15 Questioning the Question

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1 INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this volume address the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' or else an equivalent version of it such as 'Why is there anything at all?' In honor of G.W. Leibniz, history's most famous champion of the question, let's call it 'Leibniz's Question', or 'LQ' for short. LQ has shown remarkable resilience since Leibniz first posed it more than three hundred years ago (Leibniz 1697). The question just won't go away. Several of the contributors to this volume take LQ very seriously and at face value, and some of them offer elaborate metaphysical answers to it. Some of those answers strike me as merely fanciful; others strike me as truly desperate. For present purposes, however, I needn't name names.

What accounts for this unresolved, centuries-old controversy? Might LQ itself be so apparently intractable—might it invite those truly desperate answers—at least in part because the question itself embodies some confusion? That's exactly my diagnosis of it. I'll argue that LQ as it's often meant by those who ask it—that is, as a question that natural science can't answer even in principle—is *ill-posed* because it rests on false presuppositions, some of which have gone unnoticed. In that sense LQ is a pseudo-question, and it's no wonder then that we can't agree on an answer to it.[1] To put it another way, I aim to 'domesticate' LQ, to deflate its pretensions to being a question that has no naturalistic answer. If LQ has an answer at all, it has a naturalistic answer.

2 NECESSARY OR CONTINGENT? ABSTRACT OR CONCRETE?

For those who accept Platonism about abstract objects, there's a sense in which LQ has a simple and obvious answer: there's something rather than nothing at all because there *couldn't* have been nothing at all. There *had* to

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1. For a similar diagnosis of the persistent disagreement over Newcomb's problem in rational decision theory, see Maitzen and Wilson 2003.

be something, namely, all of the necessarily existing abstract objects in the Platonic realm, including the real numbers, the empty set and various non-empty sets, and at least some universals. Those objects exist in every possible world, and hence there's no alternative to their existing that could have obtained instead.[2] Some Platonists therefore interpret LQ as a question they can answer by invoking necessarily existing abstract objects, and as a result some of them may regard LQ as resting on a false presupposition, namely, that there *could* have been nothing at all.[3]

In my experience, however, this Platonistic answer rarely satisfies those who take LQ seriously. Non-Platonists see nothing in Platonism to recommend it as an answer, and even Platonists often don't regard it as an answer that gets to the real heart of LQ. Instead, when most people ask LQ, they want to know why there exist any of the visible and often tangible objects they see around them: plants, animals both human and nonhuman, mountains, planets, stars, and so on. It's widely agreed that none of *those* objects had to exist, so why is it the case that any of them do? That question concerns the existence of *contingent* things, and so it misses the point of the question simply to assert the existence of objects that exist necessarily if they exist at all. A satisfactory answer has to cover things that *didn't* have to exist.[4]

But even narrowing our focus to contingent things doesn't go quite far enough. For consider the set whose only member is the planet Mars: the set {Mars}. If {Mars} exists, it exists contingently, because its only member exists contingently and sets owe their identity to their members. But if {Mars} exists, it exists abstractly, and, as I mentioned before, those who ask LQ seem concerned about the existence of concrete objects such as Mars the planet and not, or not primarily, abstract objects such as {Mars} the set. Properly interpreted, then, LQ concerns those things that are contingent (i.e., that didn't have to exist) and concrete (i.e., that exist in spacetime). Why do any of *those* things exist rather than none at all?

Using 'CCT' to abbreviate 'contingent, concrete thing', we can put LQ tersely: 'Why are there any CCTs?' We can omit the traditional coda 'rather than none at all' because, as far as I can see, those five words add rhetorical

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2. As I explain below in reply to objections, even if it's true that these Platonic entities had to exist, it remains perfectly legitimate to ask *why* they had to exist: you can agree that N exists of necessity and still legitimately ask for an explanation of N's necessity.

3. I'll argue that LQ, as it's typically intended, *does* rest on false presuppositions, but different presuppositions whose falsity is easier to establish. John Heil, 'Contingency' (this volume), challenges the presupposition that there might have been nothing *concrete* at all. I'll argue that LQ rests on false presuppositions even if we *grant* that there might have been nothing concrete at all.

4. Starting with Leibniz himself, philosophers typically interpret LQ as concerning only, or at least primarily, those things that could have failed to exist. See van Inwagen 1996 and O'Connor 2008 among the many recent treatments that interpret LQ this way.

force but not logical content to the question. Notice that LQ doesn't ask, with regard to any particular CCT, 'Why is this thing *contingent*—why doesn't it exist of necessity?' Nor does LQ ask why some particular CCT (some particular table, say) *exists*, a question that shouldn't have struck anyone as profound. Instead, LQ asks why any CCTs at all exist. Leibniz thought, and many have agreed with him, that such a question can't be answered by invoking *only* contingent things and therefore can't be answered by invoking only CCTs. By the same token, and despite the impressive progress of natural science since Leibniz's day, many think that LQ is a question that natural science isn't capable of answering: a question so fundamental and so general that any answer to it must come from *outside* the domain investigated by natural science. I disagree. I think natural science can put the question to bed. If LQ has an answer, there's no good reason to think natural science can't provide it.

3   ANSWERING LQ NATURALISTICALLY

I think LQ has a simple empirical answer. Pick any kind of CCT: penguins, for example. Penguins are CCTs, and if required we can give an empirical explanation of the existence of penguins, an explanation that there's every reason to think will only improve as science continues to progress. Necessarily, if there are penguins there are CCTs, since presumably it's essential to penguins that they be CCTs: in any possible world in which there are penguins, therefore, there are CCTs. Even if it's not *essential* to penguins that they be CCTs, penguins are *in fact* CCTs, or so we assume: in any world in which penguins *are* CCTs there are CCTs, including in the actual world. We often explain some fact F by citing a different fact G whose obtaining is logically sufficient for F. I've therefore explained why there are (some) CCTs (rather than none at all). There are CCTs because there are penguins (among, of course, other CCTs).

