CHAPTER 9

The Dissolution of Creation

Presupposes: the occurrence premise (Ch. 1, §5.3) and the dependence of content on contrast (Ch. 2); the two-names result (Ch. 3, §3.5); equality as the grounding and the temporal terminus (Chs. 4–5); the zero-complexity constraint (Ch. 6); and, as a forward debt costed in note 2, the closure of the agent dilemma's second horn (Ch. 10, §3).

Establishes: the incoherence of creation pictured as a transition from non-being; the redescription of creation as transformation; the disambiguation of Leibniz's question and the costing of its remainder; the vehicle premise, named with its refusal costed (§6.4). The transformation result is established by two different routes against two different opponents — grades and routes are given in note 1 and in the Premise Register.

In brief. God cannot create from nothing, because God counts as something. If "why is there something rather than nothing?" is the question, a state that includes an eternal God already contains the one thing creation ex nihilo demands be absent: being itself. This chapter dismantles creation-from-nothing in two stages, and is candid about which does the work. Three pictures of creation as a transition from non-being are each incoherent, but the mature doctrine (Aquinas, Feser) holds none of them: for it, creation is not a change at all. Against that doctrine the chapter deploys an agent dilemma: an agent is either structured enough to act — and then its act diversifies being that already includes it — or simple enough to be the ultimate source, and then it cannot act at all. Either way, "creation" names dependence or transformation. Leibniz's famous question divides with the doctrine: one reading names no state, the other a brute fact the framework owns.

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1 Introduction

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo, that God brought the universe into being from the complete absence of anything, has been central to Abrahamic theology for nearly two thousand years. It is affirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and major Protestant confessions, and defended by leading contemporary philosophers of religion.

On the analysis developed in the preceding chapters, its origination component — the claim that being was produced from non-being — is structurally incoherent, in the way that a dimensionless extension is incoherent: the conditions of application of the concept contradict the content of the state to which it is applied.

The net yield against the mature doctrine is smaller, since §2.4 concedes that the three transition arguments do not reach it: what the chapter removes is origination; what it returns to the tradition, under the name "sustainer" (Chapter 24, §4.1), is total dependence without origination — the position Aquinas held. The doctrine's dependence component survives the argument, and §2.4 states where the line between the two falls.

The chapter does not target every theological use of the word "creation". Traditions that describe God as ordering pre-existing material, emanating the world from divine substance, or structuring formless being describe transformation, the restructuring of something that already exists, and the chapter has no quarrel with them. The target is the specific claim that there was once a state of absolute non-being and that being was produced from it. Defenders who hold only dependence — Swinburne, Plantinga, the Thomist on the mature reading — are met at §2.4 and Chapter 10.

The doctrine has deep roots. May (1994) traces it to the second century; Copan and Craig (2004) argue for it on both philosophical and scriptural grounds; Pruss (2006) connects it to the principle of sufficient reason. It is the standard position within the Abrahamic traditions, and the chapter engages it as such.

The individual arguments against creation ex nihilo are not all new. The self-excluding character of non-existence echoes Parmenides; the incompatibility of non-existence with causal power is a standard concern in the metaphysics of causation; and the equivocation between philosophical and physical "nothing" has been identified by Albert (2012) against Krauss (2012), with Holt (2012) surveying the debate.

The chapter's contributions are three. The first is the demonstration that theism's own premises — God's eternity, together with the results of Chapters 6 and 10 — entail that what the traditions call creation is the diversification of being that was always present (§3). The second is the diagnosis of why the three pictures of creation as a transition from non-being, each incoherent in its own right, do not by themselves reach the doctrine the developed traditions actually defend (§2.4). The third is the

integration of these results with the structural foreclosure analysis of Chapter 5, to clarify the status of the transition from equality to diversity.

The chapter examines the three transition pictures (§2), shows that the decisive case proceeds from theism's own premises (§3), offers a positive structural alternative (§4), and disambiguates Leibniz's question as a downstream consequence (§5).

2 Three Arguments Against Creation Ex Nihilo

If creation is pictured as a transition from non-being to being, that transition can be conceived in exactly three ways. Either non-existence itself causes being, which is direct creation; or being arises spontaneously from non-existence without a cause, which is self-creation; or an agent causes being from non-existence, which is agent-based creation. These exhaust the ways the transition picture can be filled in, since a transition must either have no cause, be caused by the prior state, or be caused by an existing entity.

Each is structurally incoherent, for the reasons given in §§2.1–2.3. But the transition picture is not the doctrine the developed traditions hold, so the decisive engagement with the mature doctrine lies in §2.4's agent dilemma, supplemented by §3's appeal to theism's own commitments.

2.1 Direct creation: non-existence as cause

The first possibility is that non-existence itself directly causes something to exist: the state of non-being, by its own nature, gives rise to being. This is incoherent on the most basic analysis. Non-existence is defined by the absence of ontological presence, including the absence of the capacity for change, so the demand that non-existence produce something is the demand that a state defined by the total absence of capacity exercise a capacity. It is structurally self-contradictory in the way a dimensionless extension is, since the conditions of application of the concept — "producing" requires a producer with causal power —

contradict the content of the state to which it is applied. The point concerns conceptual structure rather than probability or evidence.

The incoherence has ancient roots. Parmenides (fr. 8, lines 6–9) argued that what-is-not cannot be thought or spoken, because to think of non-being is already to think of something, and something is not nothing. The argument has been dismissed as a confusion between the existential and predicative senses of “is”, a diagnosis Owen (1960, p. 94 n. 1) rejects as groundless, and the dismissal is too quick. Parmenides’s core insight — that non-being cannot serve as a starting point for any transition, because a starting point is something — is structurally sound, and the present analysis vindicates it on independent grounds.

