Is Total Nothingness Metaphysically Possible?

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1. Introduction

In this note I propose an a priori deductive argument for the metaphysical impossibility of total nothingness. The proposed argument does not depend on an appeal to the existence of a metaphysically necessary being. The conclusion that total nothingness is impossible follows logically from the following three premises:

(a) The Aristotelian-causal account of metaphysical modal facts is correct,
(b) There is at least one possible state of affairs,
(c) If a state of affairs is possible, then it is necessarily possible.

2. The Aristotelian-causal account of metaphysical modal facts

In his essay *The Leibnizian Cosmological Argument* [1] Alexander R. Pruss raises the question of the truth ground of metaphysical modal facts such as 'It is necessary that P', 'It is impossible that Q' or 'It is possible that R'. Pruss presents five non-revisionist theories about what features of reality make metaphysical modal facts hold: narrowly logical, Lewisian, Platonic, Aristotelian-essentialist, and Aristotelian-causal. Pruss argues in detail that the first four theories are unsatisfactory, and concludes that we must accept the Aristotelian-causal account until a better account is found. Pruss states that according to the Aristotelian-causal account of metaphysical modal facts "a non-actual state of affairs S is merely possible provided that something – an event or substance or collection of events or substances, say – exists (in the tenseless sense: existed, exists presently, exists eternally or will exist) with a causal power of bringing about S, or with a causal power of bringing about something with a causal power of bringing about S, or with a causal power of bringing about something with a causal power of bringing about something with a causal power of bringing about S, or more generally provided that

something exists capable of originating a chain of exercises of causal power capable of leading to S". Pruss explains further that, according to the Aristotelian-causal account, "a state of affairs is possible if it is either actual or merely possible".

3. There being at least one possible state of affairs

According to the second premise there is at least one possible state of affairs. This second premise cannot be substantiated by referring to the empirical observation that our world contains many actual and therefore possible states of affairs. For such an appeal to sense perception would turn the whole argument into an a posteriori argument instead of an a priori argument. Now, the second premise is a priori substantiated by the fact that we can a priori conceive a possible world that contains at least one actual and thus possible state of affairs. Take as an example a world consisting of a single atom. This world is surely possible and it indeed contains at least one actual and thus possible state of affairs.

4. From being possible to being necessarily possible

The third premise is also sufficiently a priori plausible. Pruss states in his aforementioned essay: "However else things might have gone than they did, it would still be true that they could have gone as they actually did". If a state of affairs is metaphysically possible in some possible world, then it is plausibly metaphysically possible in all possible worlds.

5. The metaphysical impossibility of total nothingness

To derive the metaphysical impossibility of total nothingness I show that the assumption that total nothingness is metaphysically possible results in a contradiction. Suppose that total nothingness is possible. In that case total nothingness could be actual. Let us assess the case that total nothingness is actual. In that case there is not any *actual* state of affairs. There are no *merely possible* states of affairs either, since there is nothing with the causal power of bringing about an actual state of affairs. Now, a state of affairs is possible if it is either actual or merely possible. From this it follows that there are no possible states of affairs in case total nothingness is actual. However, according to premise (b) there is at least one possible state of affairs S. Premise (c) implies that S is necessarily possible. S is necessarily a possible state of affairs. Therefore S must also be a possible state of affairs

in the case that total nothingness is actual. This contradicts our earlier conclusion that there are no possible states of affairs in case total nothingness is actual. From this contradiction it follows that total nothingness cannot be actual. But this contradicts the original assumption that total nothingness is metaphysically possible. Therefore total nothingness is not metaphysically possible.

6. Closing remarks

The argument shows that total nothingness is metaphysically impossible without having to argue for the existence of a metaphysical necessary being. Further, since the argument is a priori and not a posteriori, it does not only show *that* total nothingness is impossible, but also *why* it is impossible. The argument gives an *explanatory reason* for the fact that total nothingness is impossible without having to show that there is a necessary being.

Literature

1. Pruss, A.R., The Leibnizian Cosmological Argument, The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology, edited by: W.L. Craig and J. P. Moreland, 2009