear that there is a great cost, if the cost is merely granting that there can be exceptions to the general idea that metaphysics is about working out a most joint-carving description of the world, or what have you. I see no reason to rigidly insist on a no-exceptions policy.

Before concluding that the quantifier pluralism poses little threat to the substantivity of the Question, it will be worthwhile to consider a different pluralist argument from McDaniel (2013) against the substantivity of the Question, one which

appears to be a challenge even for those who deny the general claim that substantive questions require perfectly natural vocabulary. I turn now to this argument.

4 Another Argument

The argument goes like this. Ordinary English language use exhibits certain patterns of reification that seem to suggest some bridge principle is true in our language that licenses us to use 'nothing' as a referring term in our language (or a language very similar to ours). The principle McDaniel has in mind is this: "an absence of F's exists when there are no F's." Using this principle as a premise, we can construct an annoying argument to the effect that "if there isn't anything, then there is something, namely nothing". This argument will enable us to easily answer the Question. The answer is simply that there really couldn't have been nothing. If the answer to the Question is so incredibly easy to derive, then the question is non-substantive. We've answered it simply by employing a sort of bridge principle that is true in our language (or a very similar language) given the meaning of the existential quantifier in our language (or a very similar language).

McDaniel suggests that even if this bridge principle doesn't hold *generally* in our language, there is surely some possible language whose quantifier is very similar to the English quantifier in which it does. In a language where this principle does hold, the existential quantifier is plausibly more natural than the one in English since it "uniformly codifies the relevant [bridge] principle and so provides the basis for a principled account of when absences exist" (2013: 278). But the fact that this quantifier would be more natural than the English one that did not codify the principle about absences reinforces the claim that the Question is not substantive or deep in English, McDaniel argues. Absences, including global absences, are not things a most natural quantifier would quantifier over. If we embrace the idea that only questions where the key vocabulary are joint-carving are substantive, then plausibly the quantifier that codifies the bridge principle is not the most joint-carving quantifier, or among the class of maximally and equally joint-carving quantifiers. So if our English quantifier is even *less* natural than this alternative quantifier, the Question will surely not be substantive.

To start, notice that there is a straightforward way to pose the Question with quantifiers, one which McDaniel himself embraces when the quantifier is a perfectly natural one: "why $\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$ rather than $\sim\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$?" (Although we might want to complicate this in light of the discussion in Sect. 2.) If this adequately captures the form of the question, we can straight away substitute $\exists_{english}$ for $\exists_n$. This directly prevents a referential reading of 'nothing' in the Question. To maintain that this substitution can't be made, or that this is not what is generally intended and understood when posing the Question, we'd need some argument to show why the ordinary English quantifier expressions cannot be adequately expressed in formal logic. There are good reasons to think that it can.[12] So the success of McDaniel's

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[12] See, for example, van Inwagen (2009).

argument comes down to whether the truth of the bridge principle (either in English or some similar language) would entail some truth (in English or the similar language) that answers the Question in a way that renders it non-substantive.

I do not think McDaniel's argument stands up to scrutiny even when we assume the bridge principle is true in English. If the bridge principle licenses us to conclude there must be something, then we should concede that it is (nearly) a conceptual truth for English speakers that there couldn't have been nothing. In that sense, the Question is easy to answer for English speakers. We saw above that, at least on Sider's notion of substantivity, having an easy answer is irrelevant to whether a question is substantive. But even if McDaniel has some looser notion of metaphysical substantivity in mind, we should find the suggestion that being easy to answer has to do with substantivity doubtful. Questions such as "does $66 + 43 = 99$?" are easy to answer, but are plausibly substantive. And while some conceptual truths are uninteresting and boring, many are not, even for plausibly non-fundamental entities like persons. If it is a conceptual truth, for example, that persons are moral agents, this is an interesting answer to the surely interesting corresponding question as to whether persons are (necessarily) moral agents. We need some further argument here that the conceptual truth that answers the Question would be trivial in a way that justifies claiming that the Question is non-substantive. Though many might find the answer under consideration just *obviously* trivial in a way that makes the Question importantly non-substantive, given how many folks find metaphysical or conceptual claims of interest to philosophers trivial and boring (students in required Introduction to Philosophy courses come to mind), we should not leave the argument there if it is to show us that the Question is non-substantive.

One idea is to further argue that the answer to the Question depends unacceptably on the meaning of the quantifier: we could easily have gotten a different answer to the Question with an equally good but different quantifier meaning. This is roughly to argue that the answer to the Question is what Sider (2011) calls *candidate-selection conventional*. A choice of word meaning is candidate-selection conventional if there are a number of candidate meanings for some word, and if each of these meanings would accomplish the "semantic goal" of introducing the word equally well.[13] A *sentence* is candidate-selection conventional when the truth-value of the sentence depends on a candidate-selection conventional choice.[14] Arguing that the answer to the Question when phrased with a referential use of 'nothing' is conventional in this sense, will turn on whether we can make the case that there are equally good quantifier meanings that would yield a different truth value for the sentence, or perhaps just the relevant predicates. How the answer is phrased will be constrained by how we understand the form of the argument to the effect that there must be an absence, and therefore something (in the quantificational sense: $\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$). If the bridge principle looks something like $\sim \exists x Fx \rightarrow \exists x Ax$, where "A" means "is an absence", we cannot use the typical way of construing "there is something" formally, i.e., $\exists_n x \exists_n y(x = y)$ as a premise in the argument. F must be a predicate that is roughly a

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[13] Sider (2011, p. 54).