The metaphysics of causation reinforces the point. Mumford and Anjum (2011) argue that causal power is a dispositional modality, the capacity to bring about effects under appropriate conditions, so a state that has no dispositions cannot exercise any, and non-existence by definition has none. Chapter 4 established the structural basis: non-existence is self-excluding, since it cannot coherently obtain, because its obtaining would be its own negation. A state that cannot coherently obtain cannot serve as a cause, a relatum, or a starting point for any transition.

2.2 Self-creation: spontaneous appearance

The second possibility is that being spontaneously appears from non-existence: not because of non-existence but within it. Non-existence plays no role; being simply arises. This is self-creation: the coming-into-being of something that was not there before, without an external cause.

Self-creation is structurally contradictory. Creation is a type of change, the transition from one state, non-being, to another, being, and change presupposes the capacity to change. But that capacity is just what is supposed to be absent in the prior state and produced by the transition. Self-creation therefore requires as its precondition the very thing it is supposed to produce: for the transition from nothing to

something to occur, something — the capacity for transition — must already be present, which means the prior state was never truly nothing.

The structural analysis of Chapter 5 reinforces the point, since any state from which a transition occurs is already something rather than nothing. If a series bounded by equality obtains, equality was never "nothing"; it was undifferentiated being with ontological presence. The self-creation concept therefore collapses into transformation in the licensed sense (§4) rather than creation from non-existence.

The objection from quantum mechanics — that particles spontaneously appear from the vacuum — conflates the physicist's "nothing" with the philosopher's. The quantum vacuum is a structured, law-governed physical state with measurable properties (Albert, 2012), so particle production from it is a transition within diversity, governed by physical laws that are already operative. Krauss's (2012) claim that the universe arose from "nothing" equivocates on the term, since his "nothing" is a physical state with specific mathematical structure, far from the philosophical nothing targeted here.

2.3 Agent-based creation: a creator from nothing

The third possibility is that an agent, typically identified as God, creates being from a state of non-existence. This is the creation account of the Abrahamic traditions: God, existing eternally, brings the universe into existence from nothing.

The ontological category of God. The incoherence is decisive, and the most direct route to it is the ontological category to which God belongs. If God exists, God is. God has being, whatever the structural character of that being may be. The doctrine of creation ex nihilo, by contrast, requires that creation proceed from non-being: from the complete absence of all being whatsoever. A state that includes God is a state in which being is present, where the presence of being is the absence of non-being.

The argument does not depend on any further claim about what kind of being God is, or where God falls in the partition between equality and diversity, since on either reading the conclusion is the same. There is no

prior "nothing" from which God creates, because the state that includes God already contains the one thing the doctrine demands be absent: being itself.

Leibniz's own framing makes this vivid. If "why something rather than nothing?" is the question, then God counts as something rather than nothing. The doctrine therefore silently presupposes the answer to Leibniz's question even as it purports to explain it, since there was always already something — namely God — and "from nothing" never names the actual starting point of the creative act.

The theist may respond that God does not exist "within" non-existence but "beyond" or "outside" it, since God's mode of existence is sui generis. But the argument does not turn on God's spatial, temporal, or modal location relative to "nothing"; it turns on the bare ontological fact that God, if God exists, has being. "Beyond" and "outside" are metaphors that do not alter that fact.

The doctrine therefore equivocates on "nothing", requiring it to be the structural absence of all being, the only sense in which creation could be truly from non-being, while also requiring God to exist prior to or alongside it, which presupposes being and forecloses the structural sense. The two requirements cannot be simultaneously met. The further question — whether God's being is differentiated or undifferentiated, and which option is compatible with the capacities the theistic traditions ascribe to God — is taken up in Chapter 10.

The dependence reformulation. A sophisticated theist may reformulate. God does not create "from" a prior state of non-existence but sustains all of reality in being, such that without God's sustaining act nothing would exist. On this reading, "creation from nothing" means ontological dependence rather than origination of being from non-being. O'Connor (2008) points the same way, arguing for a necessary being as the explanatory ground of contingency rather than as a temporally prior cause. The reformulation is coherent, and it avoids the structural problems identified above. But it is no longer creation ex nihilo in the strict sense.

The distinction between origination and dependence matters because many contemporary theists blend the two. Swinburne (2004) treats God as the ground of the universe's continued existence while affirming that God brought it into being, though he takes God's own existence to be brute rather than metaphysically necessary. Craig (1979; Craig & Sinclair, 2009) argues the universe began and was caused by a personal agent. Pruss (2006) grounds contingent beings in a necessary being. Each combines an origination claim with a dependence claim.

The chapter's argument targets the origination component. If the origination of being from non-being is incoherent, the origination claim fails even if the dependence claim is correct, so theists who mean only ontological dependence by "creation" are not in the chapter's line of fire.

2.4 What the three pictures share — and what they omit

What the three arguments do not reach. The three arguments share a single assumption: that creation is a transition, a passage from a prior condition of non-being to a subsequent condition of being. Within that picture the elimination is complete. But the developed traditions do not hold the transition picture.

On the mature doctrine — paradigmatically Aquinas's (1947b, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 45, aa. 2–3), restated in contemporary form by Feser (2017) — creation is not a change at all. There is no subject that passes from one state to another, no prior "nothing" that becomes "something", and no material out of which the world is made. "Ex nihilo" means non ex aliquo, not out of anything, rather than out of a thing called nothing (ST I, q. 45, aa. 1–3). What is asserted is the efficient causation of the world's whole being by God, a relation of total ontological dependence that may even be eternal. The three arguments of §§2.1–2.3 therefore do not touch this doctrine, because it makes none of the transition-claims they refute. To present them as exhausting the conceptual space would be to win an argument the tradition is not having.

