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Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit

An Argument for Anti-Nihilism

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1. Introduction

The big question about modal metaphysics is: what is a possibility? The big answers are: modal realism, combinatorialism, ersatzism, and modal dispositionalism. More on these below. Here's another big question—about nothingness: could there have been any? Our big conclusion is that the big theories about modality have the same answer: no. If you already agree, stop reading this. Curl up with a novel by the fire instead—we recommend *The Myriad* by R. M. Meluch (2004).

Before we develop the question and the answers, here's some standard enough terminology:

> *metaphysical nihilism* is the view that there could have been no concrete beings;
> *anti-nihilism* is the view that there *must* have been some concrete beings;
> *concrete beings* are spatial or temporal beings, or beings with powers or dispositions;
> *abstract beings* are beings that are not concrete; and
> *naturalism* is the view that there are no abstract beings.

Some writers discussed below have narrower criteria for concreteness than ours (e.g. by counting only things located *in* space-time as concrete, and not space-time itself), but this makes no difference for our purposes.

Peter van Inwagen (2015) argues for anti-nihilism, or, to be precise, for the conditional claim: if the existence of something is possible, then anti-nihilism. His conditional is cautious. Throw caution to the wind: there *is* something; therefore, anti-nihilism. Van Inwagen's arguments rely on a number of assumptions—about kinds and explanations—that ours avoid. His arguments don't move from premises about modal metaphysics. Ours does.

In section 2, we show how modal realism entails anti-nihilism. We reject David Efird and Tom Stoneham's attempt to modify modal realism so as to permit metaphysical nihilism. In section 3, we show how combinatorialism entails anti-

nihilism. We reject Efid and Stoneham's attempt to modify combinatorialism so as to permit metaphysical nihilism. In section 4, we argue that erstatz possibilism entails anti-nihilism, and, in section 5, that modal dispositionalism entails anti-nihilism. All the big theories about modality point to the same answer to our big question: there couldn't have been nothing. We conclude by sketching how anti-nihilism bears on another big question: why is there something rather than nothing?

2. Modal Realism

According to David Lewis (1986), possibilities are parts of maximally spatio-temporally related, causally isolated systems. Possible worlds are the systems themselves. That, very roughly, is Lewis-brand modal realism. *Very roughly.*

Anti-nihilism follows from the spatio-temporal nature of Lewis's possible worlds. If metaphysical nihilism is true, then there's a world containing no concrete beings. But, according to Lewis, worlds are sums of spatio-temporal entities, and thus all contain and are concrete beings. Lewis draws the conclusion himself:

> If a world is a maximal mereological sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things, that makes no provision for an absolutely empty world . . . There can be nothing much: just some homogenous unoccupied spacetime, or maybe only one single point of it. But nothing much is still something, and there isn't any world where there's nothing at all. That makes it necessary that there is something.
>
> (Lewis 1986: 73)

Add immediately: and something concrete.

Efird and Stoneham (2005; 2006) try to modify modal realism so as to permit metaphysical nihilism. What's the motivation? Three things. First, they think that metaphysical nihilism is intuitively plausible. Second, they accept the subtraction argument for metaphysical nihilism: there could have been a finite number of concrete beings, each of these in turn might not have existed, and so there might have existed nothing concrete (see Baldwin 1996). Third, they endorse Hume's Razor:

(HR)   Do not multiply necessities beyond necessity. (Efird and Stoneham 2005: 25)

A metaphysics that posits fewer necessities is safer, in that it has less chance of going wrong, than one that posits more. So, *ceterus paribus*, we should prefer versions of modal realism and combinatorialism not positing the necessity of concrete beings.

Efird and Stoneham modify modal realism by permitting a world consisting of abstract beings only, particularly the null individual. Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (2004)—who also tries to reconcile modal realism and metaphysical nihilism—prefers permitting a world of pure sets. Lewis (1991: 11–13) wasn't delirious about either the null individual or abstract pure sets, but apparently what he thought was bad about the null individual wasn't so bad (see Efird and Stoneham 2005: 32–4). Such fine metaphysical details and the details of the modifications won't matter to our criticism.

