

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE THAT THERE COULD HAVE BEEN NOTHING: NEW SUPPORT FOR COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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Abstract

Cosmological arguments for the existence of God defend God as a necessary being against (among others) the alternative that the universe came from nothing. “Nothing” is an ambiguous term, but when clarified it can be argued that a strong sense of the term is self-contradictory and thus impossible. This article discusses the arguments Lorenz B. Puntel has put forth in favour of this conclusion. The arguments herein rely on Puntel’s understanding of theoretical frameworks in explanations, which is also discussed. This article finds that there are good arguments against the possibility of nothing in a strong sense of the term, ending by considering this argument’s relevance to cosmological arguments for the existence of God.

Keywords

Nothing, being, cosmological arguments, theoretical framework, L. B. Puntel

Introduction¹

Cosmological arguments for the existence of God defend the idea that God is a necessary being who has always existed. This view is defended against alternative ideas, like the view that something contingent has always existed or that there could have been nothing at one time, from which something began to exist without a cause. In this article I discuss this alternative idea that something could come from nothing. When famous proponents of cosmological arguments

¹ Acknowledgments to be inserted in final version.

like William Lane Craig argue against the idea that something could have come from nothing, they do not argue that it would be self-contradictory to believe that there could have been nothing. Furthermore, it is often ambiguous what is meant by “nothing” and “existence” in the arguments.

German philosopher Lorenz B. Puntel specifies different meanings of the terms “nothing”, “being”/ “Being”, and “existence”, and offers an argument in favour of a necessary dimension of Being where he argues that it is self-contradictory and thus impossible that there could have been nothing (in a strong sense of that term).

Puntel’s arguments are based on his metaphysics, his understanding of possibility as the possibility of being, and especially the role of theoretical frameworks in explanation. I will present relevant parts of his philosophy in due course and argue that his arguments against the possibility of nothing (in a strong sense) can be used to lend new support for cosmological arguments for the existence of God.

I will start by presenting briefly some of Puntel’s terminology on nothing, being and existence, and his argument for a necessary dimension of Being. Then I will discuss especially his arguments against the possibility that there could have been nothing (in a strong sense of the term). I conclude that a good case can be made that it is self-contradictory to believe that it is possible that there could have been nothing (in a strong sense of the term). I end by commenting in more detail the relevance for cosmological arguments for God, using especially the KALAM argument as a case study.

Puntel’s argument for a necessary dimension of Being

In his systematic philosophy, Puntel distinguishes between einaiology and ontology. Einaiology is about Being, which Puntel writes with upper-case B (German: Sein, Latin: esse), while ontology is about beings, which Puntel writes with lower-case b (German: Seiendes, Latin: ens).² Beings (with lower-case b) are entities that exist, but what is it that all beings have in common in virtue of

² MF Norwegian School of Theology MF-conference, "Fil1015 Symposium Metaphysics," (2016).

which they can all be said to exist? Puntel's answer is that they exist by participating in Being itself, but Being cannot be defined in terms of anything more fundamental, since Being is the most fundamental category of all, including any expressible structure. When it comes to Being, Puntel distinguishes between Being as such and Being as a whole. Being as such is Being considered without beings, while Being as a whole is the conjunction of Being as such and all beings.³

In analytic philosophy this distinction between two kinds of being is often not made. A reason may be that English uses the same term "being" for both concepts. Moreover, analytic philosophy has tended to focus on the distinction between existence merely in the mind and existence also outside of the mind. Puntel uses the term "existence" only for beings, and does not distinguish between existence inside and outside of the mind, but is interested instead in the common existence that beings inside and outside of the mind have.

This distinction between the two senses of being/Being correlates to two different senses of the concept of nothing, which Puntel calls *nihilum relativum* and *nihilum absolutum*, but which I here will call nothing in the weak sense and nothing in the strong sense, respectively. A world without beings would be an empty world, and thus nothing in the weak sense. It would not be nothing in the strong sense, which is the absence of Being as a whole, since to have a meaning, the meaning of the concept of an empty world cannot be nothing in a strong sense of the term.⁴

From now on I shall refer to nothing in the strong sense as nothing_{ss} and nothing in the weak sense as nothing_{ws}. With this terminology at hand, we can now look at Puntel's argument for a necessary dimension of Being. The argument is a Modus Tollens argument:

P1: If everything was contingent, nothing_{ss} would be possible.