The agent dilemma. The doctrine so understood is reached instead by the agent dilemma drawn in this section, whose second horn rests on the results of Chapters 6 and 10 — the second a forward debt, closed there in full — and which closes the space by a different route. Efficient causation requires an agent: something that acts. But an agent that originates being faces a dilemma the framework has already established.

Either the agent is differentiated, possessed of the internal structure that acting, intending, and knowing require (Chapters 6 and 10), in which case it is a being within the diversity hierarchy, and its act is the diversification of being that already includes it — transformation rather than the origination of being from non-being. Or the agent is the simple ultimate source itself, at the structural limit where being is undifferentiated, in which case, by the zero-complexity constraint (Chapter 6), it has no dispositions, no intentions, and no agency, and the "why" of any transition is foreclosed rather than exercised (Chapter 4, §5; Chapter 5, §2.5).

There is no third position in which something is at once simple enough to be the origin of all being and structured enough to act. The mature doctrine therefore resolves, on inspection, into one of two things the framework already accommodates: ontological dependence, which is coherent while not being the origination of being from non-being, or agency at the undifferentiated limit, which is foreclosed. Creation as the bringing of being from non-being names neither. What the chapter dissolves is origination; what it preserves is dependence, and the framework keeps the preserved doctrine under a name of its own — the sustainer (Chapter 24, §4.1), the dependence doctrine correctly described. The agent dilemma is not a further refutation of that doctrine but the one thing that stops it from re-importing the origination it had given up.

The first horn invites a reply that must be closed before the dilemma can carry the weight assigned to it. The sophisticated theist objects that creation has no patient, since God's act does not operate on anything but gives the world its whole being, and "diversification", like "transformation", presupposes a patient, which is what non ex aliquo

denies. The redescription, she concludes, begs the question by renaming.

The reply is the totality argument. Any act by an existing agent operates on, at minimum, the total state of reality, which includes the agent. The post-act totality, God and world, differs from the prior totality, God alone, and a totality that includes an existing God was never non-being. "Origination of being from non-being" would therefore require the prior totality to be non-being, which the agent's own existence contradicts, while "diversification of being" is the literal description of a totality-difference within what was always being.

For eternal creation, where no "prior" exists, the same point runs modally: the counterfactual totality without the act, God alone, is still being, so on no reading is non-being a term of the act. What non ex aliquo correctly denies is a material patient. What it cannot deny the act is a totality, and totalities that include God are never nothing. Sokolowski's (1982) "Christian distinction", on which God and the world together are no more than God alone, since the world adds no perfection to God, leaves the argument untouched, because the argument needs a difference and never an addition: God with the world differs from God without it, whatever the sum of being on either side.

The exhaustive partition in play is the one Chapter 5 used to dissolve the temporal regress (§2.3): "what came before?" has exactly three outcomes, where the exhaustiveness of the diversity/equality partition guarantees that no fourth exists. The agent dilemma inherits its closure from that same partition, since an originating agent is either within diversity or at the equality limit, with no third option, because any agent must either bear internal distinctions or lack them. It is this partition, rather than the trio of transition-pictures, that does the exhaustive work.

The most sustained contemporary defence, Copan and Craig (2004), develops three lines of argument. The scriptural argument is addressed in Chapter 17, on scriptural infallibility; the scientific argument is engaged in §2.2, since the quantum vacuum is not non-existence; and the philosophical argument — that the universe began to exist and

requires a transcendent cause — is what the present chapter targets directly.

Copan and Craig's philosophical case presupposes that the transition from non-being to being is coherent and asks what kind of cause could produce it, whereas the chapter argues that the transition itself is incoherent, regardless of the adequacy of any proposed cause. Their further argument, that the alternative to creation ex nihilo is philosophically worse because eternal matter leaves existence unexplained, meets the disjunctive result of Chapter 4: the alternative is not unexplained eternal matter but either infinite diversity or equality at the structural limit, where explanation is foreclosed rather than declined.

3 Theism Refutes Creation

The doctrine's "nothing" was always nothing besides God: no orthodox theist holds that God created from a state in which there was no God. What the argument from God's eternity reaches is therefore the transition picture that the doctrine's formulations invite and its expositors slide into, on which being was produced where there was none; the mature doctrine §2.4 has already met. What the section shows is that theism's own premise of God's eternity forbids that picture, so that what the tradition means by creation must be what §2.4 said it is: the section clears the ground for Chapter 10, which is its whole yield.

The three arguments above dispose of creation pictured as a transition from non-being. The chapter's second argument proceeds from the theist's own premises; this is arguably what makes it the most dialectically effective against every version of the doctrine that retains an origination component: the temporal beginning of Craig, and any view on which non-being enjoys some priority over the creative act. The pure-dependence reading is met by §2.4. A critic who resists the structural analysis of Chapters 4–5 can resist the external arguments; she cannot resist an argument that uses her own commitments against the doctrine she defends.

Theism is committed to God's eternity: God has always existed. If God has always existed, then non-existence has never obtained. If non-

existence has never obtained, then the transition from non-existence to existence, which is what creation ex nihilo means on the transition picture, has never taken place. What the theistic traditions describe as "creation" is better described as transformation or diversification: the conversion of one form of being (divine presence, or undifferentiated being at the grounding terminus) into another form of being (the differentiated universe). God, on this analysis, did not create the universe from nothing; God — if God exists and was the proximate source of the universe — transformed or diversified being that was already present.

The disjunct inside that description — divine presence, or undifferentiated being at the grounding terminus — must not be allowed to blur, because the two readings are different theologies with different costs, so the redescription is complete only when the theist is shown what each costs.