   How could such an explanation possibly suffice? Stay tuned. The objection that it couldn't possibly suffice stems from one or more of the confusions detailed below. I contend that there's nothing at all defective in my naturalistic answer to LQ: it needn't leave any legitimate question unanswered in principle. In the next section, I'll rebut six objections to the effect that my answer is in some way defective. Examining those objections will reveal that LQ is ill-posed if it's intended or interpreted as a question that natural science can't in principle answer.

4   OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Objection A: Penguins aren't the *only* CCTs there are, so your explanation only begins to scratch the surface. By failing to mention any CCTs besides

penguins, it falls woefully short of explaining why there exist any of the numerous CCTs and kinds of CCTs that in fact exist.

Reply: It's simply not true that my explanation falls short of explaining why there exist any of the numerous CCTs that exist. For penguins are among the numerous CCTs that exist, and hence the existence of penguins is sufficient for the existence of some of the numerous CCTs that exist. Granted, my explanation doesn't explain the existence of *all* of the numerous CCTs that exist, but it needn't do that in order to explain why there are *any* CCTs, i.e., why there are at least some. Why is there any mud on the carpet? Because the plumber tracked in mud on his shoes, which explains the presence of at least some mud on the carpet even if another culprit, the electrician, tracked in the rest of it.

As for explaining *kinds* of CCTs, my explanation doesn't explain why even *one* kind of CCT exists; it doesn't even try. It asserts the existence of penguins, CCTs that belong to the kind *penguin*, but it doesn't explain why penguins exist, why anything belongs *to* that kind. Answering that question is the job of a different explanation, one there's every reason to think natural science can provide. In citing penguins to explain why there are any CCTs my explanation doesn't thereby explain the existence of any kind of thing at all, a point I'll emphasize in reply to Objection D below.

If the objector complains that my explanation is nevertheless incomplete because it mentions only penguins and not also pens, plums, or protons—the existence of *each* of which suffices for the existence of CCTs—there's of course no reason in principle why my naturalistic explanation couldn't invoke those other CCTs as well. Objection A therefore fails as a principled objection to the project of naturalistically explaining the existence of CCTs: it gives no reason to think that the project can't succeed. Like any project, the project of naturalistically explaining the existence of CCTs has to start somewhere.

Objection B: Your explanation invokes penguins to explain why there are any CCTs at all. But of course penguins *also* need explaining, and whichever CCTs your naturalistic explanation invokes to explain penguins—the evolutionary ancestors of penguins, presumably—will *themselves* need explaining. Your objection fails in principle because it always contains something or other that's unexplained.

Reply: This objection assumes that an explanation falls short if it contains something unexplained. But that assumption misunderstands the concept of explanation that we actually use. If the fire investigator concludes that a short circuit in poorly installed wiring explains why the fire started, we don't regard the explanation as in any way defective because it doesn't also explain why the wiring was poorly installed, why the building materials were combustible, or why enough oxygen was present for combustion to occur. Our concept of explanation allows that an explanation can succeed even if it contains something unexplained.

My point isn't just a pragmatic one about how explanations work in everyday life. Of necessity, *any* noncircular, finite explanation contains

something unexplained. In any noncircular explanation, no particular explanans appears more than once. Any finite, noncircular explanation contains a final explanans, which, because it's not explained by anything else in the explanation, is left unexplained or else explains itself. Of necessity, however, *nothing* explains itself: nothing succeeds as its own explanation.[5] If we rule out the possibility of successful circular explanations, then it follows straightaway that nothing explains itself, since anything's succeeding as its own explanation would be the tightest possible explanatory circle.

But the impossibility of anything's succeeding as its own explanation doesn't depend on the impossibility of successful circular explanations. The impossibility of self-explanation is a logically weaker principle reflecting a basic truth about the concept of explanation, namely, that anything—any fact, event, substance, state of affairs, you name it—is distinct from whatever (if anything) explains it. It's widely recognized that nothing *contingent* is self-explanatory. But neither is anything else. Suppose that N is necessary rather than contingent, and suppose that E, the explanans for N, is the fact that N *had to* obtain, occur, or exist. Now, E—the fact that N had to obtain, occur, or exist—is one explanation, maybe the strongest possible explanation, for why N *does* obtain, occur, or exist. (I hasten to add that this fact about E doesn't make E self-explanatory.) Nevertheless, E must be distinct from N. Even if N and E are both necessary, they remain distinct, for E is a fact *about* N, whereas N *can't* be a fact about N even if N is itself a fact. To repeat: nothing succeeds as its own explanation, so any finite, noncircular explanation contains something unexplained.[6]

One might reply that something can come *close* to explaining itself if the explanation of its existence stems *entirely from its own nature*.[7] But that's not close *enough*: any explanation invoking such a thing as its final explanans leaves something unexplained, namely, why (or how) this thing's existence stems entirely from its own nature and, furthermore, why it *has* a nature of that special sort. If the answer to those questions is 'It couldn't have been otherwise' or even 'It's just analytically true', then of course we're entitled to ask why it couldn't have been otherwise or why it's analytically true. (Asking why something is analytically true differs from asking why something is true *if* it's analytically true, but even that latter, easier question admits of an answer.) Those questions may seem finicky, but they're perfectly legitimate questions in reply to the assertion that a finite, noncircular explanation might leave *none* of its elements unexplained. What's

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5. See also Morreall 1980: 210–2, and Wielenberg 2009: 29–30.
6. For structurally similar reasons, nothing could count as an *ultimate purpose*, a 'purpose to end all purposes', a purpose for which it would make no sense to demand an explanation or a justification. See Maitzen 2011.
7. In William Lane Craig's metaphorical phrasing, the ultimate explanation of the existence of CCTs is 'a necessary being . . . which *carries within itself* its reason for existence' (Craig 1991: 85, emphasis added).

more, the answers to those legitimate questions—because none of them can be self-explanatory answers—will invite still further legitimate demands for explanation.