³ Lorenz B. Puntel, *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, trans. Alan White (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 413-21.

⁴ "Is the Question "Why Is There Anything Rather Than Nothing?" A Meaningful Question?," <http://www.metaphysicalsociety.org/2014/Papers/puntel.pdf>.

P2: Nothing_{ss} is not possible.

C: Therefore, not everything is contingent.⁵

One could object to the first premise by saying that maybe all things or beings are contingent, but not Being itself, or maybe not the world as the place or dimension where the beings either exist or not. That is, one could argue that maybe there could be an empty world which was not absolutely nothing even if no things existed in this world, and so it does not follow that nothing_{ss} would be possible even if everything is contingent. However, the first premise is clearly true, because the term “everything” in that premise is meant to refer not just to beings, but also to Being. If Being as a whole itself were contingent, it would be possible for it not to be, and then nothing_{ss} would be possible.⁶

Puntel’s defence of premise two: the impossibility of nothing_{ss}

Puntel offers the following three arguments to defend premise two:

- a) Absolute nothingness is not positively thinkable because it is self-contradictory and is therefore a pseudo-concept. To think it at all one would have to determine it, but one would thereby ascribe to it something that it excludes: one could determine it only by naming something or other, but that something or other would be a determinate way of being/Being—it would be something that was, in one way or another. One can only speak about nothing_{ss} in a paradoxical manner, and the only reason to do so is to articulate its absurdity.
- b) The possibility of nothing_{ss} is self-contradictory, because possibility is possibility of being/Being; it is contradictory to say that nothing_{ss} could possibly *be*.
- c) The all-is-contingent thesis entails not only the possibility of nothing_{ss}, but also the additional assumption that the dimension of Being, and with it all beings, could have somehow “emerged” from nothing_{ss}. How could or should this “emergence” of the dimension of Being/beings out of nothing_{ss} be conceived? One would have to admit to some kind of “transition” from nothing_{ss} to the dimension of Being/beings. But such a “transition” is unthinkable,

⁵ *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, 446.

⁶ "Is the Question "Why Is There Anything Rather Than Nothing?" A Meaningful Question?".

because Being is the total negation of nothing_{ss}; between Being and nothing_{ss} there is only total negation, total exclusion, total incompatibility – no kind of “transition”, however conceived – so there can be no sensible talk of any transition from the former to the latter.⁷

Puntel does not go into a longer discussion of these arguments, but there are many resources in his philosophy that can be used to support the arguments and respond to objections. I will now discuss his three arguments against the possibility of nothing_{ss}, focusing especially on the first argument. I will use Puntel’s concept of theoretical frameworks and discuss his arguments against those arguments one will typically find in analytical philosophy defending the possibility of nothing in one sense or another.

Within analytical philosophy, one will typically find the view that there is a world of things outside of our minds, which our minds try to understand as good as we can. Given such a view, it seems obvious that one could imagine one thing at a time disappearing until nothing was left – no things and no mind and then nothing would exist either.

Concerning this distinction between what is inside our mind and outside of our minds, Puntel points out that everything we can say about things outside of our mind is still understood in our mind and expressed through language. The distinction between things outside of our mind and things in our mind is a distinction we make inside a common dimension of language and mind.⁸ More precisely, the distinction is made within a theoretical framework, a concept with a central function in Puntel’s philosophy, which we shall look at more closely now.

Theoretical frameworks are “instruments that make possible the articulation, conceptualization, and explanation of theoretical contents or subject matters”.⁹ A theoretical framework will have a language (semantics and syntax), a logic

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, 401.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

and conceptuality, and the different components of the theoretical apparatus.¹⁰ While usually expressed in normal words in spoken languages, I do use the term language very broadly here to refer to any system of signs related to each other. This means that images in our mind related to each other can also be understood as a simple theoretical framework that we use to understand the world, as long as there are some systematic relations between them.

