

Beginnings: The Possibility of Something From Nothing

Dwight Holbrook

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland

The origin of the universe? The origin of free will? The origin of space? Or simply the appearance of something out of nothing, with no causal before, like a probability that transforms into an unpredictable particle actuality in quantum physics. In short, does better explanation for such questions await us? Or are we hamstrung by our tendency for “cause-and-effect” explanations or “something vs. nothing” ways of forcing the options? This essay explores the notion of beginnings—that is, the possibility of something from nothing. It begins by clarifying how the meaning of such terms is being intended, for example the question of whether the moon if no one sees it qualifies as a nothing, the question of an uncaused something or an effect minus an antecedent of any kind. In short, what does a something-from-nothing entail? And what is a something in the first place, as Heidegger asks in his essay, “What Is a Thing?” Having sketched out notions of “something” and “nothing”, the discussion proceeds to the central question, namely the possibility of a something from nothing. What is something? What is nothing? It may be that we need new categories of understanding for a better answer. This essay suggests such a quest.

Keywords: nothingness, non-causal emergence, free will, pre-temporal Big Bang, expanding universe

Emergence Possibilities in Physics

This essay considers the notion of origins or beginnings as understood in a literal sense, namely as a something wholly originating out of the blue, out of a nothing at all, rather than the commonplace and plausible understanding of a beginning as something new and different, yet even so as arising and brought about by something else, not from a literal nothingness.

To begin with, there are admittedly interpretations in science, particularly in quantum physics, that get tantalizingly close to the notion of a beginning of something from a literal nothing. One such example could be that paradox in quantum physics where the observed measurement of a quantum particle changes a quantum particle’s status from a probability to an actuality. (Cp. “In quantum physics the idea of an objective world in which objects possess unambiguous properties independent of their observation has become untenable”. (Hooff, 2013, p. 47)) One could also cite the case of quantum entanglement (i.e., nonlocality), something instantaneous and unmediated across space and time where, in short, what happens over here can instantly affect, and be affected by, what happens over there. But even so, the end result is not exactly an origin in the sense of a something from nothing, but more like an origin from something, even if the causal connection is unclear or by inference, be it by the act of observation or by a measurement producing the effect. Likewise, one can point out the unclear connection between a purportedly determined outcome as a something from a “chaos” scenario, as

Dwight Holbrook, B.A. Cum Laude, English and Religious Existentialism, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut; M.A. Teaching English as a Second Language, New York University, N.Y.; Contract professor under Professor Fisiak at A.M.U. English Department, Poznan, Poland; presently retired.

that term is used in physics. Nevertheless, there is still that something rather than a nothing before the determined outcome—namely that prior state of chaos.

In contrast to these scenarios, what we are looking for in this discussion is a gap—like a hole in the clouds penetrating through to us from outside the expanding universe, i.e., the nothingness outside. In other words, the complete absence of the originating source outside space vs. the something that constitutes the hole inside—that kind of beginning, a something from nothing, with no explanatory before.

What is “Nothing”?

This takes us to closer scrutiny of the pivotal words in this query on beginnings—namely these two everyday words—“something” and “nothing”. Obvious as their meanings seem at first sight, the two words “something” and “nothing” are actually elusive as distinct designations. As Heidegger points out, each of the two words is co-referential and in a sense their meanings beg the question of meaning. For example, “The sunlight is bright” in common usage seems to be pointing to an objective fact, a something, but actually its meaning hinges on an understanding of the opposite state, the nothing of darkness by which the sunlight can be compared. Likewise, the words “something” and “nothing” evince their meanings by way of contrast. In other words, what would “nothing” mean if there were not a “something” that existed by way of contrast? But as Heidegger pointed out, there is more to this nothing than a denial of its opposite (Polt, 1999, pp. 124-125). How I will proceed to address this semantic limitation of opposite referrals will be to probe deeper the meaning of “nothing” than mere implication by contrast with its implied opposite. The examples I will provide will aim to demonstrate this deeper level of “nothing”, a level from which beginnings can be said to truly take place in the raw, so to speak. This paper, however, will not extend into discussions of “emptiness” in eastern religions, which go beyond our focus here.