Objection C: Because it invokes CCTs at every turn, your naturalistic method of explaining the existence of CCTs is viciously *circular* or else produces a vicious *regress* of explanations.

Reply: I'll reply to each charge in turn. In short, my method of explanation contains no circularity and hence no vicious circularity, and if it produces an endless regress of explanations, the regress isn't vicious.

First, I don't say, 'There are CCTs because there are CCTs', which *would* be circular. I say, 'There are CCTs because there are penguins', and I can add 'and penguins are CCTs' if it's needed to make the implication explicit. Now, the objector might claim to find vicious circularity in my explanation 'There are CCTs because there are penguins and penguins are CCTs' on the grounds that the explanation 'presupposes the existence' of CCTs.[8] But this misguided objection is easily dismissed. *Of course* my explanation of the existence of CCTs presupposes the existence of CCTs: any genuine explanation presupposes the existence of the explanandum that the explanans tries to explain; otherwise, why try to explain it? The explanation 'There's smog because . . .' obviously presupposes the existence of smog. Explanations aren't *arguments*: the point of an explanation isn't to *persuade* its audience that the explanandum exists or obtains, and hence there's no risk that the explanans might 'beg the question' by presupposing the explanandum.[9] On the contrary, the audience already accepts that smog exists and wants to know why it exists. Someone who poses LQ already accepts that CCTs exist and wants to know why they exist. If the objector's charge of circularity were correct, then every genuine explanation would be circular, and the concept of a *circular explanation* would therefore lack the distinctive use that the concept obviously has.[10]

Second, the objector complains that invoking CCTs to explain why there are any CCTs at all produces an endless, and hence vicious, regress

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8. William F. Vallicella raised this mistaken objection to my explanation in a comment he posted on his blog *Maverick Philosopher*: http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2012/06/the-modified-leibniz-question-the-debate-so-far.html (June 19, 2012, at 7:37 pm).

9. So I find it odd that Richard Gale suggests that an explanation suffers from the defect of being '*pragmatically circular* if the person to whom it is addressed [can't] know some proposition in the explanans without knowing the explanandum' (1991: 268). An explanation might be pragmatically defective because its audience doesn't know enough to *comprehend* the explanans, but that's not the alleged defect Gale defines here.

10. We can distinguish a genuine explanation from a pseudo-explanation. The latter occurs, for instance, when a parent tries to explain to a child why Santa Claus didn't bring her a bicycle for Christmas by saying 'Maybe Santa forgot': the parent isn't really trying to explain an omission on the part of Santa Claus.

of explanations: if CCTs exist because penguins exist, and penguins exist because their evolutionary ancestors existed, and so on, where does it end? But wait: why think it has to end? Why think that an endless regress of explanations would be vicious? On the contrary, given the impossibility of anything's succeeding as its own explanation, an endless regress of explanations is *unavoidable* unless the regress ends with an unexplained fact.

One putative way out of this dilemma would be to allow for the success of a circular explanation, an explanatory account that—unlike an endlessly regressive one—needn't keep adding explanantia because the same explanans occurs more than once. One might say that explanations of this form lack any unexplained or self-explained elements: after all, every element in the circle is allegedly explained by something distinct from it. But one might just as well say, instead, that *none* of the elements in a circular explanation is genuinely explained. For purposes of defending a naturalistic answer to LQ, I needn't resolve this issue: if a circular explanation could succeed, then a naturalistic explanation invoking CCTs to explain the existence of CCTs could go in a circle without thereby failing as an explanation and hence without thereby failing as an answer to LQ. Nevertheless, I'll assume what all sides in the debate seem to hold: circular explanations are inadequate as answers to LQ.

Therefore—to draw the conclusion I asserted earlier in this reply—the only potentially acceptable alternative to an endless regress of explanations is an unexplained fact. As should be clear by now, I don't think the *existence of CCTs* is an unexplained fact. On the contrary, I've offered an explanation of it: there are penguins, and penguins are CCTs, so that's why there are CCTs. But could the explanation of the fact that penguins exist—a fact different from the fact that CCTs exist—itself ultimately rest on a fact that *has* no explanation? Again, for the purpose of answering LQ, for the purpose of explaining why there are CCTs, it doesn't matter: the existence of CCTs can be explained even if what explains it—the existence of penguins—has no explanation. Our concept of explanation allows that A can explain B even if nothing explains A. Exposure to poison gas can explain why Schrödinger's cat dies even if the gas is triggered (as the standard story goes) by the fundamentally indeterministic decay of a radioactive substance. Exposure to poison gas successfully explains the cat's death, and radioactive decay explains the cat's exposure to poison gas, even though (again, according to the standard story) nothing, even in principle, explains why the decay occurred during the cat's time in the box rather than not.

Despite its irrelevance to answering LQ, however, I admit to preferring an endless regress of explanations over a fact that has no explanation. I don't really understand what it could *mean* for there to be no explanation at all for some fact F, for there to be literally no answer to the question 'Why does F obtain?'[11] That's one reason I dislike the standard, indeterministic

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11. At least where F conceptually *could* have an explanation. I add this qualification because I can think of one fact that *may* have a claim to being an

interpretation of quantum mechanics, which asserts that many facts obtain despite there being no reason at all why they obtain rather than not.[12] (Fortunately for those of us who find that assertion hard to fathom, quantum mechanics faces daunting challenges, including the quantum measurement problem and the difficulty of making quantum mechanics compatible with general relativity.) Indeed, the idea that some contingent facts have no explanation strikes me as no more comprehensible than the idea that there's a smallest nonzero unit of space or time (an idea I can't fathom despite the claim of some in quantum mechanics that space and time are 'quantized' into smallest units). Again, however, this preference of mine doesn't bear on the answer I give to LQ.