It is impossible to understand anything unless it is being understood in a larger framework, for it is the relation to other entities in a framework that makes it understandable. Talking about anything outside of a theoretical framework is impossible. Just try! If you disagree, then try to come up with a counterexample. Any counterexample presupposes a theoretical framework in order to be an example of anything at all.

You may think that surely atoms exist independently from theoretical frameworks, but how do you pick out something as atoms and what does it mean to exist? Saying that atoms exist has no understandable meaning without an explicit or implicit theoretical framework saying what atoms and existence are; otherwise “atoms” and “exist” are just ink on paper or sound waves in air. But can one not think that atoms exist without even knowing how to define “exist”? Yes, but only because you have a vague understanding of existence with some typical examples, etc., so that even if you cannot think of a clear and covering definition of existence, you know that “exist” does not mean “cat”, “Norway” or “the number 4”.

Puntel does not claim that the theoretical framework makes the atoms exist, for there is something before language and theoretical frameworks that the frameworks can express, but language and theoretical frameworks are needed to express what it is. When we want to discover and understand the world, this can only be done within a theoretical framework where we develop concepts and try to systematize our experiences in as coherent a way as possible. There is no point in talking about what an entity is like independently of a theoretical framework, for no description of it has any meaning outside of a theoretical framework. What one must do instead is to discuss in what theoretical

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

framework it can be understood in a most coherent way (including coherence with experience).

A typical argument against the view I present here, is to say something like “Obviously, dinosaurs would have existed even if humans never evolved”. The one who says something like this is of course presupposing a theoretical framework which contains dinosaurs, so that it does not show that there are dinosaurs independent of theoretical frameworks, but let us look more closely at the example. We have evolved to see a large, coloured object when a large collection of photons at the same frequency comes from a concentrated area, because that will usually mean that there is an object there, which may be a dangerous animal. At the same time that billions of photons hit our eye coming from the area of the animal, billions of neutrinos are also coming from the same area, but they pass us, and we do not interact with them.

We could imagine that there was a being called “donk” who did interact with the kind of configuration of neutrinos that came from the area of a dinosaur, but which did not interact with photons, or the up and down quarks and the other particles that made up the dinosaur. Call this particular configuration of neutrinos, which does exist in our world, a “gnuk”. At the same area of space where there is a configuration of particles that we call a dinosaur, there is also a configuration of neutrinos that could be called a gnuk. And there are billions of other configurations of entities in the same that may be unknown and undiscoverable to us. Should we say that they all exist? Instead of saying that dinosaurs would exist without humans and gnucs would exist without donks, we should say that there was something before humans existed which can be understood as the existence of a dinosaur and something which can be understood as the existence of a gnuk. And much more exists, but we need theoretical frameworks to relate to it in any way.

The reason why this is so difficult to wrap one’s head around, is that we are used to distinguishing between the ideas in my individual head and the world outside of my head, and it is easy to imagine the world without myself and my head even existing. But there are two levels here: the distinction between my own mind and the world happens at the top level, but there is a deeper level where the distinction between my head and the world is still a distinction that requires a mind to make sense. It is this deeper level I am concerned with in this article.

It may seem like I mix up epistemology and ontology, and that we should separate what we understand from what is really true or out in the world. But this distinction breaks down at the basic level, since truth does not make sense without a mind that can express something true. Truth gets its meaning from mind, and truth is that the mind understands how the world really is, and “really is” means the most coherent description of the world.

Again, it may seem that I confuse the act of thinking with the content I am thinking about, or that I confuse the act of affirming that nothing exists with the hypothetical possibility that nothing exists. Many would think that even if I cannot say that nothing exists without mind and language, it is still possible that mind and language and anything did not exist. But the meaning and content of this proposition also presupposes mind and language, so there is no confusion.