But before that, one immediate problem: make your empty worlds out of any abstract being you like, there'll still be the worry that possible worlds won't all be of the same type—*videlicet* (or namely): concrete. There'd be worlds with concrete ingredients, and worlds with only abstract ingredients. And it was important to Lewis's reductive ambition that worlds all be of the same type. Otherwise, we'd do worse on Ockham's Razor (Latin: *novacula Ockhami*):

(OR)   Do not multiply entities beyond necessity. (Efird and Stoneham 2005: 25)

This includes a restriction on multiplying *types* of entities. Accordingly, Lewis had a reductive ambition that all his possible worlds be of the same *type*.

Efird and Stoneham answer that their modification keeps all worlds of the same type: they all count as *abstract*, since none have a spatio-temporal location, which their criterion of concreteness would require. On our criterion, lacking spatio-temporal location doesn't guarantee abstractness (compare Lewis 1986: 84). But Efrid and Stoneham could seek comfort in that all their worlds—be they concrete or abstract—are at least *unlocated*. Is this really enough to satisfy Lewis's reductive ambition? We doubt it. Cold comfort.

If you prefer the weather in Oxford over York, Rodriguez-Pereyra has a more elaborate strategy for rendering all worlds alike. All his worlds—even the worlds of pure sets—are of the same type in that they are all collections made out of the same type of beings—viz. sums of memberless beings and their set-theoretical expansions. How much does the empty set have in common with a table? They're both memberless! Is this gerrymandering really enough to satisfy Lewis's reductive ambition? We doubt it. Let's pack our bags and relocate.

Even putting aside Lewis's reductive ambition, we have three objections against modified modal realism.

The empty set in our world is the very same being as the empty set in all others. To use the Lewisian terminology, pure sets are not "worldbound"; they can exist wholly in multiple worlds and enjoy "transworld identity" (Lewis 1999: 11 n. 5). Accordingly, Rodriguez-Pereyra's empty world, built out of the empty set and its set-theoretical constructions, is just a part of every other world, including ours. Why insist that they combine without any concrete beings to constitute a world

of their own? We only need to posit worlds to give location, so to speak, to world-bound possibilia, but we don't need to posit worlds comprised only of un-bounded beings—on pain of violating OR.

If we follow Efird and Stoneham and construct our empty world out of the null individual, then we inherit the same worry and generate another. Behold two questions concerning null individuals: First, is there only one null individual or are there many? Second, is a null individual abstract or concrete?

Here's a reason for thinking there's only one: the null individual functions in mereology much as the empty set functions in set theory. But if so, then, like the empty set, it won't be world-bound. It exists in every world, as a constituent of every mereological sum. But if it is so omnipresent, why think of it as comprising a world in its own right? Thus, our problem with Rodriguez-Pereyra re-emerges. Alternatively, there might be many null individuals, distinguished by brute haecceities (what other kinds could there be? Explicable haecceities?) existing in different worlds.

But segue to our second question: Are the null individuals abstract or concrete?

If you take seriously the notion that there are many null individuals, existing in different worlds, then you might think that null individuals are concrete in virtue of having a unique spatio-temporal location—spread out through all of the mereological sums they're a part of, and absent from the sums they're no part of. But if null individuals are concrete, then Efird and Stoneham's empty worlds, with their null individuals, contain concrete beings. Their empty worlds will not be empty after all.

Alternatively, you might think that (1) there are *multiple* null individuals (all Roman generals: Brutus Haecceitus I, Brutus Haecceitus II, et al), (2) that they don't all exist in every world, and (3) that they're abstract. Being abstract, they will have no real spatio-temporal location—such generals can conquer only philosophical consciences. But then we have no plausible principle for individuating worlds containing only abstract denizens.

You might insist that there's only one such world: even though a given pair of null individuals won't be compresent in every world, the only world with *no* concrete beings is a world that contains all and only the null individuals. There'd be only one way that there could have been nothing. That would avoid our worry, but it would be ad hoc (*though by now you're comfortable with Latin*). If there can be multiple and contingent null individuals, then why must they all together be present in the one and only empty world?

To summarize our first objection: Whether Rodriguez-Pereyra or Efird and Stoneham's modified modal realism is preferred, individuating worlds takes a certain ad hocery, stabbing into the ideological parsimony that is modal realism's heart.