On the first reading, what is diversified is the totality that includes God. The post-act totality, God and world, differs from the prior or counterfactual totality, God alone (§2.4), with the difference constituted on the diverse side. Nothing in the totality argument makes the world of God, so the reading carries no commitment to panentheism or emanationism; what it withholds is only the description of the act as origination from non-being. Read as dependence — the world's whole being sustained by a God who did not originate being — it is the mature doctrine under the name the analysis licenses, and it keeps classical theism's insistence that the world is not made of God.

On the second reading, what is transformed is undifferentiated being at the terminus, and the theist inherits the framework's own result against her. The transition from equality is structurally foreclosed from the equality side (Chapter 5, §2.5), and foreclosure is the absence of the very thing an act could operate on: no features at the terminus for an intention to select among, no this-rather-than-that for a will to prefer.

A God who "transforms equality" would therefore have to perform an act whose content has nothing to be. The difficulty is not that the act is hard but that there is no possible specification of what was done.

Chapter 10 closes this second route in full, by showing that the capacities acting requires cannot characterise the undifferentiated.

What survives is accordingly two things: dependence without origination on the first reading, and, on the second, a transformation of the terminus with no possible content to specify. The theisms the framework itself finds coherent (Chapter 24, §4.1) stand on the first reading and divide within it — a God on whom all else depends, or a God who shares existence without sustaining it — and neither originates being.

This is not a minor terminological correction. Creation ex nihilo attributes to God a specific power, the power to bring being from non-being, that is structurally incoherent for the reasons given in §2. Transformation, the restructuring of already-existing being, is a coherent power that does not require a transition from non-being to being. The theist who accepts God's eternity should, by her own lights, describe God's act as transformation rather than creation ex nihilo.

The point applies to the major theistic positions individually. Swinburne (2004) holds that God exists everlastingly as the ultimate brute fact, while Pruss (2006) grounds contingent beings in a necessary being via the principle of sufficient reason. Both are compatible with the argument, since on both, if such a being has always existed, non-being has never obtained, so the explanatory role that being provides is transformation rather than creation ex nihilo.

Craig (1979; Craig & Sinclair, 2009) argues that the universe began to exist and that its cause must be a personal agent. The full response to the kalām is developed in Chapter 11, while the present point is narrower: even if Craig is right that the universe began and that its cause is a personal agent, the "beginning" is at most a transition from equality to diversity — a transformation rather than a creation. The word "creation", on Craig's own theistic premises, misdescribes the act it purports to name. The theist's God transformed rather than created, in the sense §4 licenses and confines.

A third route, on the tradition's own principle. Nothing gives what it in no way has: every perfection of an effect pre-exists in its

cause, formally or eminently (Aquinas, 1947b, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 4, a. 2). The world is differentiated (Chapter 1). A source of the world therefore had difference, formally or eminently. Formally, it has internal distinction, and is not simple. Eminently, it contains what it gives without being distinguished by it, which is the containment fork of Chapter 10 (§3.2): a containment that is a determination of the container is a distinction in it, and one that is not contains no determination. On the tradition's own principle, then, a simple source gives no differentiation, and a source of differentiation is not simple — the conclusion Chapter 10 reaches by the longer road of the intra-attribute constraint, reached here in four steps from a premise the theist holds. The route is the chapter's own; it is the shortest form of what Chapter 8 (§5) borrows under the name of the richness premise; it carries the fork's cost, since a Thomist who refuses the fork's first horn by the doctrine of virtual containment refuses this route with it.

Where the argument stands: the three transition pictures are incoherent (§2.1–2.3), the mature doctrine is met by the agent dilemma and the totality argument (§2.4), and theism's own premises entail that non-being never obtained, and that a source of differentiation is not simple (§3). What follows is the positive account of what happened instead.

4 The Positive Alternative

The chapter does not merely deny creation ex nihilo; it offers a structural account of what occurred instead, with two complementary readings corresponding to the two hierarchies.

On the atemporal reading (Chapter 4), equality is the structural boundary of the grounding hierarchy: the condition at which diversity's own structure reaches its limit. The relationship is structural, equality at diversity's boundary, rather than sequential, equality "before" diversity. The unilateral boundary characterisation applies, since diversity has an edge while equality contributes nothing to the boundary, having no structure to contribute. The question "what grounds diversity?"

therefore terminates in a structural limit at which the conditions for further grounding are absent rather than in a prior cause.

On the temporal reading (Chapter 5), equality is the structural boundary of temporality: if the temporal hierarchy terminates, the series is bounded below by equality, a boundary at which time itself begins rather than a first moment within it. The transition from equality to diversity is, in the licensed sense stated below, the diversification of undifferentiated being into the differentiated universe, its occurrence established retrospectively by the actuality of diversity and its mechanism foreclosed.

A vocabulary note. A vocabulary note fixes what the words of this section, and their uses throughout Chapters 8 and 9, may and may not mean. “Transition”, “transformation”, “diversification”, and “conversion” are diversity-side glosses, licensed by two facts and confined to them. The first is the obtaining of a diverse series bounded by equality, established by the existence of diversity (Chapter 5, §2.5). The second is the totality-difference between the branch’s candidates, which the totality argument of §2.4 defines: the post-boundary totality differs from the bare-equality alternative, and the difference is constituted entirely on the diverse side.

What the words are not licensed to mean is a process with equality as its patient, an input persisting through conversion, or an event at the boundary, since equality undergoes nothing, contributes nothing, and stands in no before-relation, for the reasons Chapter 5 (§§2.3–2.5) fixed. The reading rule is uniform: wherever this book says “transformation of undifferentiated being”, what it amounts to is the population of the diverse side of a boundary that equality does not constitute.

