

Title: Why is there something rather than nothing? Revisiting van Inwagen's probabilistic argument against nothingness

Why is there something rather than nothing? Ever since Parmenides the question has gained centre stage in metaphysics. Heidegger went as far as to label the question as the most fundamental issue of philosophy. One of the recent responses to the problem of nothingness proposed by Peter van Inwagen is a probabilistic argument, according to which there can be at most one empty possible world among an infinite number of non-empty possible worlds and that this singularity of nothingness renders it infinitely improbable. In this essay, the discussion is based on the criticism of van Inwagen's argument. I shall begin with arguing that most of objections that were earlier advanced against van Inwagen lack persuasive force. Instead, I shall propose alternative grounds on which van Inwagen's argument can be undermined.

In brief, van Inwagen's argument runs as follows (1996, p.99):

- 1) There are some beings;
- 2) If there is more than one possible world, there are infinitely many;
- 3) There is at most one possible world in which there are no beings;
- 4) For any two possible worlds, the probability of their being actual is equal.

If it is the case that Spinozism is false, there are infinitely many ways that the universe could have been. It is of very little relevance whether there is an infinite number or a finite number of possible worlds; the fact that one of these possible states of affairs has been realized requires some sort of an explanation. Even if there are only two possible ways that things can be, the instantiation of one of these ways will certainly necessitate an explanation. In other terms, there must be something that decides which possible state of affairs should be instantiated. If we accept the assumption that the actual world in which we find ourselves is a possible world that has been instantiated, the question that arises is what factor or force instantiated the actual world? Being based on precisely such assumption, van Inwagen's probabilistic analysis of nothingness does not provide a complete answer to the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' unless there is a selector which inevitably instantiates one of the multiple possible worlds. However, in what follows we shall see that van Inwagen's argument cannot accommodate a selector.

One can conceive three possible scenarios in which van Inwagen's argument could have room for a selector. These three scenarios are exhaustive of the ways that van Inwagen's analysis could accommodate a selector. Each of these scenarios are considered below.

Scenario (1) suggests that there might be one selector which would be external to all the possible worlds. In this case a selector is something that instantiates one of the possible worlds and, at the same time, that selector does not belong to any of the possible worlds. However, this scenario is not

feasible for two reasons. Firstly, there cannot be anything outside the logical space – everything must be therein. Logical space is all-inclusive; it is inconceivable that there can be something external to it. Everything that can be conceived must be within one of the possible worlds. Secondly, since a selector is something, to postulate its existence would mean that there is already something prior to any of the multiple possible worlds' being instantiated.

Since scenario (1) is impossible, we are left with the other two alternative ways of accommodating a selector into van Inwagen's argument. Scenarios (2) and (3) take a selector to be something internal to possible worlds. The only difference between the two scenarios is that according to scenario (2) there might be only one selector, while according to scenario (3) there might be numerous distinct selectors. Nonetheless, upon some further reflection, both of the above scenarios cannot be sustained.

If we assume, as per scenario (2), that there is one common selector which is present in every possible world, it would require that this common selector be present in all possible worlds, including the empty world. A selector is something and an empty world with a selector would be absurd for there cannot be anything in an empty world. If there is a selector in an empty world it would no longer be empty. Hence, a selector and an empty possible world are incompatible.

The same holds true of scenario (3): to suppose that every possible world might have its own individual selector would again result in there being a selector in all the possible worlds including the empty world which therefore would no longer be empty.

Moreover, there is also another reason why scenario (3) is not sustainable. There cannot be multiple and distinct selectors. Let's suppose that there are two selectors: selector A and selector B. Selector A can be distinct from selector B if and only if selector A chooses a world that is distinct from the world which is chosen by selector B. Choosing whichever possible world to instantiate is the only essential property of a selector, which means that a selector does not possess any other properties by virtue of which two selectors could be distinct from each other. Therefore, in order to be distinct, selectors must choose different possible worlds. If two selectors choose the same possible world, they will be regarded as one selector, for there will be no difference between them to make them two separate things. The unity of their choice eliminates any difference between them. And, since out of the multiplicity of possible worlds only one can be instantiated that single instantiated world presupposes only one selector.

From the foregoing, one can conclude that in order to accommodate a selector van Inwagen should either: 1) give up the idea of an empty possible world, saying that there is a necessary selector in all the possible worlds, and therefore all the worlds are populated; or 2) concede that Spinozism is true, i.e. the universe could not have been any other way than the way we find it now.

References:

Van Inwagen, P. 1996, 'Why is there anything at all?' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 70, pp. 95 – 120.