The second objection is even more to the point. If the pluriverse contains an empty world, then modal realism can accommodate the possibility of nothingness—in a sense. But there's still a sense in which it cannot. For the empty world exists

within a pluriverse of concrete worlds containing concrete beings, and that pluriverse exists necessarily. When we consider metaphysical nihilism, we're not interested in whether an itty-bitty corner of existence is empty, even if that corner is a possible world. Rather, we want to know whether nothingness could have been *all* there is. The modal realist admits that there had to be something concrete somewhere, even if it didn't have to be *here*. And thus, in the only sense that really matters to anyone, the modal realist has to accept that there couldn't have been nothing.

The modified modal realist could resist our second objection: on their view, the sentence "there could have been nothing concrete" comes out true, because there *is* a possible world with nothing concrete in it. If that sentence comes out true, then metaphysical nihilism is true. Since it does, so it is.

The second objection then collapses into a third objection (who's counting anyhow?) that threatens modal realism in general. Saul Kripke's *Humphrey objection* to modal realism is that the modal realist misinterprets our modal claims. When I say that Humphrey could have won the election, I'm not talking about some counterpart of Humphrey in some other world, I'm talking about the actual Humphrey and I'm saying that he *himself* could have won the election (see Kripke 1980: 45).

The modal realist can respond: we provide a semantics that renders it true that "Humphrey could have won the election." Why should we worry that our semantics hasn't truly grasped the meaning of these sentences if we can't find a single true sentence that our account renders false, nor a single false sentence that our semantics renders true? More robustly: your claim is truly about Humphrey in that it's about *his* possessing certain counterparts.

These responses strike opponents of modal realism as sleight of hand. Lewis (1990: 393–4) takes George Berkeley not to have believed in trees, even though he said he did—*tu quoque*! Likewise, our modified modal realist *says* that they have secured the truth of metaphysical nihilism, even while there necessarily exist concrete worlds containing concrete beings. But their nihilism is an illusion spun by a semantic scheme that doesn't get to grips with the meaning of metaphysical nihilism. In the only sense that matters, there can't have been nothing concrete so long as there exists a single concrete world with a single concrete inhabitant.

But our third objection to modified modal realism is actually more pressing than Kripke's attack on modal realism. Modal realism leaves *Kripke* feeling cheated, but the modal realist can at least answer that (1) every sentence that is supposed to come out true does come out true, and that (2) even in the metalanguage, the modal realist never has to say anything that conflicts with the fact that Humphrey could have won the election. If there's an illusion here, it's hard to see what's generating it. But discovering the trick of *modified* modal realism is much easier. It provides a semantics to render "there could have been nothing concrete" true, but in the metalanguage it is committed to necessary truths that quantify over concrete worlds and their concrete inhabitants. That's a two-faced (the Romans would say *Janus*) and superficial form of nihilism (see Williamson 2002).

In a parody of Nelson Goodman, Alonzo Church describes a doctrine of ontological misogyny. The ontological misogynist is the person who "is led by his dislike and distrust of women to omit them from his ontology" (unpublished lecture). Church suggests numerous ways in which this could be done without undermining our empirical observations. Since every woman has a father, descriptions of women could be translated in terms of their fathers instead: "we might speak of men as having two kinds of presence, primary presence and secondary presence, the observational criteria for secondary presence of a man being the same which the more usual theory would take as observational criteria for presence of a woman" (unpublished lecture). The modal realist might have ways of talking about worlds that make it sound as if there's nothing there, but this is like the ontological misogynist who has ways of describing the world as if there are no women. Prejudice against possibilities is far less harmful than misogyny, but it's philosophically blinkered nevertheless.

3. Combinatorialism

According to David Armstrong (1989), possibilities are states of affairs constructed out of combinations of actual particulars and universals. Possible worlds are combinations of actual particulars and universals that respect a totality condition—the condition is something like a second-order state of affairs according to which there are no more than some specified range of first-order states of affairs. That, very roughly, is Armstrong-brand modal combinatorialism. *Very roughly*. But enough for our purposes.