I am not saying that theoretical frameworks cause something to exist. There is something in the world that could have been formulated in a theoretical framework the way that we have done, even if no humans, minds or languages had existed. But that something could be understood as a gazillion different things and there is nothing to say about it (beyond that it is “something”) before it is expressed through a theoretical framework.

With this understanding of theoretical frameworks in mind, we are now ready to look at Puntel’s first argument against the possibility of nothing_{ss}, along with some objections. His first argument was that nothing_{ss} is a self-contradictory concept, since to determine its meaning one must ascribe it to something, but when the term excludes anything and everything, it cannot be ascribed to anything.

“Self-contradictory” must here mean not a formal contradiction in the sense that the sentences expressed have the form “S and not-S”, but rather that, given the definitions of the terms, a self-contradiction is implied. But what is this contradiction? Why is it self-contradictory to ascribe the term nothing_{ss} to something? At a conference in 2016, Oxford philosopher Brian Leftow argued against Puntel that it is not self-contradictory to say that nothing exists.¹¹

¹¹ MF-conference.

Puntel's answer was that it is not self-contradictory to say that nothing in a weak sense exists, but that it is impossible that nothing in a strong sense exists. Puntel showed this by asking what it would mean to say that it is true that nothing_{ss} is possible. If the claim "it is possible that there could have been nothing_{ss}" is to be true, it has to express something about the world, since to say something is true is to express something that is really the case. But that then presupposes that there is a world about which something true can be said. It could never be true that there was nothing_{ss}, since that would require that there was a world of which it was true to say that there was nothing_{ss}.¹²

Another possible response, which seems closer to the one expressed in Puntel's first argument above, is that the concept of nothing_{ss} is not even positively thinkable. The reason is that any description of anything must be made within a theoretical framework, which presupposes the existence of different concepts that can give each other meaning by being related to each other. However, could it not be that none of the concepts in the theoretical framework referred to anything that exists? Why should the mere use of a theoretical framework presuppose that something must exist or have Being? The answer is that it is correct that a term in a theoretical framework does not have to refer to something that exists or has Being, but the framework itself has to exist. For any concept to have meaning, it presupposes the existence of a theoretical framework, which is to say that mind and language is presupposed when any word has a meaning. This is not Platonism, but a fact about how language expresses the world, regardless of whether one is a naturalist or anything else.

But is it not possible that mind, language and theoretical frameworks did not exist? Well, if they did not exist, the words in that question would not have any meaning. It is not possible to consider possibilities independently from a theoretical framework, since the theoretical framework is necessary for any consideration to take place at all.

I made this argument in an online debate with Professor of philosophy Einar Duenger Bøhn: theoretical frameworks, mind and language are always

¹² Ibid.

presupposed when we discuss the truth or possibility of anything, and thus nothing_{ss} is impossible.¹³ His reply was that we must distinguish between what one uses to show something and what one shows thereby. Bøhn used two examples to argue this: if he uses his brain to describe something, what he describes does not presuppose that his brain exists. Or if he drives to Rome on a motor cycle, that does not presuppose that one needs a motor cycle to get to Rome.¹⁴

Bøhn's point is correct and applicable to the examples he uses, but it is not applicable to the case of nothing_{ss} and role of theoretical frameworks. For here, what I show and what I use to show it is the same: what I show is that I have to use a theoretical framework if I want to show something. We do not have to presuppose Bøhn's brain to describe something, but mind and language must be presupposed for any description of anything. There are many ways to get to Rome, but nothing_{ss} is not one of the ways.

However, could it be that one could use theoretical frameworks to show a possibility lying outside of the theoretical framework? This could seem to be the strategy in the other argument Brian Leftow made at the before-mentioned conference to argue that nothing_{ss} is possible. We can imagine without problem that this or that entity did not exist. Now, continue that process with anything and everything, and the result will be nothing_{ss}.¹⁵

Puntel's response was again that the result is nothing in a weak sense (we will imagine an empty world with no beings), and not nothing in a strong sense (with no Being whatsoever). But could we not imagine that also Being, mind, language and theoretical frameworks all disappeared? No, we cannot imagine it or think it or express it (and nor could any mind) without still using mind, language and theoretical frameworks, which means that Being is still presupposed. Any proposition expressing that Being, mind, language and

¹³ Atle Ottesen Søvik, "Ikke Tilstrekkelig Logikk," <http://religioner.no/ikke-tilstrekkelig-logikk/>.