On both readings, two structurally distinct conditions must be separated: the absence of all being, which is non-existence and self-excluding (Chapter 4, §2.1), and the presence of being without internal differentiation, which is equality. The transformation account requires only the second. When a cosmological argument concludes that “the universe came from nothing”, the conclusion equivocates between these two structurally opposite conditions — the absence of being, incoherent

as an origin, and the absence of differentiation within being, the equality terminus.

The why-question divides in the manner of Chapter 5 (§2.5). Its mechanism side is foreclosed, since equality possesses no features from which an explanation could be constructed, while its obtaining side is owned as the obtaining residue.

The foreclosure might seem to generate a further problem: how can a state without dispositions undergo transformation? The question presupposes that transformation requires a dispositional basis, that something must be disposed to change in order to change. But this presupposition, standard in the metaphysics of dispositions (Mumford & Anjum, 2011; Bird, 2007), applies to states within diversity, states that have properties capable of grounding dispositions. Equality has no properties and therefore cannot have dispositions, while it also cannot have the disposition not to change. The absence of all dispositions is not the presence of a disposition to stasis.

That a series bounded by equality obtains is established by the actuality of diversity, on the termination branch. Since diversity exists and non-existence is self-excluding, the bounded series is the only structurally coherent origin of the present state on that branch. On the non-termination branch there is no origin to explain. On neither branch does creation ex nihilo feature. What remains is a picture in which being has always been present and the question is not “why something rather than nothing?” but “why this form of diversity rather than another?” — a question acknowledged as open and assigned to cosmology rather than to metaphysics.

5 Leibniz’s Question as a Downstream Consequence

The dissolution of creation ex nihilo has a downstream consequence for Leibniz’s question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” The question presupposes that non-existence is a coherent alternative to existence, so the default condition is nothing and the existence of something is a departure from the default requiring explanation.

The argument denies the presupposition. Non-existence is outside the ontological domain (Chapter 4, §2.1), since it is self-excluding; there is no branch of the temporal disjunction on which it obtains; being has always obtained, either as infinite diversity or as equality. Leibniz's question is therefore ill-formed as asked, because the alternative it contrasts with existence falls outside the space of real possibilities. The question that survives once equality is recognised as what the mind had pictured under "nothing" — why being is differentiated rather than undifferentiated — is developed below and receives an answer the framework owns as brute; Appendix A sets out the whole sequence in one place.

The recent literature. The recent something-from-nothing literature has sharpened the question without resolving it. The essays Goldschmidt (2013) collects press the question as a real explanatory demand that cannot be dissolved by linguistic analysis, so something's existence requires either a necessary being or a concession to bruteness.

The argument occupies a position Goldschmidt does not consider, since the question is disambiguated by structural analysis of non-existence's self-excluding character rather than by linguistic analysis, and his dilemma — necessary being or brute fact — is not exhaustive if the alternative to existence is structurally incoherent rather than merely unexplained.

The framework's full position relative to the dilemma should nonetheless be stated rather than left for discovery. Where the dilemma's analogue re-arises at the successor question, why the bounded series is populated at all, the framework takes the brute horn deliberately and in its least shape: one structureless fact (Chapter 5, §2.5), against the maximal alternative of a necessary being. The volume's "concession to bruteness" is therefore accepted as a costed line-item rather than suffered as a defeat, with the comparative costing completed in Chapter 11 (§5.6).

Two further positions converge from different directions. Conee (2014) argues that the question has a straightforward answer — there is something because the concrete entities that exist are such as to exist —

and seems deep only because we imagine non-existence as a live alternative. Pearce (2017) argues that God is the foundational ground of the total sequence of causes and effects, and that the explanation this affords must be non-causal if the argument from contingency is to succeed. Conee deflates the question's apparent depth, Pearce grounds the whole sequence in a foundation outside it, while the present analysis identifies the structural error generating the appearance: nothing falls outside the space of possibilities entirely.

This is a disambiguation with a remainder; it is no evasion; the distinction matters. The question's force rested on the assumption that non-existence was a live option, so once the assumption is removed the force dissipates. The analysis does not claim that existence is self-explanatory or that there is nothing to explain about the world. It claims that the specific question "why something rather than nothing?" rests on a false presupposition and should be replaced by better-formed questions: "why this form of diversity rather than another?" or "why diversity rather than equality?" These are well-formed, metaphysically demanding, and not fully answered by the present framework, while being the right questions, whereas Leibniz's, on this analysis, is not.

Rundle (2004) reaches the nearest conclusion in the literature — there could not have been nothing — by another route, arguing that the question strains language past its conditions of application, so that no intelligible possibility answers to the words. The conclusion is shared; the route is not open here. An ascent from what cannot be coherently said or pictured to what cannot obtain is a transfer the grid containment blocks (Chapter 7, §3), since reality outruns registration, so the present analysis rests on the structure of the condition itself, with the imagery diagnosis of Chapter 8 explaining the question's grip rather than settling its answer. Nozick (1981) surveys the remaining region in a speculative register: a self-subsuming explanatory principle, an egalitarian measure across possibilities, a nothingness force turned on itself. Each candidate equips the terminus, or the space of possibilities, with determinations from which the world's character could follow, so each meets the constraint of Chapter 4: a condition with no internal distinction supplies no principle, no measure, no force. The speculations are offered by their

author as speculations, while the constraint says why the region they explore is empty.

