**Is the existence of the universe a mystery?**

A mystery is different to a problem. When we talk of ‘murder mysteries’ we are really talking about ‘murder problems’. For the detective knows how to go about solving the ‘mystery’, so it is not a mystery. A mystery is a problem that you don’t have any idea how to solve. You don’t really know where to begin.

There are many who regard the existence of the universe as a mystery. Are they right? A well-known expression of this thought is found in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus,* ‘It is not how things are in the world that is mystical but that it exists.’[[1]](#endnote-1). So, for Wittgenstein, that the universe simply exists is a mystery. Actually, Wittgenstein might even be understating his case, for it may well even be that *how* some things are in the world is also a mystery, as well as the fact that it exists.

Colin McGinn, for instance, has claimed that for us[[2]](#endnote-2), the relationship between consciousness and matter is a mystery. That is, *how* matter can give rise to consciousness is a mystery. McGinn thinks that the relationship between consciousness and matter is a mystery because the brain is in space, but the mind is not, and we have no way of explaining a relationship between a spatial thing and a non-spatial thing. McGinn’s view is that we would need to develop entirely new concepts in order to understand a relationship of this kind, and we may never do that.

The mystery of the existence of the universe also seems to be connected to issues about the relation between spatial and non-spatial things. The universe, let us suppose, comprises all of space. It is possible, of course, that there are many universes, but if we set that complication aside for the moment we can say that we think of the universe as comprising all of space. The most widespread account of the universe at present is that it came into being 14 billion years ago with a ‘big bang’, during which matter, time and space emerged. So, on this picture, a spatial thing seems to emerge from non-spatiality. This is a like the reverse of McGinn’s problem, in which a non-spatial thing (mind) emerges from a spatial thing (the brain), and if McGinn is on to a mystery, then the emergence of space from non-spatiality is also a mystery. There is incidentally the issue of how time emerges from no-time. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle found this possibility so confounding that he decided that the universe could not have had a beginning, and therefore must be eternal.

However, the universe may still seem mysterious even if we reject the suggestion that it had a beginning. Even if the universe is eternal, we might still feel the desire to ask, ‘Why does it exist?’. Why, for instance, is there something and not nothing? And it is not clear at all how we could attempt to answer this question. Bertrand Russell, however, claimed that the universe is ‘just there’ and that is all we could say. It was impossible, he thought, to answer the question of why it is there. We will come back to this idea at the end. Perhaps we can remove the mystery of the universe in this way, by just accepting that it is there.

Some ‘big bang’ cosmologists, though, feel more confident in offering an ultimate explanation of why the universe exists. Lawrence Krauss, for instance, argues that the universe came into being from ‘nothing’[[3]](#endnote-3). Why did it do this? Here Krauss resorts to quantum mechanics, according to which it is not always possible to say precisely *why* something happened. The emergence of a universe from ‘nothing’ was a non-zero probability, relative to that ‘nothing’ and just occurred, in accordance with quantum theoretical laws. It might just have well not occurred, and we would have been left with ‘nothing’. The attraction of this idea is that it removes some of the compulsion to keep asking *why* there is a universe. Perhaps we simply need to get used to the idea that, at the quantum level, this is how things can be. This would be a good example, recalling McGinn, of how the emergence of new concepts, of new ways of looking at the world *might* disperse what we previously thought was a mystery.

But Krauss’s suggestion that the universe came into being from nothing has, probably rightly, attracted a good deal of criticism, largely because even he does not really say that it came into being from *absolutely nothing.* It came into being, in his view, from empty space, or what is known as a quantum vacuum, which is not absolutely nothing, but a ‘field’ of minimally low energy. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the more interesting part of Krauss’s view is not this but lies in the appeal to quantum mechanics, which might allow us to say that the universe came into being from a quantum vacuum and that is that. This possibly stops us pestering the universe with questions about why it is there.