¹⁴ Einar Duenger Bøhn, "Koherent Og Koherent, Fru Blom," <http://religioner.no/koherent-og-koherent-fru-blom/>.

¹⁵ Thomas Baldwin, "There Might Be Nothing," *Analysis* 56 (1996).

theoretical frameworks disappear or do not exist will itself presuppose the existence of Being, mind, language and theoretical frameworks.

Could we say, though, that while we *now* have to use a theoretical framework to discuss nothing_{ss}, *at another point of time* there could have been nothing_{ss}, which we would not have been able to understand or express *then*, but can understand as possible *now*, for example via the reasoning that all beings and Being could be gone? In other words: can we not understand *now* that it is possible that there could have been nothing_{ss} *at another time* even if we are not able to understand what that would be like? The answer is still no since the words «nothing», «Being», etc., do not have meaning without the existence of theoretical frameworks. Every understandable word expresses something which presupposes that there is mind and language and thus no understandable word expresses what nothing_{ss} *tries* to express, but cannot, since the term is self-contradictory. In this regard, nothing_{ss} is like a triangular square.

Puntel's second argument is that possibility is possibility of Being. If one says that there *is* or could *be* nothing_{ss}, one says that absolute nothing has Being. But then it is not nothing_{ss}, because it is not the absence of Being. Some may object that this is playing with words and to say that "there *is* absolutely nothing" does not mean that there is something called nothing_{ss} which has Being, but rather that the sentence just says that the possibility of being was never actualized. But Puntel's point is that possibility presupposes Being, of which something can be possible.

One could try to avoid this problem by avoiding the term "possible" and just say that the sentence "Nothing_{ss} exists" is not contradictory since it merely expresses the absence of everything. But again: this sentence, to make sense, must be considered as a true sentence or simply as a truth. From that it follows that, if the sentence pretends to be true, then there would *be* a truth expressing the absence of everything. But this truth is not absent, it *is* something present, it is something *being*.

Puntel's argument makes perfect sense in how he understands the role of language in expressing the world, but may seem strange to those who are used to substance ontology, where substances have properties. What is wrong with just removing all substances? A way of formulating the point in a more

understandable way for substance ontologists would be to say that there cannot be free floating possibilities. A possibility must be the possibility of something that has the possibility. Just as there cannot be a world where only leftness exists or where only “two feet taller” exists, there cannot be a world where only possibility exists.

Since there is something now, it must always have been possible that there could be something now, for it could not have been anything now if it was not always possible that it could be something now. But if possibility has always existed, and possibilities presuppose something that has the possibility, then there can never have been nothing_{ss}. Nothing_{ss} is thus impossible given that there is something now. Note that I am not saying that possibility is a thing, only that possibility must reside in something.

Puntel’s third argument starts with a comment that when a theory says that something emerges or happens spontaneously, it should be taken as a sign that the theory has exhausted its resources and starts giving just names and not explanations. In the case of emergence of Being, it must be emergence from something, or something must be doing something spontaneously. There cannot be nothing_{ss} that changes somehow, since change, transition, emergence or spontaneous action all presuppose the existence of something.

I believe this is a good point. If one has nothing more to say about how an event occurs than that it “emerges” or happens “spontaneously”, this remains names and not explanations that can be understood, since to understand something is to integrate it into a theoretical framework. “Emergence” and “spontaneity” may be signs of a lack of explanation instead of actually being explanations if nothing more can be said about how the emergence or spontaneity is possible or actualized.