One final reason to allow for an endless regress of explanations in answering LQ is the possibility that there's no temporally *first* CCT. If there's no temporally first CCT, and if every CCT is explained in terms of an earlier one, then there's no temporally first explanation and hence there's an endless regress of explanations. As far as I know, nothing in modern cosmology rules out a past that's infinitely long, but an endless regress of explanations doesn't logically require an infinite past. Whether an endless regress of explanations requires an infinite past depends on whether the explanations 'telescope' so that infinitely many of them fit into a finite length of time (much as the infinitely many members of the series 1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + 1/16 + . . . never sum to more than 1).

Objection D: Because it invokes CCTs at every turn, your naturalistic method of explanation joins the race in the middle and therefore has no chance of answering LQ. Because it invokes CCTs that already exist, your naturalistic method of explanation has no chance of explaining why there are any CCTs *in the first place*, any CCTs *to begin with*, any CCTs *at all*.

Reply: This objection may get at what Objection C meant in accusing my explanation of 'vicious circularity', an accusation that looked simply confused when assessed in its original wording. In any case, Objection D contains a kernel of truth that's worth examining, but my examination will show that the kernel of truth doesn't in the end support the objection.

I've said that you can explain why there exist any CCTs at all by invoking the existence of penguins. Could you invoke the existence of penguins again

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inexplicable fact: the fact that the law of noncontradiction holds, the fact that no proposition and its negation are both true. This fact might be too fundamental to be explicable in the sense that putative explanations of it might be *mere reassertions* of it in different language. I trust it's obvious that 'There are penguins' *isn't* a mere reassertion of 'There are CCTs'.

12. To be clear: I'm not claiming that every successful explanation must be a *contrastive* explanation, only that I prefer a view on which there's a contrastive explanation *of* every fact that conceptually could have an explanation at all. Furthermore, given an endless regress of explanations, *modal collapse* (in which all facts obtain of necessity) wouldn't follow from the existence of a contrastive explanation for each fact that's susceptible of explanation.

to explain why there are any *penguins* at all? Clearly not, but what's the difference? I'll explain the difference, and I'll explain why I think Objection D may stem from ignoring the difference.

Why can't you explain the existence of penguins, as such, by invoking only penguins? Because you can't explain why there are any items of a particular kind—in the words of Objection D, why there are any items of that kind in the first place, any to begin with, any at all—by invoking only items belonging *to* that kind, even if your explanation goes on forever. As William L. Rowe puts it, using *man* as the kind in question, 'If *all* we know is that there always have been men and that every man's existence is explained by the causal efficacy of some other man, we do not know *why* there always have been men rather than none at all' (Rowe 1998: 154–5).[13] If you want to explain why there are any items at all belonging to a given kind, you have to invoke something *other* than items of that kind.[14]

To put it more precisely, Objection D seems to rely on the following correct principle governing explanation (with 'substance' used in the metaphysical sense):

> (KI) Where K is any *substantial kind*—i.e., any kind of individual substance—you can't explain why there are any Ks *at all* by invoking only Ks, even if your explanation goes on forever.

The initials 'KI' will remind us that this principle governs the explanation of *kind-instantiation*. KI implies that you can't, for instance, explain why there are any penguins at all by invoking only penguins, even if your explanation goes on forever. That result looks entirely right. But Objection D appears, therefore, to use KI in order to conclude that you can't explain why there are any CCTs at all by invoking only CCTs, even if your explanation goes on forever. That conclusion follows from KI only if 'CCT' denotes a substantial kind, which it doesn't, as I'll argue presently. On this interpretation of it, Objection D starts with the correct principle KI but tries to apply KI outside its range of application; the objection takes a principle stemming from and regulating our practice of explaining *kinds* of things and mistakenly relies on it to block my answer to LQ.

Why does 'penguin' denote a substantial kind, thus bringing penguins within the scope of KI, while 'CCT' doesn't? Since the point is crucial, I'll

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13. For reasons that should become clear shortly, I take Rowe to be using 'man' as what Wiggins 1967 calls a 'substance sortal' rather than a 'phase sortal'. That is, I read Rowe's use of 'man' as synonymous with 'human being' rather than as a term applicable only during some arbitrarily defined phase in the life of a male human being.
14. Rowe appears to recognize this point when he allows that one *could* explain why men have existed at all by invoking beings of some other kind: in his example, gods (Rowe 1970: 459).

take the time to discuss four ways in which penguins exhibit the characteristic pattern of things forming a substantial kind while CCTs, as such, don't.

First, we can nonarbitrarily *count* penguins but not CCTs. There's a nonarbitrary count of exactly how many penguins occupy a given location—say, the penguin enclosure at the zoo—at a given instant. If CCTs formed a substantial kind, there'd be a nonarbitrary count of exactly how many CCTs occupy a given location at a given instant. To see why there isn't, imagine holding a capped, blue-ink ballpoint pen in your otherwise-empty hand and then trying to count the CCTs you're holding in your hand. Are you supposed to count the pen and its cap as one thing or two? Or consider just the pen-sized CCTs. Are you holding at least eighteen such CCTs: pen; blue-ink pen; ballpoint pen; capped ballpoint pen; blue-ink ballpoint pen; capped, blue-ink pen; capped, blue-ink ballpoint pen; blue-capped pen; blue-capped ballpoint pen; blue-capped, blue-ink ballpoint pen; writing implement; capped writing implement; blue-ink writing implement; capped, blue-ink writing implement; blue-capped writing implement; and blue-capped, blue-ink writing implement? (Whew!) On some ways of counting CCTs, all of the items captured by those eighteen count nouns are distinct CCTs, but on other, no less sensible ways of counting CCTs they're not. Do you also count the pen's barrel shell, ink cartridge, metal tip, and its 'proper parts' such as one-centimeter undetached cross-sections of the barrel shell? Any pen less one of its atoms is (still) a pen-sized CCT; do all of those CCTs count too? The answers to these questions all depend on arbitrary specifications of 'CCT'. There's no nonarbitrary count of the CCTs you're holding.[15]