Armstrong allows for expanded and contracted worlds containing more or fewer beings than the actual world. But what is foreclosed is a world containing no beings:

> For the empty world is not a construction from our given elements (actual individuals, properties and relations). For the combinatorialist, then, it is necessary that there be something.   (Armstrong 1989: 63)

Add immediately: and something concrete—since all the given elements are spatio-temporal. Perhaps nothing much, but something nonetheless. Lewis was pleased that Armstrong's combinatorialism was also anti-nihilistic, since he regarded it as "second best" (1986: 73 n. 53) to his own modal realism.

A familiar objection to Armstrong's combinatorialism is that it doesn't permit expanded possibilities, specifically alien properties not found in our world (see Schneider 2001). A less familiar problem is that combinatorialism doesn't permit a contracted *enough* possibility. Constructions must be made out of things: "if you give a child a set of building blocks and ask her to construct something,

doing nothing is not a way of complying with your request" (2006: 273). However, Efird and Stoneham (true to form) modify combinatorialism and our notion of construction by permitting a world "constructed*" out of no beings, "a null product consisting of no elements to be constructed" (2006: 273). Armstrong (2006) later conceded this point.

An immediate worry: modified combinatorialism does worse in terms of OR by having a peculiar kind of totality fact, "the second-order state of there being no first-order states of affairs . . . an essentially negative state of affairs, something which Armstrong has otherwise been at great pains to avoid" (2006: 278). Efird and Stoneham try to soften the blow of negative states of affairs with their observation that—for two reasons—combinatorialism already had to countenance them. First, any totality fact is a negative state—it's just there being *no* other lower-order states. Second, the possibility of alien particulars, which Armstrong is desperate to secure, requires the relation of difference, and the negative state of an individual *not* being identical to any actual one. So no *new* cost is incurred in terms of OR.

Here's our objection to this modified combinatorialism. Either the totality fact in the empty world is of the same kind as the totality fact in the actual world or it is not. If it is not, then modified combinatorialism introduces a new kind of being. That's a cost in terms of OR, and contrary to constructing the world only out of given elements. This would undermine a big motivation for combinatorialism. If the totality fact is of the same kind, then either it's concrete or it's abstract. If it's concrete, then the empty world contains a concrete being, which is impossible. If it's abstract, then the actual world contains an abstract being. That's contrary to naturalism— another big motivation for combinatorialism. Either way, Armstrong's combinatorialism cannot be made anti-nihilistic without sapping it of its central appeal.

Recombinations can be construed as concrete representations of a way the world could have been. If your favorite variety of combinatorialism is representational in this way, and for that reason, you don't think we've forced you to accept anti-nihilism, jump to §4.2 below, which deals with possible worlds as *ways this world could have been*.

4. Ersatzism

According to ersatzism (see Plantinga 1974; Adams 1974), a possibility is something like a proposition describing a state of affairs. Possible worlds are maximal descriptions. A maximal description is a set of propositions where, for every proposition, either it or its negation is a member of the set. That, very roughly, is ersatzism. *Very roughly.* But enough for our purposes.

As a set of propositions, a possible world is not a real *place*; it's a bunch of propositions that might *describe* a real place. Possible worlds are just models,

made out of propositions, representing the way that things could have been. The actualized world is the model that matches the actual world—the maximal set of propositions that are all true.

Geraldine Coggins contends that ersatzism is at odds with the subtraction argument for metaphysical nihilism. That argument contends: there could have been a finite number of concrete beings, each of these in turn might not have existed, and so there might have existed nothing concrete. The argument assumes that there could have been concrete beings—plausible enough! The criterion of concreteness in the argument: "Ks are concrete if and only if Ks have intrinsic properties and there is some possible world in which at least two Ks share all their intrinsic properties" (Coggins 2003: 358). That perfect replicability means that no concrete being has a unique intrinsic property—a haecceity. In contrast, ersatzism makes use of haecceities: they help make for possibilities without merely possible objects (see Coggins 2003: 359).

But we do not pursue this route. First, the subtraction argument for metaphysical nihilism is not metaphysical nihilism: perhaps the premises of that argument are at odds with haecceitism, whereas the conclusion of the argument is not. Second, proponents of the subtraction argument need not and often do not commit to the problematic criterion of concreteness. Third, some versions of ersatzism make do without haeceties. Coggins (2003: 358–60) recognizes these points. Let's try something else.