The constraint carries an assumption of its own, stated where the foreclosure is run (Chapter 5, §2.5): any answer to either question would have to cite a feature of the boundary state. The relational corollary (Chapter 3, §2.3) closes every proposal whose explanans must take the terminus as a relatum, which is most of them and all of the causal ones. What it does not close is an explanans meant to bear on the obtaining while relating to the state not at all — Nozick's egalitarian measure is borderline in just this way — and no account of that kind has been given in a form that survives the question of what the measure would be a measure on. Entry to the region carries a cost that should be recorded beside it. An occupant would itself be differentiated, since a principle, a measure, or a force is a determination-bearing item, so its own obtaining would stand as one more instance of the fact in question, the demand re-arising one step back — unless that obtaining were necessary, the ascription Chapter 11 examines and finds undischarged. A candidate for the region therefore relocates the residue or assumes the necessity thesis, with neither move retiring the question at a cost below the one the residue already carries. The framework records the region as open rather than closed, while no part of the disambiguation rests on the region staying empty.

A caveat: the result depends on the two-names result of Chapter 3 (§3.5), developed in Chapter 4 (§2.1). A critic who collapses equality into non-existence can resist the result, at the cost, as Chapter 4 argued, of eliminating any undifferentiated ground and leaving only infinite diversity or brute differentiated fundamentality.

The replacement question "why diversity rather than equality?" receives a different treatment on each branch. On the non-termination branch it does not arise, since diversity has always existed, and the residual demand for an explanation of the whole beginningless series is met, with its own obtaining residue owned, at Chapter 5 (§6.8). On the termination branch it divides in the manner of Chapter 5 (§2.5): mechanism foreclosed, obtaining owned as the residue. What remains

open is the specific form of the diversity — why this universe rather than another — which belongs to cosmology rather than metaphysics.

5.1 Metaphysical nihilism and the subtraction argument

Metaphysical nihilism. One position in the something-from-nothing literature engages the disambiguation at its foundation and must be met directly. Metaphysical nihilism is the thesis that there might have been nothing: that among the possible worlds is an empty one, containing no concrete objects. The subtraction argument (Baldwin, 1996; refined by Rodriguez-Pereyra, 1997, and Efird and Stoneham, 2005) supports it by iteration, since in a world with finitely many concrete objects each is contingent and its removal leaves a possible world, so subtracting object by object one arrives at a world with none. If the empty world is possible, non-existence appears to be a live alternative to existence after all, and Leibniz's question regains the footing this chapter denies it.

What the subtraction terminates in. The reply is that the argument's conclusion equivocates at the very point the framework has already mapped: between the condition the word "nothing" names and the one the mind substitutes for it (Chapter 4, §2.1; Chapter 8, §A.1). Ask what the subtraction terminates in.

If the "empty world" is a world that obtains — a way reality could be, actual at itself, standing in modal relations to the others — then it is not non-existence. It is being with everything subtracted from it, and being from which every concrete differentiation has been removed is either still differentiated, if spacetime, fields, or immanent abstracta remain, in which case the subtraction has not finished, or wholly undifferentiated, in which case it is equality: ontological one, undifferentiated being under another name.

If instead the "empty world" is meant as outright non-existence — not a way reality could be but the absence of reality — then it is not a world at all, since non-existence is self-excluding (Chapter 4, §2.1), and a "possible world" that could not coherently obtain is no member of the space of possibilities. The subtraction argument therefore proves

something, though not what the nihilist takes it to prove. Followed through, the subtraction is the equalisation of a world: the stepwise removal of distinction, terminating, if it terminates completely, at the state with none.

The operation's own form says the same. Subtraction is a taking-from, so each licensed step trades on some object's contingency while leaving the world subtracted from; every stage the iteration reaches is being with something removed. A step that removed the bearer along with the last removable item would not be one more subtraction but a change of operation, one for which the argument's premise — the contingency of each concrete object in turn — supplies no licence; the containment order records the same limit, since a descent among states can thin toward the bottom element and can do no more (Chapter 4, Appendix).

It is tempting to go further and welcome the argument as independent support at the framework's most contested point: a sustained case, developed in another literature for reasons of its own, that equality is possible. The temptation must be refused, and the disambiguation just drawn is what refuses it.

Metaphysical nihilism is the thesis that there might have been no concrete objects, and the subtraction machinery reaches just that far. Every step turns on some concrete object's contingency, and abstracta, standardly held to be necessary existents, are the very things the engine cannot remove. The world Baldwin's iteration arrives at is therefore a plenum of abstracta with no matter in it — distinguished throughout, and diversity by the partition's own reckoning. It lands on the first horn above, where the subtraction has not finished. Coggins (2010) reaches a kindred verdict against the argument from inside the modal literature, holding that the subtraction argument fails to establish its conclusion; the present point is narrower, that whatever the last step reaches is being.

What the framework may take from the literature is accordingly narrower than support, and worth having anyway: that the terminus of a subtraction, if one obtains, is not non-existence, since the empty world

either obtains and is a way reality could be, or is no world. The possibility of equality it does not supply, and no argument of this book will be rested on it.

A neighbouring argument is already known within the nihilist literature: an empty world would still host the truth that nothing exists, a truth in want of a bearer, so the world would contain something after all. The standard reply denies that every truth needs one (Lewis, 2001; Melia, 2005). That reply leaves the present argument untouched, since the two-names result concerns what would obtain rather than what would make a sentence true, so the residue it locates is a condition of being rather than a standing truth. The refusal that does reach it — that possibility itself needs no vehicle — is met at §6.4.

Chapter 11 will argue that the kalām's necessity ascription requires the impossibility of undifferentiated being, and that this impossibility is a heavyweight metaphysical thesis no one has discharged. The nihilist and the framework disagree only over the description of the terminus: she calls it nothing, while the analysis shows that a nothing which obtains is undifferentiated being (Chapter 3, §3.5), and that the wholly empty description, non-existence, names no world. Between them, Leibniz's question fares no better than before. Where the "empty" world obtains it is a full one, undifferentiated, and something was never absent; where it does not, the alternative to existence was never possible. The disambiguation stands on either horn, and the subtraction literature, correctly described, stands with Chapter 11 against the necessary being.