Second, the proper *parts* of an individual substance don't, at any given time, belong to the same substantial kind as the individual substance itself. By contrast, at any time at which a CCT and its proper parts exist, both the CCT and its proper parts *are* CCTs. At no time is a penguin's beak a penguin, but at any time at which both exist each of them is a CCT. Some examples might seem to cast doubt on my claim about individual substances and their parts, but not if we consider the examples carefully. A rock can break into halves, each of which is then a rock, but the original rock and the two smaller rocks don't coexist. The smaller rocks don't exist before the original rock breaks in half—if the rock has proper parts, those proper parts aren't (yet) *rocks*—and the original rock ceases to exist (or at any rate ceases to be *a rock*) when it breaks in half. If you join two garden hoses by (for example) screwing one into the other, you thereby create a CCT having

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15. For a somewhat more detailed discussion, see Maitzen 2012, especially 53–5. See Thomasson 2007 for more on the use of a single term such as 'thing' (or in our specific case 'CCT') to 'cover' items belonging to disparate substantial kinds. I should note that even a metaphysically *simple* CCT, assuming such a thing is possible, gives rise to this counting problem. As long as the CCT satisfies some predicate *P*, there will be a CCT and a *P*-satisfying CCT in the same location. Is that one CCT or two?

proper parts that are both CCTs and garden hoses. But strictly speaking you don't thereby create a single *garden hose* with proper parts that are garden hoses: instead, you create something you might use as if it *were* a single garden hose. (If the sign at the store says 'Any Garden Hose for $20', you won't have much luck getting the manager to regard two joined hoses as one.) But because 'CCT' doesn't denote a substantial kind, you *can* join the two hoses, each of them a CCT, to create a single CCT.

Third, there's a nonarbitrary answer as to whether a given penguin *persists* from one particular time to another, say, during the year between your visits to the penguin enclosure at the zoo. But the same can't be said for a CCT as such. For 'CCT' might refer to a mereological sum of atoms now, as it happens, arranged 'penguin-wise', a sum whose persistence conditions differ markedly from those of a penguin. If a single atom belonging to that sum undergoes radioactive decay (and is thereby replaced by a numerically different atom), the sum but not the penguin ceases to exist, and the penguin can cease to exist (at a minimum, by postmortem decomposition) even if the atoms belonging to the sum (and thereby the sum) continue to exist. Or 'CCT' might refer to that same sum of atoms *in precisely the shape it now has*, in which case it doesn't persist for more than an instant. Both of those sums are CCTs, but depending on which one of them (or which other thing, such as a penguin) you arbitrarily refer to by 'CCT', the CCT in question persists throughout that year or not.

Fourth, it's conceptually impossible, or at least highly implausible, that two instances of the same substantial kind should *coincide* in space and time, but it's not impossible, or even highly implausible, that two CCTs should coincide in space and time.[16] Even if you insist that (i) a penguin and (ii) that same penguin minus one of the feathers it now has both count as *penguins*— rather than, as I'd insist, one penguin and perhaps one of its proper parts— (i) and (ii) don't now coincide in space; instead, they imperfectly overlap. By contrast, the Venus de Milo and the hunk of marble that wholly constitutes it now coincide perfectly in space despite being, according to some plausible arguments, distinct CCTs. Moreover, the ability of CCTs to coincide in space and time—like the ability of a CCT's proper parts to count as CCTs—only adds to the difficulty of counting CCTs that I discussed above. A particular volume of space in the Louvre Museum contains exactly one statue, exactly one marble statue, exactly one sculpture, and exactly one Venus de Milo, but it's an arbitrary call exactly how many CCTs it contains.

These considerations show, I submit, that 'CCT' doesn't denote a substantial kind. In the phrase coined by David Wiggins (1967: 29), 'CCT' is a *dummy sortal*, a term that functions grammatically like a count noun but doesn't function logically like a count noun (see also Lowe 1989: 11, 25). Other dummy sortals include the nouns 'thing', 'object', 'individual', 'item', 'entity', 'existent', 'being', 'fact', 'event', 'cause', and (in the metaphysical

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16. See Oderberg 1996 for a thorough defense of these claims.

sense) 'substance'. Because 'CCT' is a dummy sortal rather than a substance sortal, principle KI, even though it's true, *doesn't* rule out invoking only CCTs to explain why there are any CCTs.[17]

Moreover, the other dummy sortals I just listed *also* inevitably fail to denote kinds, even if they're qualified with 'contingent and concrete'. Three of the nouns on that list—'fact', 'event', and 'cause'—wouldn't likely be mistaken for substance sortals, but they share some of the hallmarks of terms that fail to denote kinds, including arbitrariness in counting and in judging persistence. How many facts are there? How many facts are there about penguins? Any answers to those questions are at best arbitrary, and moreover there are Cantorian reasons for thinking that those questions can't *have* correct answers.[18] How many events, and how many causes, occurred in the last hour? How long does a given event, such as the Battle of Hastings, last? When does a given cause stop and its effect begin? The arbitrariness of any answers to those questions suggests that 'fact', 'event', and 'cause' aren't any better than 'CCT' in denoting kinds, and hence it doesn't make any relevant difference if LQ is posed in terms of *those* dummy sortals instead. Finally, I should emphasize, the distinction between grammatical and logical function applies strictly speaking to the *concepts* corresponding to the English terms 'thing', 'object', 'event', and so on (compare Wiggins 1967). Therefore, it makes no relevant difference if LQ is posed in a language using different terms to express those same concepts.

But, one might ask, who cares whether 'CCT' or any other dummy sortal denotes a kind: why think that denoting or failing to denote a kind makes the crucial difference? Notice, however, that denoting or failing to denote a substantial kind makes other important differences, including the differences we just saw with respect to counting, parthood, persistence, and spatiotemporal coincidence. So there's some reason to think it might make a difference to how explanations work as well. Nevertheless, one might try to support Objection D by means of a stronger principle that makes no mention of kinds and *does* rule out invoking only CCTs to answer LQ:

(PS) Where *F* is any predicate that applies to CCTs only, you can't explain why there are any *F* things *at all* by invoking only things that are *F*, even if your explanation goes on forever.