4.1 The Nature of Propositions

One person says "Venice is a beautiful city", another says "Venise est une jolie ville", and yet another says "Urb Venetia pulchra est". In one sense, they're all saying different things, using different words, in different languages. But, in another sense, they're all saying the same thing, since the three sentences are translations of each other. The three people are making the same point; the different sentences all express the same meaning. Philosophers call these meanings *propositions*; ersatzism's ingredients for possible worlds.

On the one hand, it's tempting to think that propositions exist outside of anybody's mind. After all, the meaning of 'Venice is a beautiful city' cannot exist in *my* mind. If it did, then you'd never be able to get at my meaning, and two people would never be able to mean the same thing. We can't say that it exists in anybody else's mind either. So, propositions are not in the head.

On the other hand, it's tempting to think that propositions depend upon minds. If they don't, then they seem to be somewhat magical or mysterious. After all, propositions represent ways the world could have been. When a proposition accurately represents the world, then the proposition is true. When a proposition *fails* to represent the world, then the proposition is false. So, propositions are

representations. But it's weird to think of something representing something else without a mind doing the representing.

Think about a road sign that signifies that cars shouldn't enter a certain road: All roads lead to Rome, except this one. There's nothing about this sign itself that inherently means that this road shouldn't be entered. The sign only manages to represent anything (an instruction, a state of affairs) because minds have decided to give it that meaning. Mindless stuff can't represent anything until some minds accord it that role, as in the case of our road sign. If propositions are at once representational *and* exist (and represent) independently of any mind, then they are unusual, mysterious, magical.

A popular solution takes propositions to depend in some way upon minds *and* to exist outside of any mind. How so? Perhaps a proposition is a property a mind could have (see Soames 2010; Hanks 2015). For example, when the three people express the same proposition in three different languages, what they have in common is that each of their minds is doing the same thing. And, thus, their three minds share a property in common. Perhaps propositions are properties like that.

However the mind-dependence of propositions might be understood, the basic idea goes back at least as far as Russell:

> If we imagine a world of mere matter, there would be no room for falsehood in such a world, and although it would contain what may be called 'facts', it would not contain any truths, in the sense in which truths are things of the same kind as falsehoods. In fact, truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements: hence a world of mere matter, since it would contain no beliefs or statements, would also contain no truth or falsehood.   (Russell 1998: 70)

Truth is a correspondence between a representation of the world and the world itself. But without minds, there are no representations. There are facts, but nothing for those facts to correspond to, and so no propositions, and so no truths and no falsehoods.

But, if propositions depend upon minds, and if possible worlds are just sets of propositions, then no worlds could exist without the existence of some mind or minds sustaining their members in being.

Granted: with the right modifications, the ersatz pluriverse can contain empty worlds—an empty world is just a set of propositions according to which there is no concrete being. Accordingly, we must concede that there's a sense in which ersatz possibilism *can* accommodate nothingness. It provides a modal semantics where 'there could have been nothing concrete' is true. But even if empty worlds *exist*, they exist within an ersatz pluriverse that requires the sustenance of at least one concrete being, since *minds* are concrete. The existence of the pluriverse requires a mind.

Again, when we investigate metaphysical nihilism, we're not interested in whether a corner of logical space is empty, even if that corner is a world. Rather, we want to know whether nothingness could have been *all* there is. Without magical propositions that represent without minds, the ersatzist must admit that there had to have been something concrete somewhere, even if it didn't have to be here or there. Thus, in the only sense that really matters to anyone, the ersatzist, like the modal realist, has to accept that there couldn't have been nothing. Appearances to the contrary are nothing but a sleight of hand conjured by an illusory semantics (This argument for erzastism to the existence of a mind can be extended to serve as an argument for the existence of God; see e.g. Adams (1994: 177–91); Welty (2014); Keller (2018).)

The modified modal realist can't escape anti-nihilism because, even if some worlds are empty, some worlds aren't. The ersatzist can't escape anti-nihilism because, even if *every* world in a given region of modal space were empty, every world—empty or not—must depend upon some concrete mind or other.

4.2 Non-Propositional Ersatzism

The ersatzist can resist anti-nihilism by adopting a non-propositional ersatzism, which takes possible worlds as neither propositions nor spatio-temporally related systems.