The relevance of the question of nothing for cosmological arguments for the existence of God

Two cosmological arguments where it is relevant to consider the possibility of nothingness are the third way of Thomas Aquinas and the KALAM argument. In Thomas Aquinas’ third way he defends the idea of a necessary being by arguing that if there was no such necessary being, there would at a given point of time have been nothing. But then there would not have been anything that could have

started to exist either, and there could not be anything now. Since there is something now, there must exist a necessary being, which Aquinas' says is God.¹⁶ The argument presupposes that it is not possible that there could at one time be nothing and then later something could start to exist without a cause. Aquinas seems clearly to be talking about beings and not Being, since Latin distinguishes between being (ens) and Being (esse), and Aquinas only talks about ens/entia and not esse.

The question of whether it is possible that there could have been nothing is also relevant for the KALAM cosmological argument, although it does not distinguish between different kinds of nothing and being. The argument is most commonly formulated in the following way:

- 1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- 2) The universe began to exist.
- 3) Therefore, the universe has a cause.¹⁷

This version of the KALAM argument is not an argument for the existence of God, but for the existence of a cause of the universe. But Craig usually extends the argument by treating "the universe" as everything physical, since he also argues that a possible multiverse must have a beginning. He then argues that the cause of everything physical must be something non-physical, one of the reasons being that if it was physical it would be included in everything physical.¹⁸ Peterson, et. al., formulates the extended version like this:

- 4) The cause of the universe is either impersonal nature or a personal, non-temporal, supernatural being.
- 5) The cause cannot be impersonal nature, since that is included in whatever begins to exist.
- 6) Therefore, a personal, non-temporal, supernatural being exists.¹⁹

¹⁶ Aquinas Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), FP, Q2, A3

¹⁷ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152-54.

¹⁹ Michael L. Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 86.

In the extended version of the argument, Craig argues that there must be a non-physical cause of everything physical and thus rejects the two alternative possibilities:

- 1) Everything that exists is physical, and something physical has always existed (he rejects this by defending premise 2 above).
- 2) Everything that exists is physical, and this began to exist at a point of time, before which there was nothing (he rejects this by defending premise 1 above).

Craig offers three different arguments in favour of premise 1, which states that whatever begins to exist has a cause: A) Our metaphysical intuition says that it is impossible that something should begin to exist without a cause; B) if it was not impossible for something to begin to exist without a cause, why do not things pop into existence all the time – why only universes; and C) experience confirms again and again that everything has a cause.²⁰

To reject the idea that everything that exists is physical - and that this began to exist at a point of time before which there was nothing - Craig does not argue that it is impossible that there should be nothing, at least not in the sense that it should be a self-contradictory idea. In fact, he seems to believe that it is possible (in the sense of non-self-contradictory) that there could have been nothing.²¹

For both Thomas Aquinas and William Lane Craig it is relevant whether or not nothing_{ss} is possible, since one of the alternatives they reject implies that nothing_{ss} is possible. One could reformulate the KALAM argument to make this relevance clearer for both types of argument. The reformulation goes in two steps like this:

Step one:

- 1) Either nothing_{ss} is possible or something has always existed.
- 2) Nothing_{ss} is not possible.

²⁰ Craig, 111-12.

²¹ "In What Sense Is It Impossible for the Universe to Come from Nothing?," <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/in-what-sense-is-it-impossible-for-the-universe-to-come-from-nothing>.

3) Something has always existed.

Step two:

- 1) That which has always existed is either physical or non-physical or both physical and non-physical.
- 2) Something physical cannot always have existed.
- 3) That which has always existed is non-physical.

Here the relevance of the argument that nothing_{ss} is impossible for cosmological arguments become clearer. The relevance is to establish that something must always have existed. Other arguments are then needed to show that what must always have existed is non-physical and that it is conscious and God. Many such arguments can be given, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented how Lorenz Puntel argues against the possibility of nothing_{ss}. I have added some supporting arguments, and discussed some objections. The case against the possibility of nothing_{ss} seems quite good. This detailed line of reasoning has not, to my knowledge, been used to support cosmological arguments for the existence of God, but it is relevant to use as indirect support in future discussions of the Kalam cosmological argument and the atemporal version that Thomas Aquinas presents in his third way.

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