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17. Conveniently for my purposes, Rowe commits just such a conflation of a dummy sortal ('dependent being') and a substance sortal ('elephant'): 'The question why there are any dependent beings cannot be answered by noting that there always have been dependent beings, any more than the question why there are any elephants can be answered simply by observing that there always have been elephants' (Rowe 1998: xiv).

18. See Grim 2000: 147–53.

The initials 'PS' will remind us that this principle concerns the explanation of *predicate satisfaction*. Because 'contingent and concrete' is a predicate satisfied by contingent, concrete things only, if PS is true then you can't explain why there are any CCTs at all by invoking only CCTs, even if your explanation goes on forever. But is PS true?

No: PS is too strong. Where the existence of things satisfying predicate *G explains* the existence of things satisfying predicate *F*, you can invoke *G* things to explain why there are any *F* things even if you thereby invoke only things that are (also) *F*. For example, let *F* be 'looks red to normal human observers in normal conditions', and let *G* be 'reflects light of wavelengths roughly in the range 630–740 nm' (the explanandum and the explanans are equally and appropriately vague). 'Because there are *G* things' is an adequate explanation of why there are any *F* things. (Again, 'Why are there any *G* things?' is a *different* question calling for a different answer.) Yet by invoking *G* things, the explanation thereby invokes only things that are also *F*. Indeed, scientific explanations such as the one I just gave commonly invoke some microlevel predicate in order to explain why things satisfy some macrolevel predicate, where satisfying the former nomically *necessitates* satisfying the latter. The explanation passes the test of KI because 'looks red to normal human observers in normal conditions' doesn't pick out a substantial kind, for all four of the reasons that 'CCT' didn't either. In any case, PS is false and hence useless as support for Objection D.

Now, one might add a rider to PS to avoid my counterexample:

> (PS*)   Where *F* is any predicate that applies to CCTs only, you can't explain why there are any *F* things *at all* by invoking only things that are *F*, even if your explanation goes on forever, *unless* the existence of *G* things explains the existence of *F* things and being *G* implies being *F*.

Because of its 'unless' clause, PS* avoids my counterexample. But it simply begs the question against me to say that PS* rules out my invoking the existence of penguins to explain the existence of CCTs. For, I've argued, the existence of the former *does* explain the existence of the latter, and it's agreed on all sides that being a penguin implies being a CCT. So if PS* is the correct test after all, my explanation passes it.

In the context of LQ, 'CCT' seems to be what Amie Thomasson (2007: 117) calls a 'covering' term ranging conveniently over heterogeneous items. The term 'CCT' doesn't pick out a category, collection, class, or kind of thing requiring an explanation beyond the explanations available for the items covered by the covering term 'CCT'. However, in demanding an explanation of the existence of CCTs as such, Objection D treats 'CCT' as if it did denote a kind of thing whose instances ought to have *an* explanation appropriate to *things of that kind*. I've tried to show why it's a mistake to treat 'CCT' that way: although the label 'CCT' of course *applies* to every CCT—to every

pen, penguin, plum, and so on—CCTs don't form a kind. They don't share a genus. They don't have a common essence.[19]

Again, in rejecting my explanation of the existence of CCTs, Objection D seems to assume that penguins are just *instances* of the kind *contingent, concrete thing*—in which case of course it wouldn't suffice for me to invoke the existence of penguins to explain why that kind *has* any instances. Likewise, if you want to explain why there are any penguins—any instances of that substantial kind at all—it won't suffice to invoke the existence of emperor penguins, which are already instances of the kind *penguin*. 'Because there are emperor penguins' is a bad answer to the question 'Why are there any penguins at all?' (even if it's a sufficient answer to the question 'Why are there any penguins at all left on earth?' in circumstances in which emperor penguins are the only penguins left on earth). But it doesn't follow that 'Because there are penguins' is a bad answer to the very different question 'Why are there any CCTs at all?'

Objection E: Your explanation fails because it isn't a *causal* explanation. You don't show, nor is it true, that the existence of penguins is what causes CCTs in general to exist. Relatedly, your explanation doesn't sustain the required *counterfactual conditional*: it's simply not true that CCTs wouldn't exist if penguins didn't exist.

Reply: True, I don't give a causal explanation. For three reasons, I don't claim that (a) particular penguins or (b) the existence of penguins *causes* (c) the existence of CCTs. First, (b) and (c) are states of affairs, or facts, rather than events or instantaneous physical states, so I think that (b) and (c) can't literally be causes or effects. Second, and more important, I'd never rest my case on an appeal to causation, because the metaphysics of causation is too poorly understood: so poorly, in fact, that anyone demanding a *causal* explanation, in particular, owes us an account of causation that improves on the broader concept of explanation that we employ. No such account exists, to my knowledge.

Fortunately, however, our ability to explain things doesn't await our discovery of an uncontroversial account of causation. Not all good explanations are causal: 'because' differs from 'cause'. To recall my earlier example, (d) things exist that look red because (e) things exist that reflect light of a particular range of wavelengths, but we needn't therefore say that (e) *causes* (d), especially since causation, if it's anything at all, is a relation holding not between abstract states of affairs but between events or between instantaneous physical states.

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19. Even if all genuine CCTs are instances of kinds, that wouldn't imply that *CCT* is *itself* a kind whose instantiation deserves its own explanation. Each of the items I bought yesterday is an instance of a kind, which doesn't make *item I bought yesterday* a kind unto itself, let alone a kind whose instantiation requires an explanation beyond the explanations available for each item I bought yesterday.