Possible worlds might instead be properties corresponding to some sort of maximal world states. The actual world instantiates such a property—call this property *the actualized world*—but it could have instantiated any number of *different* properties, each corresponding to a different maximal world state. Alongside all of these world properties, there must be a particular, since properties can't be instantiated without particulars.

Must that particular be concrete? Could it be abstract? If it *must* be concrete, then anti-nihilism follows, since there necessarily exists some concrete particular or other. If the particular could be *abstract*, then metaphysical nihilism follows; the world could have been an abstract particular instantiating an abstract actualized world. But the particular *must* be concrete on pain of risking a big attraction of ersatzism: the combination of (1) actualism and (2) compatibility with S5 modal logic.

Ersatzism rejects the naturalism of combinatorialism, but wants to share its actualism. The ersatzist appeals to exotic abstracta to avoid the modal realism of Lewis. For the actualist, the only real world is the *actual* one. Every possible world represents some way that this actual world could have been but isn't.

The distinguishing feature of S5 is that if something is possible, then it's necessarily possible; in other words, any possible world is possible relative to any other possible world. Combinatorialism struggles to accommodate S5, since

smaller worlds don't seem to have sufficient internal ingredients to recombine into larger worlds. If you're attracted by actualism *and* S5, then you'll be attracted to ersatzism. On the non-propositional version under consideration, every world is some property that our particular world could have instantiated.

Our actual world is concrete. Could it possibly have been abstract? If so, given S5, it could only have been *contingently* abstract. We are suspicious about the possibility of contingently abstract beings. Some countenance contingently "non-concrete" beings that are neither concrete nor abstract; others demur (compare Linsky and Zalta 1994; 1996; Williamson 2013; Tomberlin 1996; King 2016). But why countenance a gap between the concrete and the abstract? Williamson declines to provide a formal definition of *concreteness* (2013: 6, especially n. 6) and the standard definitions, including our own, stipulate that the two categories are exhaustive.

We reject the notion of a gap between the abstract and the concrete. Accordingly, if the abstract could never have been concrete and the concrete could never have been abstract, as all sides agree, then the actual world is necessarily concrete. And if every possible world is a property constituting some way *this* world could have been, then every world is a property that could only have been instantiated by a concrete being. Anti-nihilism is secured.

Even philosophers countenancing the contingently non-concrete should agree that the actual world is necessarily concrete. You might think that we're essentially human, and that all humans are essentially concrete beings. But if we're not essentially concrete, then how could we be essentially human? To avoid the problem, adherents of the contingently non-concrete distinguish between two senses of "essential". Some of our properties we call "essential" because we have them in any world where we're concrete. But that doesn't mean that we're concrete in every world. Rather, there's another sense of "essential" that picks out those properties we have even in worlds where we're *not* concrete. Thus Linsky and Zalta:

> the latter properties are ones that are 'essential' to an object only in a vacuous sense of 'essential' (if you have such a property in every possible world, you certainly have such a property in every world in which you are concrete).
>
> (Linsky and Zalta 1996: 291)

The essential properties of contingently non-concrete beings are all "vacuous", like being self-identical, or being non-concrete or non-human. Their most substantive and positive essential properties are irreducibly modal, like being possibly concrete and being possibly human. But any world that's actualized, which the actual world is in every possible world, has more than merely vacuous essential properties. Thus every side to this debate should accept that an ersatzist account has the actual world as necessarily concrete.

This version of ersatzism entails not only the necessary existence of some particular or other, but that this particular *must* be concrete: our necessarily concrete world necessarily exists, although it may have instantiated any number of world states. This version of ersatzism also therefore entails anti-nihilism even if there were some room for the contingently non-concrete.

Finally, even if abstract propositions have a brute power to represent states of affairs—that is, even if the propositional form of ersatzism can escape our argument against it—our argument against *non-propositional* ersatzism can be generalized to counter *all* versions of ersatzizm. After all, the actual world is concrete, and necessarily so. Given actualism, possible worlds either are or represent some way the actual world could have been. In no possible world could the actual world fail to be concrete. Therefore, there necessarily exists something concrete.

5. Dispositionalism

According to Charlie Martin's (2008) modal dispositionalism, possibilities are grounded in the powers and liabilities of actual beings. The possibility of a kettle boiling boils down to the causal powers and liabilities of the elements and the water. Very roughly. But enough for our purposes (also see Borghini and Williams 2008; Jacobs 2010).