[14] Ibid. p. 55.

predicate meaning "being something." So the relevant predicates and referring terms in the answer to the Question as construed above could in principle vary in meaning as well. It is not totally clear what alternative candidates there are here that would be equally good, in the sense of preserving the semantic goal for the term, yet yield different truth values for the answer. But we can sidestep considering this matter if the bridge principle is taken to be true relative to the meaning of the existential quantifier in the language. Whatever difference in candidate meanings for the other terms in the answer there may be, these are differences that are reflected in the quantifier meaning for quantifier pluralists. Thus we need only consider whether it is plausible that there are equally good alternative meanings of the existential quantifier that yield a difference in truth value for the answer to the Question. And this will depend on what we think it takes for alternative candidates to be equally good.

If we suppose that any quantifier meanings in languages with the same looking lexicon and which validate the same introduction and elimination rules are equally good, we've more or less committed ourselves to a kind of "quantifier variance" claim that deflationists like Hirsch (2002, 2009) espouse—something those who (like McDaniel) believe that there *are* substantive metaphysical inquiries will want to avoid. But if we place further demands on what it takes for a quantifier meaning to be equally good, and these can't be explained as anything other than requirements that the quantifier expressions be equally joint-carving, natural, or fundamental, then saying there are equally good quantifier meanings that yield a different truth value for this particular answer to the Question looks tantamount to claiming that the answer (and the Question) are only substantive if posed with some perfectly natural quantifier. If that's right, we do not have here an argument independent of the Quick Argument discussed above, and the same responses will be available.

5 A Dilemma

I've now shown that quantifier pluralists have arguments at their disposal that appear to challenge the metaphysical substantivity of the Question. But not only are there good ways to resist these arguments, there is a way to show they do not jeopardize the substantivity of the Question in the first place. Neither argument poses a challenge to the substantivity of the Question if it is construed in a way that makes reference to many quantifiers. Rendering the Question with multiple quantifiers not only allows quantifier pluralists to grant the prima facie substantivity of the Question, but allows us to express it in a way that is mode-of-being-neutral and ontology-neutral—an independently desirable aim. One such rendering I floated was this: for any (all) candidate n on which $\exists_n x \exists_n y (x = y)$ is true, why $\exists_n x \exists_n y (x = y)$ rather than $\sim \exists_n x \exists_n y (x = y)$? But we may wonder whether this raises further questions about the possible substantivity of the Question for a quantifier pluralist.

In particular, one might worry we'll face a dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is to say that there may be an indefinite or infinite number of ontologies corresponding to quantifiers, making the Question unanswerable in practice. This would render the Question pointless, and so in that sense not substantive. The second horn of the dilemma is to say that the Question is trivially answerable because

$\exists x \exists y (x = y)$ is a theorem of classical logic and will be true relative to any candidate quantifier (and ontological framework). If "something exists" is true relative to (all) quantifiers the Question can be answered trivially and is therefore not substantive. The sense of triviality here may be the Carnapian sense in which "internal" questions are easily answered.[15]

I'll begin by noting that I've limited myself in this paper to (1) showing how quantifier pluralist metaontological commitments lead to the "Quick Argument", which concerns the Siderian sense of metaphysical substantivity; (2) showing that the Quick argument can and should be resisted; (3) showing how quantifier pluralists can capture a broad or more ontologically neutral understanding of the Question, which I suggest captures at least one natural and desirable understanding of the Question and is at the very least metaphysically substantive in the Siderian sense; (4) showing how another sort of argument (sketched by McDaniel) to the effect that the Question is not substantive in English given the quantifier pluralist framework does not succeed either. With this in mind, my response to the first horn of this dilemma will be that we need not regard the Question as non-substantive even if we grant that it is unanswerable in practice. My response to the second horn will be that the truths of certain theorems of logic won't make the Question trivially answerable. But even setting these responses aside, I think this would not be a true dilemma for someone who takes up my proposal since even if there is a very large number of questions (perhaps an infinite number), the answers for many might be the same and allow us to answer the Question with generalizations. For example, it may be the case that we can say something like this: for all quantifiers that have "absences" or abstracta in their domains, there is something rather than nothing because there couldn't have been nothing; and for all quantifiers that have only concrete objects in their domains, there is something rather than nothing because there is an infinite regress of contingently existing concrete things; etc.[16] But again, I don't think there is really a dilemma here, at least not one that's in tension with what I've claimed to show in the paper.