Third, and finally, I don't know how to make sense of the claim that anything causes CCTs *in general* to exist: as I emphasized in reply to Objection D, CCTs don't form a kind whose instantiation ought to have a uniform cause, or a uniform explanation, in the first place. To put it somewhat differently, there isn't *a general way* in which CCTs come into existence: depending on the *kind* of CCT, some (such as tables) are made, some (such as penguins) are born, and some (such as icebergs) simply arise, with naturalistic explanations available in each case.

It's also true that my explanation doesn't sustain the counterfactual conditional 'CCTs wouldn't exist if penguins didn't exist'. But not all good explanations sustain a counterfactual conditional of the form 'If the explanans hadn't existed (or occurred), the explanandum wouldn't have either'. In cases of explanatory overdetermination, such a counterfactual doesn't hold: we can explain the presence of mud on the carpet by blaming the plumber—'There's mud on the carpet because the plumber tracked it in'—even if the electrician would have tracked in mud regardless of the plumber's conduct. The fact that the blame is shared doesn't make either party blameless. Explanatory overdetermination is exactly what occurs in the case of penguins and CCTs: there are CCTs because there are penguins and also because there are pens. (Again, to ask why there are penguins or pens is to make a *different* explanatory demand.) There's of course a counterfactual in the neighborhood that my explanation does sustain: penguins wouldn't exist if CCTs didn't exist. But my explanation's success doesn't depend on its sustaining any counterfactual conditionals.

Objection F: Even if we allow an endless regress of explanations, and even if natural science can explain every CCT *in* that regress, your naturalistic method of explanation can't, even in principle, explain the existence of *the whole regress*. As Hume has Demea say in the *Dialogues*, 'The question is still reasonable, why this particular succession of causes existed from eternity, and not any other succession or no succession at all' (Hume 1779/2007: 64; see also Rowe 1998: 264–5).

Reply: What do the phrases 'the whole regress' and 'this particular succession' even mean? If they refer to the *set* whose members are all and only the CCTs that have ever existed, then the objection simply misfires, for to explain each member of a set *is* to explain the set. Any set's identity is determined wholly by the members it contains. It's therefore confused to ask why, for example, the set {Mars, Saturn} has the members it does rather than having other members (or no members) instead.[20] Likewise, since on this interpretation the

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20. Rowe acknowledges this confusion in the preface to Rowe 1998. So instead of asking, as he did in Rowe 1970, 'why the set of dependent beings has the members it has, rather than other members or none at all', he asks 'why the property of being a dependent being is exemplified' (Rowe 1998: xix).

objector accepts the existence of sets in general, the question 'Why does the set {Mars, Saturn} exist at all?' reduces to the question 'Why do Mars and Saturn exist at all?' The latter question surely admits of a naturalistic answer.

Barring circular explanations and facts that have no explanation, my naturalistic strategy proposes to account for 'this particular succession' of CCTs by explaining every CCT in terms of other CCTs. Such a strategy produces an infinite regress of explanations, but our discussion of Objection C revealed nothing vicious about that regress. Yes, at every step in the regress we encounter something that didn't have to exist, but that fact doesn't make what we encounter at any step inexplicable. Moreover, we don't *want* an explanation that makes 'this particular succession' of CCTs necessary, or else we lose the contingency of each of the particular CCTs that belong to the succession. Nor does the endlessness of the regress imply that 'the whole regress' is itself unexplained. By analogy, the Peano axioms of arithmetic 'explain' how to generate each positive integer by starting with zero and using the *successor* function; no one, I take it, regards the axioms as insufficient for explaining 'the whole regress' of positive integers just because every positive integer *has* a successor.

If the objector still complains that we fail to explain 'the whole', that we fail to explain 'why there's a succession of CCTs at all rather than none', then I believe Objection F simply restates Objection D by tacitly relying on principle KI: the objector uses 'CCT' as if it denoted a kind whose instantiation can't be explained by invoking what the objector wrongly thinks are instances *of* that kind. To sum it up as a dilemma: Either 'Because there are penguins, and penguins are CCTs' is an adequate answer to 'Why are there any CCTs at all?' or else the question is ill-posed because it demands an explanation for a kind of thing when there's no such kind.

5   VARIANTS OF LQ

Variants of LQ, if they're well-posed questions at all, also admit of naturalistic answers. Take, for example, the question 'Why does the universe exist?' Again, presumably the questioner is asking about contingent and concrete (rather than noncontingent or abstract) aspects or inhabitants of the universe and hence won't be satisfied by a Platonistic answer invoking necessarily existing abstract objects. In that case, then, asking 'Why does the universe exist?' amounts to asking (again) 'Why are there any CCTs at all?', the question I've already answered naturalistically. Or perhaps it's the question 'Why are there *these* CCTs rather than none at all?', which seeks explanations for

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My answer to the latter question should be easy to predict: 'Because there are penguins, and penguins exemplify that property'. Given that 'dependent being', like 'CCT', fails to denote a substantial kind, my answer doesn't violate principle KI.

particular *kinds* of CCTs (or instances of those kinds): penguins in general (or particular penguins), pens, plums, etc. There's every reason to think such questions have naturalistic answers, and I've diagnosed various confusions behind the insistence that they don't. Or perhaps it amounts to asking 'Why are there these CCTs rather than *other* CCTs?', a somewhat strange question: 'Why are there penguins rather than unicorns?' or maybe 'Why have only *n* penguins actually existed rather than *n* + 1?' Those questions, to the extent to which they make sense, seem to admit of naturalistic answers: there's no reason to think that just any species we can imagine would evolve into existence; we can in principle explain the species that did evolve and the circumstances in which their specimens did or didn't reproduce.[21]

Someone who finds David Lewis's modal realism plausible might try to revive the question 'Why does the universe exist?' as a principled challenge to naturalism by recasting the question as 'Why does the actual world exist?', where the actual world is as Lewis describes it: a concrete object including, or consisting of, everything spatiotemporally related to whoever asks the latter question. According to Lewis, however, the question poses no deep problem: of necessity, *all* possible worlds exist, and 'actual' is only an indexical term referring to the single world inhabited by whoever uses 'actual' on that occasion. On Lewis's view, 'Why is our world actual?' makes no more sense, or at any rate is no harder to answer, than 'Why is here here?' In responding this way, I don't mean to endorse Lewis's controversial ontology of possible worlds, only to show that someone who does accept that ontology has an easy way of dissolving the question 'Why does the actual world exist?'