Ross Cameron argues that modal dispositionalism rules out the possibility of none of the actual contingent stuff existing. He calls modal dispositionalism 'Aristotelianism', but why go for the Greek over a Latin root? Anyhow:

> Intuitively, I am a contingent being—I might not have existed. What, for the Aristotelian, grounds this possibility? Presumably, it is my parents; for just as it was within their power to beget me, it was also within their power not to, and had they exercised the latter power I would not have existed. And the truthmaker for the truth that my parents might not have existed is, in turn, their parents. But what about the highly intuitive possibility that *none* of the actual contingently existing substances existed—what is the truthmaker for the truth that this situation is possible? It can't be any of the actual contingently existing beings, for none of these beings has the capacity to bring it about that it itself *never existed*.
>
> (Cameron 2008: 273)

What's possible is what there's a capacity of actual beings to bring about or to fail to bring about. For any possibility, there must have been the capacities of actual beings on the scene. Thus, for the possibility of there *never* having been the contingent beings, Cameron insists that there must have once been the contingent beings—which is absurd. Thus, given modal dispositionalism, there could not have been none of the contingent stuff there is. Cameron worries about this

implication because he finds the possibility plausible: since each contingent being could have failed to exist, and its non-existence would not necessitate the existence of another contingent being in its stead, there could have been no contingent beings.

But the argument is too quick. Barbara Vetter points out that for there to be capacities on the scene there need not have been contingent beings: a necessary being could do the work. She talks in terms of *potentialities*:

> Let $x1, \ldots, xn$ be all actual contingently existing objects. Then it is possible that none of $x1, \ldots, xn$ existed. Something, therefore, must have a potentiality to be such that none of $x1, \ldots, xn$ existed; but that something cannot itself be any of $x_1, \ldots, xn$. Since $x1, \ldots, xn$ are all the contingently existing objects that there are, the bearer of the relevant possibility cannot itself be a contingently existing object. Therefore it must be a necessary existent.   (Vetter 2015: 275)

Since only a concrete being could have potentialities, we can conclude that there is a necessary concrete being. Which concrete being? Vetter locates necessity in the primordial concrete being:

> Nothing has or ever had a potentiality for the beginning of time to be different than it was: for there was never a time at which such a potentiality might have been possessed. Hence, whatever entities existed at the beginning of the universe are, on this view, necessary existents: nothing has or ever had a potentiality . . . for them not to have existed.   (Vetter 2015: 276)

Cameron finds modal dispositionalism at odds with other possibilities: "there are other possibilities that the Aristotelian account looks hard pushed to ground, such as the possibility of there being different global laws of nature, or in general possibilities concerning how the world could have been globally." (2008: 273). If we salvage modal dispositionalism in terms of a necessary primordial being, then this being had better have quite extraordinary powers to bring about extraordinary global possibilities. This makes for a little argument for a quite potent primordial necessary being—perhaps omnipotent?

But, returning to our theme, we can draw the dialectic between Cameron and Vetter together: if modal dispositionalism is true, then either there being no contingent beings is impossible, or there is a necessary concrete being. There being no contingent beings is possible. Thus, if modal dispositionalism is true, there is a necessary concrete being. Thus modal dispositionalism entails anti-nihilism.

Here's an even simpler route: what's possible is what there's a capacity of beings to bring about or to fail to bring about. For any possibility, there must have been capacities on the scene. For there to be capacities on the science there must have been concrete beings on the scene. Thus, for the possibility of there *never* having

been concrete beings, there must have once been concrete beings on the scene—which is absurd.

Such ideas have precedent at least as far back as Avicenna (2009: 359–70). First, assume that it's possible for something concrete to exist. Fair enough—since concrete things *do* exist! Assume also that if something is possible, it's necessarily possible, as per S5. Now take the possibility of there being nothing concrete. Even then, the possibility of something concrete would remain, as Avicenna puts it: "the possibility of [a thing's] existence exists before [the thing] exists" (2009: 359). From whence this possibility?