6 Objections and Replies

6.1 The omnipotence objection

Objection. God is omnipotent. An omnipotent being can do anything that is logically possible. If creation ex nihilo is logically possible, God can do it — regardless of structural constraints derived from a philosophical framework.

Reply. The chapter argues that creation ex nihilo is structurally incoherent — not merely unlikely or unexplained but incoherent in the way a self-contradictory state of affairs is. The standard analysis of omnipotence (Aquinas, ST I, q. 25, a. 3; Plantinga, 1967; Wierenga, 1989) restricts it to states of affairs that are not self-contradictory, and the chapter's contribution is to show that the transition from non-existence to existence belongs in the category of the structurally incoherent, since non-existence is self-excluding, lacks all capacity, and cannot serve as a relatum of any relation, including causation.

Omnipotence is therefore not diminished by this result; it is clarified. God's inability to create from nothing is of the same kind as God's inability to make contradictions true: a structural limit on the domain of the possible rather than a deficiency of power.

Some theologians, Descartes among them, and certain voluntarist traditions, hold that God can do even the logically impossible. If omnipotence is understood this broadly, the chapter's argument does not constrain it. But this understanding eliminates the possibility of rational discourse about God's powers, since if God can bring about contradictions, no argument, including arguments for God's existence, can be trusted to track reality. Most theologians accept the logical restriction in order to preserve the coherence of theology as a rational enterprise.

6.2 The transformation objection

Objection. If the chapter's argument is correct, then God did not create but transformed. But transformation is still a remarkable act: the restructuring of undifferentiated being into the differentiated universe. The chapter concedes too much to the theist by allowing transformation. Furthermore, the chapter's concept of non-existence may be stipulative: by defining non-existence as self-excluding, the chapter has simply defined creation ex nihilo out of existence.

Reply. A clarification on modal status: the chapter claims that creation ex nihilo is structurally incoherent given the premises established in earlier chapters. The result is conditional on those

premises, so anyone who accepts them is committed to the conclusion. The chapter does concede that transformation is coherent, and the concession is deliberate. If God exists and was the proximate source of the universe, the act would be remarkable. The chapter denies only the specific claim of creation ex nihilo: the origination of being from the complete absence of being.

The distinction matters doctrinally, and the cost should be located where it falls. Sustaining dependence secures what the tradition's doctrine of sovereignty asks — that nothing other than God stands eternally on its own — as fully as origination did, since an eternally dependent world owes its being to God whether or not it began. This is why Aquinas could treat the world's beginning as a matter of faith and its dependence as a matter of demonstration. What the analysis removes is the picture of being produced from its absence, and a dependence theology loses nothing the tradition can name by that removal.

The cost arrives one step later, for a theism that declines sustaining dependence as well. A God who shares existence without grounding it leaves an eternal something whose being owes nothing to him, and no rewording recovers that surplus. Process theism trades this sovereignty for real relation (Chapter 24, §A.8), and the companion God of Chapter 24 stands openly in that lineage, meeting the cost there (§6.5), where it is the companion's and not the doctrine's. What the analysis fixes is the fork: dependence readings remain coherent, origination does not, and the sovereignty that origination was thought to supply on its own is supplied by dependence as well.

On the stipulation charge: the self-excluding character of non-existence is not stipulated. It is derived from a logical analysis (Chapter 4, §2.1): non-existence cannot coherently obtain because its obtaining would be its own negation — an instance of existence. The analysis does not define creation ex nihilo away; it identifies a structural feature of the concept of non-existence that makes the transition from non-existence to existence incoherent. The critic who wishes to resist must explain how a state defined as the absence of all being can coherently obtain — that is, how the absence of everything can be present.

6.3 The Leibniz objection

Objection. Leibniz's question is redirected rather than dissolved. Even if "why something rather than nothing?" is ill-formed, "why diversity rather than equality?" is well-formed and equally demanding. The chapter replaces one hard question with another and calls this a dissolution.

Reply. The objection is correct that the replacement question is well-formed and metaphysically demanding. It is not correct that the replacement is equally unanswered.

On the termination branch the question divides (Chapter 5, §2.5). Its mechanism component is structurally foreclosed — not an explanatory gap awaiting a future discovery but a structural limit on explanation of the same kind Chapter 4 identified for the grounding hierarchy — while its obtaining component is a gap, and is owned as one: well-formed, brute, and confined to the bare obtaining of the series. That remainder is why the replacement is an advance rather than an exchange of hard questions, since Leibniz's question demanded an explanation that was impossible, while its successor asks for one featureless fact, and asks the same of every rival.

On the non-termination branch, the question does not arise. What remains open is the specific form of diversity, why this universe rather than another, which is a cosmological rather than a metaphysical question. The verdict on Leibniz's original question stands: it rested on a false presupposition. The replacement question is better formulated, and the analysis identifies its structural status in full, even without answering it.

6.4 The primitive-possibility objection

Objection. The reply to metaphysical nihilism (§5.1) leant on a premise left tacit: that a possibility is a way reality could be, a condition standing ready to obtain. Deny the premise. On a primitivist account of modality, "possibly, nothing exists" can be true with no world, state, or truthmaker serving as its vehicle (Shalkowski, 1994), much as negative existentials have been held true without anything making them true

(Lewis, 2001; Melia, 2005). If modal truth requires no vehicle, non-existence needs no condition to carry it, the conversion into equality never begins, so Leibniz's question regains its footing.