With respect to the first horn of the dilemma, I'm inclined to agree that there is a sense in which questions that are unanswerable in practice may be non-substantive. That's alright as long as there is a relevant sense in which questions that are unanswerable in practice *are* substantive, and I believe there is for both empirical and non-empirical questions. One sense would be the Siderian sense of metaphysical substantivity which is focused on above. Since, if my argument is correct, a "many quantifiers" version of the Question can be substantive in the Siderian sense, there is no problem here. Moreover, it's doubtful that the Siderian sense of substantivity is even the only sense in which questions that are unanswerable in practice may be substantive. Questions like "how many grains of sand are there on Earth at this moment?" are empirical questions that are unanswerable in practice, and there are surely grounds for thinking questions like these are substantive. They have answers, one may be curious about them, and their answers don't turn merely on choice of

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[15] Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this dilemma.

[16] This might make the question partly naturalistically answerable in the sense of Maitzen (2012).

terminology. Likewise, there is arguably a sense in which many questions that metaphysics concerns itself with are unanswerable in practice yet are substantive in that they have an answer, we might be curious about them, and they are not straightforwardly answered by conceptual analysis, empirical investigation, or consideration of theoretical virtues.[17] In other words, all our tools for discovering the answers to questions might leave us in the dark about the fact of the matter, or even lead us to form a mistaken belief about the correct answer to a question. Regardless, my primary aim in this paper has been to show that certain apparent challenges that could be leveled at the substantivity of the Question stemming from a quantifier pluralist framework can be met, and should be met given some theoretical motivations for quantifier pluralism. Those challenges are met even if it is right that taking up one of the proposals I suggest for understanding the Question in that framework will mean that the Question is unanswerable in practice (and in that sense non-substantive). This is not only because there is a sense in which it is substantive, but also because I've pointed to ways to respond to these arguments that do not turn on embracing the "many quantifiers" rendering of the Question I've proposed.

Regarding the second horn of the dilemma, it's important to note that quantifier pluralists need not be committed to classical logic. Candidate quantifiers may come from languages where quantifiers obey principles of free logic instead of classical introduction and elimination rules. So $\exists x \exists y (x = y)$, or "something exists," may not be a logical truth relative to all existential quantifiers. But even if that were the case, we need not suppose that the answer to the Question has been trivially answered. Philosophers are normally fine with the fact that it is a logical truth that something exists in classical logic because we already know that something in fact exists and so in this sense it doesn't lead us astray. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't ask why something is a logical truth. In my view, the question why is there something rather than nothing has not been fully answered even if "something exists" is a logical truth. I want to know whether it is a logical truth because there are special reasons to think that classical logic must be correct, or whether it is because abstract objects necessarily exist, or whether it is because God exists, etc. Maybe these reasons can't be discovered, but one may reasonably regard the Question as unanswered without them.

Setting aside whether this would give a full answer to the Question, there remains the matter of whether the rendering of the Question for quantifier pluralists that I offer would mean that the Question is internal in a Carnapian sense, making it trivially answerable. Recall that the basic idea behind the quantifier pluralist view is that at least some quantified sentences are true relative to some quantifiers and false relative to others. For most quantifier pluralists, this is the way we make sense of how there could be different ontological frameworks, or different ways of "carving" the world up into objects. This doesn't make questions about what exists, or why, trivial as long as there are better and worse ways to carve up the world or, as I suggest, as long as we are interested in why something exists on any carving of the world into objects.

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[17] See Bennett (2009), Paul (2012, pp. 21–23), and McSweeney (2019).

Of course, some quantifier pluralists are deflationists about ontology and hold that no ways of carving up the world are more metaphysically perspicuous than others. This might suggest a deflationist approach to arguing that the Question is internal in the Carnapian sense, and so trivially answerable. One might suppose that insofar as answers to ontological questions are trivial by depending on a choice between equally good quantifier meanings, so answers to "why" based ontology questions are trivial in virtue of the way they will vary by choice of equally good quantifier meanings. If we adopt a quantifier meaning on which there are abstract objects, the answer to the Question may be different from one on which there are no abstract objects, and the fact that there is this variability should, a deflationist might say, lead us to think that it is not a substantive question. But I think that an argument like this will not stand up to scrutiny. Holding that many quantifier meanings are equally good for carving up the world in a way that might render first-order ontological disputes trivial doesn't put pressure on us to regard questions like why something exists on *any* carving of the world into objects as trivial too. This may well be a substantive question by the lights of the deflationist. If the deflationist quantifier pluralist regards my proposed rendering of the Question as trivial, that won't reflect some shortcoming of it but will be a function of some other antecedent metaontological commitments that other quantifier pluralists need not accept.

6 Conclusion

Quantifier pluralists have embraced metaontological commitments that appear to threaten the substantivity of the Question in a new way. I've shown that these arguments can and should be resisted, and that rendering the Question with multiple quantifiers not only allows quantifier pluralists to grant the prima facie substantivity of the Question, but allows us to express it in a way that is mode-of-being-neutral and ontology-neutral—an independently desirable aim. I've argued that the quantifier pluralist need not worry that this approach will make the Question trivial or unanswerable in a way that threatens its metaphysical substantivity. But there is undoubtedly more work to do in thinking about how this approach will change our thinking on arguments pertaining to the Question, and it is worth exploring other ways in which different metaontological views may change our thinking on the Question.

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