Like our dispositionalists, Avicenna cashes out possibility in dispositions and powers. So, if something is possible, then there must be something with the right powers and dispositions. Ultimately, Avicenna's dispositionalism analyses modality in relational terms: for any possibility, there must be an agent and a patient, and they must be related such that the agent has the power to transform the patient in a certain way, and the patient must have the liability to be so transformed. So what was assumed possible—there being nothing concrete—is not possible after all.

Since Avicenna analyses possibility in terms of a dyadic relation between an agent and a patient, he denied the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. God is the agent of creation. But there must also be a *patient* of creation—*viz.* the universe. Although he takes the universe to be metaphysically anterior to God, Avicenna is committed to the necessary existence of both God *and* the universe. *Ex nihilo nihil fit.*

But note that we can reach Avicenna's anti-nihilism without endorsing the necessary existence of the universe. Some agents might not require patients. Thomas Aquinas (1948: 241) thought that omnipotence did not require a patient. Perhaps dispositional modality needn't be cashed out in terms of dyadic relations; perhaps monadic properties suffice. So, despite our title, our conclusion is more modest than Avicenna's. Aquinas and other believers in *creatio ex nihilo* could endorse *our* anti-nihilism, since the necessary existence of God suffices, even without the universe.

What we take from Avicenna's argument is van Inwagen's conclusion: if the existence of something is possible, then anti-nihilism. Possibilities depend on dispositions. Dispositions depend on concrete beings; so there could not be possibilities without concrete beings. Since necessarily something is possible, necessarily there are concrete beings. We *think* that Martin (2008: 31) recognized the force of this sort of argument in passing. Graham Oppy's (2013: 47) naturalistic explanation of why there is something rather than nothing essentially boils down to an argument of this form too.

6. The Relevance

Why does any of this matter? If the metaphysics of modality excludes the possibility of there being nothing concrete, then it might answer one of the biggest questions of

all: why is there something—something concrete—rather than nothing concrete? Lewis didn't see things that way. On the contrary, he thinks that explaining why there's something rather than nothing would be a *problem* for his theory:

> I think the worst part of it is the fear that I might offer to *explain* why there is something rather than nothing, just by saying that this is a necessary truth. But don't fear; I do not think that would be an explanation. For an explanation, I think, is an account of etiology; it tells us something about how an event was caused . . . So I think there is nothing I might say that would count as explaining why there is something rather than nothing; and that includes saying, truly, that there is no world where there is nothing.   (Lewis 1986: 73–4; italics in original)

A weird point, especially coming from Lewis. Wouldn't modal realism explain *something* if it were true? If you insist, don't call what it does an *explanation*. But then there are still non-causal (and non-etiological) ways of answering why-questions, such as what we would normally call mathematical *explanations*, probabilistic *explanations*, and moral *explanations*. Call them *elucidations* (origin: *elucidare*) or whatever if you prefer to reserve "explanation" for something else.

Showing that there necessarily had to be something might not elucidate anything. Consider Jonathan Lowe's (1996; 1998) "explanation" of why there's anything concrete: abstract beings necessarily exist; abstract beings essentially depend on concrete beings; so concrete beings had to exist. But showing that concrete beings exist in every possible world because abstract beings exist in every possible world no more explains or elucidates concrete beings than, say, showing that there's fire on every hill by showing that there's smoke on every hill explains why there's fire on any hill.

The problem with Lowe's line of thinking arises because it tries to explain concrete beings in terms of abstract beings, which in turn depend on concrete beings. But we don't see that an answer from modal metaphysics need fall into an analogous trap—or any other besides particular problems with the proposed metaphysical frameworks. The question is worth pursuing, especially if *Lewis's* only reservation concerned the non-causal nature of the explanations that emerge from modal metaphysics.

7. Conclusion

There are other ways to motivate anti-nihilism (see *exempli gratia* Coggins 2010), and more to be said for metaphysical nihilism (see e.g. Rodriguez-Pereyra 2013). But we have shown that a whole range of modal metaphysics is anti-nihilist, including the most prominent theories. That's significant. Besides whatever intrinsic interest the metaphysics of modality and metaphysical nihilism have, the metaphysics might even promise an answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing concrete. The nature of modality simply entails the

necessity of something or other—which, like this essay, might be nothing much, but something nonetheless.

Acknowledgments

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