Reply. The premise should be named first, since the argument owes its statement: call it the vehicle premise — a possibility is a way reality could be, actual at itself. §5 uses it wherever an "empty world" is asked what it would be; Chapter 4 (§2.1) uses it in confining non-existence outside the ontological domain; the objection has therefore found the load-bearing joint. The premise can be refused without self-defeat, which is why the disambiguation is graded established rather than self-vindicating, with the Register carrying the dependency. What the refusal costs is the question.

Ask the primitivist what her modal sentence says. A content is a diff, individuated by what it excludes (Chapter 2, §2.1), so "possibly, nothing exists" carries content only through some characterisation of the possibility it asserts. Characterise it — as what would have been the case, the alternative reality missed — with that, a condition has been supplied, one with no internal distinction, so the two-names result returns its verdict: obtaining, the condition is equality (Chapter 3, §3.5). Decline every characterisation instead, so that the possibility is of nothing's being any way, then the modal clause excludes no alternative, since a possibility no description reaches rules nothing in, rules nothing out, leaving nothing for the framework to answer. The refusal keeps the sentence by surrendering its subject matter.

The refusal also secures less than the objection needs. For Leibniz's question to regain its footing, the possibility refused a vehicle must be a possibility of non-existence rather than of equality: the two clauses must come apart. Ask what parts them. A feature of the possibility's content would characterise it, returning the first horn; what remains is the obtaining clause alone — one undifferentiated condition, possibly obtaining, possibly not — which is the two-names result restated inside the modal idiom. An uncharacterised "possibly, nothing exists" accordingly comes apart from "possibly, equality obtains" in no stated respect, while the latter is a clause the framework leaves open at no cost to any result (Chapter 3, §3.5), so the refusal bears primitivism's cost

while delivering no alternative to being. Nor do worlds taken as maximal consistent descriptions retire the demand; they relocate it. A description's consistency bears on what could obtain only through the claim that the description represents a way reality could be — the vehicle premise returned at the level of representation — where the same question waits: what the empty description would represent that a description of equality would not.

The truthmaker licence carries less than it appears to. Truths without truthmakers, where they are admitted, concern absences within being — the missing coin, the unexemplified property — recorded against a world whose remainder is present. Extending the licence to the total case asks "nothing exists" to be true of nothing, at nothing, in virtue of nothing, with the surrounding world withdrawn as well. A theorist may hold the position; the framework records its cost, one the local cases never had to meet.

So costed, the objection marks the boundary of the chapter's claim. Within the vehicle premise the dissolution stands entire. Refusing the premise leaves the refuser holding a modal clause with no stated subject matter, together with the standing costs of primitivism itself, acknowledged by its defenders (Shalkowski, 1994). Chapter 3 (§3.5) recorded that the possibility of equality remains open on one flank; the present section records the counterpart on the other.

7 Conclusion

The chapter yields three results.

The incoherence of the transition picture. Three arguments show that creation pictured as a transition from non-being to being is structurally incoherent: direct creation, self-creation, and agent-based creation each fail for different but converging reasons, and together they exhaust the ways the transition picture can be filled in. But the developed traditions do not hold the transition picture, so this result, on its own, does not reach the doctrine they defend (§2.4).

Creation as transformation. Against any view retaining an origination component, theism's own commitment to God's eternity entails that non-existence has never obtained, so what those traditions call "creation" is better described as transformation: the restructuring of already-existing being.

Against the pure-dependence reading, the result is the agent dilemma of §2.4, inherited from Chapters 6 and 10, with the totality argument closing the no-patient escape. On its first horn the doctrine keeps its content under the name of dependence; on its second it has none. Neither reading diminishes God's power, since the analysis clarifies the kind of act the traditions describe.

Leibniz's question disambiguated. Leibniz's question presupposes a coherent alternative — non-existence — that the argument shows is self-excluding. The replacement question, "why diversity rather than equality?", is well-formed; on the termination branch its mechanism component is structurally foreclosed and its obtaining component is owned as the obtaining residue (Chapter 5, §2.5). The disambiguation rests on the vehicle premise, named at §6.4 with its refusal costed; the Register carries the dependency.

If creation ex nihilo is incoherent, the theological tradition loses one of its two principal routes to a divine origin. The other route remains: the prime mover argument, which reaches God through the structure of metaphysical explanation itself rather than through temporal origination. The prime mover tradition, from Aristotle through Aquinas to Leibniz, holds that the chain of explanation terminates in a being that is both the ground of all things and a maximally intelligent agent. Chapter 10 argues that these two demands are logically separable, and that the conditions for satisfying each are incompatible at the terminus.

Grades and Dependencies

1. Routes. All three results are graded *established*, but the transformation result is established by two different routes against two different opponents, and the split matters for audit: against any view retaining an origination

component, the route is theism's own premises (§3 — God's eternity entails that non-being never obtained); against pure-dependence readings, the route is the agent dilemma of §2.4, which inherits the zero-complexity constraint (Chapter 6) and anticipates Chapter 10's closure of the second horn. The disambiguation of Leibniz's question is conditional on the two-names result (Chapter 3, §3.5; Chapter 4, §2.1), as §5's caveat records. The Premise Register records the full chain.

2. Forward commitments. This chapter draws on results not yet delivered and records debts other chapters will discharge: Chapter 10 closes the agent dilemma's second horn in full (capacities acting requires cannot characterise the undifferentiated) and derives the richness premise; Chapter 11 completes the comparative costing of the obtaining residue against the necessary being (§5.6) and receives §5.1's alignment of the subtraction literature against the kalām's necessity ascription; Chapter 17 handles Copan and Craig's scriptural argument; Chapter 24 (§§4.1, 6.5, A.8) receives the sovereignty-for-relation trade that §6.2 locates, in the lineage of process theism, as the companion God's cost rather than the doctrine's. The transformation-vocabulary reading rule (§4) governs every later use of "transformation," "diversification," and "conversion" in the book.

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