However, even on Krauss’s view, we still seem to be left with the ‘mystery’ of the quantum vacuum. Why does that exist? At this point, we possibly run into a real mystery. For we might come up with an explanation of why the quantum vacuum exists, and this would probably involve reference to other kinds of entity. But we can then always ask why *that* entity exists, and there seems no end to this kind of thing. Ultimately, we seem to want to ask why *anything at all* exists. The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, argues that the question, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ can’t just be a demand for a *being* that would explain everything[[4]](#endnote-4). For, of whatever being is presented we can continue to ask, ‘Why does that exist, and not nothing?’. For Heidegger, the question ‘Why is there something and not nothing?’, is ultimately a question about what he calls ‘Being’, not about individual beings. What we are really trying to ask is ‘Why is there *Being* and nothing?’. For Heidegger, this is a different, deeper and more philosophically challenging question than asking of each individual being, ‘Why does that exist?’. For of each being, we can possibly come up with an account of why *it* exists. But the question ‘Why is there Being?’ is different.

We can perhaps appreciate why it might be different by considering the other well-known approach to the question of ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, and that is the religious approach. We might argue, for instance, that there is something rather than nothing because God, conceived as a non-material, non-spatial, non-temporal being, outside the universe (or universes, if there are more than one) chose, for good reason, to bring something into existence by an act of will. The difficulty of saying this, for Heidegger – although many other critics of this kind of argument have also said this – is that it seems to answer the question by proposing an individual being, God. To this, we may still wish to ask, ‘But why is there *Being* and not nothing?’, where ‘Being’ comprises all that exists, including God. It is for this reason that Heidegger said that the religious person cannot actually ask ‘Why is there something and not nothing?’[[5]](#endnote-5). For to *really* ask this, i.e. to ask why is there any Being at all, would be immediately to rule out the possibility of providing God as a response.

Some religious people, of course, try to avoid these difficulties by denying that God is an individual being and identifying ‘Him’ more closely with Being as a whole. In some Eastern religious traditions, such as Hinduism, the ultimate God does seem to equate with the whole of Being. However, it is clear that this does not prevent us again asking the question, ‘Why is there *Being* instead of nothing?’, indeed, it seems to encourage this question.

However, there is clearly a sense in which the existence of the universe is not in itself a mystery. There does not seem to be anything *specific* about the universe that makes it mysterious. If the mystery is why there is *Being* (and not nothing) then this question is going to arise whatever the universe is like. Given this, perhaps the mystery can be ‘resolved’, as it were, only by a decision on our part not to regard it as a mystery. In this, we might perhaps follow a related suggestion by Thomas Nagel[[6]](#endnote-6) about how we can deal with the proposal that our lives are ‘absurd’, that is utterly lacking in meaning and justification. Nagel suggests that our sense that life is absurd could *never* be removed simply by our discovering something about the world, for it is an issue that will arise in any world we find ourselves. For instance, even if there were a god, we would still possess a capacity to take what Nagel calls a ‘backward step’ and question whether this gives our lives sufficient justification to stop them being absurd. This ‘backward step’ is what we seem also able to take when we ask, even in the face of God as Being, why there is Being. We can always take this backward step. We can always take the view that our lives are absurd, or that the existence of Being is a mystery.

According to Nagel, though, we can always *decide* not to take the backward step, and precisely because we are *always* capable of taking the backward step we presumably have to *decide* not to take it in order not to take it. In relation to Being as a whole, this would be like a phlegmatic Bertrand Russell simply accepting that the universe is there, and that’s that. Once you do that, there is no mystery to the universe. You have decided not to question why there is Being, and so no mystery arises, just as you can decide that your life is not Absurd, and so it ceases to be Absurd.

So is the ultimate existence of Being a mystery? Well, it seems to be if we *decide* that it is. But otherwise, it isn’t.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* tr. D. Pears & B. McGuinnes, Routledge (1963), para 6.44 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame,* Basic Books (1999) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing,* Simon & Schuster (2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics,* Yale (2000) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. op. cit, p.8 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas Nagel, *The Absurd,* in *Mortal Questions,* Cambridge (1979) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)