A different attempt to revive LQ as a challenge to naturalism might be to ask 'Why isn't the actual world a world *without* CCTs?', where the questioner rejects Lewis's indexical analysis and uses 'actual' to designate our world rigidly. In one sense, this question also has an easy answer, or at least it doesn't require the kind of explanation we'd require for a contingent fact, because if 'actual' *rigidly* designates our world, then it's metaphysically necessary that the actual world contains exactly the CCTs that our world contains. World-indexed truths are metaphysically necessary truths. But suppose we waive this objection and agree that the question deserves a less trivial answer. In that case, we can reply as I already have: there are (for instance) penguins, which are CCTs, and hence the actual world contains at least some CCTs. Notice that it would add nothing for the questioner to point out that there didn't *have* to be penguins; no one is claiming there had to be.

Still another attempt to revive LQ as a challenge to naturalism tries to recast it so it falls within the scope of KI, the correct principle of explanation I discussed earlier: 'Why is it that, for at least one substantial kind K, there

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21. This assumes, against Kripke 1980: 24, 156–7, that unicorns clearly *could* have existed and, against some systems of modal logic, that there *could* have existed individuals that in fact never exist.

are instances of kind K?'[22] On inspection, however, this question can *also* be answered simply and naturalistically: 'Because there are penguins, and *penguin* is a substantial kind'. One might object that it can't be answered that way, that invoking instances of some substantial kind K can't explain why there are instances of *any* substantial kinds in the first place. But that objection commits essentially the same error we saw in Objection D. Objection D, recall, mistakenly assumed that 'CCT' is like 'penguin' in denoting a substantial kind; again, if that assumption were true, then principle KI *would* rule out invoking only CCTs to explain the existence of CCTs. Similarly, the new objection mistakenly assumes that 'instance of a substantial kind' denotes a substantial kind, i.e., that 'substance' is a substance sortal rather than a dummy sortal. But clearly 'substance' isn't a substance sortal, for all four of the reasons I discussed earlier involving counting, parthood, persistence, and spatiotemporal coincidence.

I don't deny that substantial kinds *exist*; after all, I just appealed to one in answering a variant of LQ. Nor do I deny that we can quantify over both instances and kinds: 'There are instances of the kind *penguin*' and 'Some kinds are instantiated' are both true. None of my answers to LQ imply the contrary. Some may think that no naturalistically acceptable answer can invoke *kinds* as such, on the grounds that kinds (if they're anything) are abstract objects that naturalism can't accommodate. I disagree that naturalism can't accommodate abstract objects.[23] But I can concede the point for now and emphasize, as I did earlier, that my *answer* to the original version of LQ—my answer to 'Why are there any CCTs at all?'—doesn't invoke the existence of kinds; it invokes only the existence of penguins, which are concrete objects if anything is. True, I appealed to kinds in rebutting some confused *objections* to my answer. But I don't compromise the naturalistic character of my answer if I appeal to kinds in rebutting objections that *presuppose* the existence of kinds. In answering the latest variant of LQ, I explicitly invoked the substantial kind *penguin*, but the variant of LQ that I was answering was itself *couched* in terms of kinds, making it appropriate for me to invoke a kind in answering it.

I'll conclude by discussing one last variant of LQ. Michael Burke poses a question that might be thought to refute my claim that explaining each particular CCT suffices to explain why there are any CCTs at all. He asks, 'Why isn't it the case that matter never has existed?' or, more perspicuously, 'Why has matter ever existed?' According to Burke, the law of the conservation of matter can explain why, at any time *t*, matter exists *if* matter has ever existed, but it can't explain why matter has existed in the first place (Burke 1984: 357). Burke's argument for this point isn't entirely clear to me, but it

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22. I owe a version of this objection to an anonymous referee for Maitzen 2012.
23. Especially if we construe naturalism as the claim that nothing *supernatural* exists—i.e., no nonphysical *minds*, *agents*, or *causes* exist. Abstract objects, being nonsupernatural, are compatible with naturalism thus construed.

looks as if he's tacitly relying on principle KI: invoking the existence of matter at an earlier time may explain matter's existence at all later times, but it doesn't explain why matter has existed rather than not.

Now, if 'matter' denotes a kind of substance, then KI implies that you have to invoke something other than matter in order to explain why matter has existed at all. But there's at least one reason to doubt that 'matter' denotes a kind.[24] Presumably, the parts of any bit of matter are all themselves matter, which sets 'matter' apart from mass nouns that uncontroversially denote kinds, such as 'water' and 'gold'. Not all of the parts of water are themselves water—some are hydrogen atoms, others oxygen atoms—and not all of the parts of even the purest sample of gold are gold—some are protons, others neutrons, and there's no such thing as a gold proton or neutron. But even if, contrary to the reasoning I just gave, 'matter' turns out to denote a kind, it's open to natural science to explain the existence of matter by invoking something other than matter. For example, physicist Lawrence Krauss's book *A Universe From Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Krauss 2012), despite its misleading title, offers to explain the emergence of matter from 'quantum vacuum states' that, while not themselves nothing, are supposed to be something other than matter.[25] Therefore, like LQ and the other variants of it that I've considered, Burke's variant poses no insurmountable challenge to naturalism. Only confusion accounts for thinking otherwise.[26]

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24. For further reasons to doubt that it does, see Maitzen 2012: 61.
25. Krauss's explanation invokes gravity in order to explain how the emergence of matter (strictly, mass-energy) from something other than matter nevertheless obeys the conservation laws of physics (Krauss 2012: 99).
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