Admittedly, there is much confusion about this kind of raw “nothing”, just as there is about other things the meaning of which are seemingly beyond our capability to experience and are taken as abstractions or understood by inference, such elusive notions as infinity, the intergalactic void, or the notion of compact mass that can deform spacetime to create a black hole. Take an everyday example—the number zero. In Poland where I live, the number zero is generally taken as a starting point in situations like describing the ground floor as zero. Not surprisingly, the floor above that is the first floor, not the second floor, just as the start of a new day after midnight is 0:01, not 12:01, the latter suggesting the previous day is still there, lingering and dragging on, so to speak. Granted that much about science and its calculated measurements is about the non-experiential (after all, what does “infinity” mean in terms of experience?), still there are provocative areas where an experiential perspective, guided by a literal and non-co-referential understanding of “something-from-nothing”, can challenge the territorial claims of science, at least as it seems to me. Consciousness is a case in point. As David Chalmers has brought out, this “something it is like” of consciousness is not easily explained in terms of cause or comparison or function or brain data (Chalmers, 2010, pp. 1-24). So is it something or more like a nothing? One may take it as a something in contrast to unconsciousness or death. But can we know this if we have not died or when unconscious? I can only speak about either from a conscious perspective, and as for the latter, this consciousness, is the better descriptive label “something it is like” or “nothing it is like”?

Versions of a Proposed Something from Nothing

While the concept of nothingness has been battled around for centuries—taken up by such luminaries as Meister Eckhart, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buddhist contemplatives, let’s here limit ourselves to the paradigm of a

something derived from a non-comparable and literal nothing, and furthermore to how such a notion impinges on certain presumptions of science. Based on the evidence of an expanding universe and other scientific data, a leading interpretation about the origin of the universe is that it all began with the Big Bang and that time itself began with the Big Bang as well. This leaves open the possibility of a literal nothing before the something of the Big Bang. But what is this literal nothing from a scientific point of view? Some interpretations would attempt to avoid a pre-state of oblivion that would leave science with a blank about that nothing, a realm opaque to theory, data, evidence of any kind, replacing that with, for example, a postulated state of pre-origin analogous to a curved globe. Hence, no problem of a beginning from nothing, nor of an end. Other interpretations might propose, instead of a literal nothingness before the Big Bang, the existence nonetheless of certain pretemporal preconditions that would make the Big Bang at least partly explainable—on the assumption that “pretemporal preconditions” is not a contradiction in terms, or another alternative, namely that the Big Bang was neither the beginning of time nor the beginning of the universe—hence, avoiding the paradox of a something from a literal nothing, despite the evidence of an expanding universe from a presumed starting point, and even the notion of the expanding universe—expanding, one might ask, into what? Shall we call it “nothing” that lies outside the expanding universe and then call it “space-time” once it is inside? If so, this would serve as a prime example; it would seem, in support of the something-from-nothing hypothesis argued in this paper, the “nothing” being understood not by comparison the way an empty closet implies by comparison the something of clothes on hangers its seeming semantic opposite, but as a literal nothing that resists such comparison and has no relation to what’s inside.

So let us move on to one final proposal of a something from nothing, this one that evidences from our very humanity and ability to pursue science in an objective way. The objectivity that a scientist presumes to have in order to evaluate data correctly and support a theory is premised on what is traditionally known as the skeptical argument. If my decisions and judgments are preconditioned and predetermined by what has been fed into my brain, including all the influences from my past, then how is it that I can stand apart from those influences and see things as they really are? Are judgments possible or are they presuming what is in fact preordained, being predetermined by external forces? What is interesting about this perennial question—this question of free will, especially in our robotic age—is that the issue, in fact, precisely hinges on a nothing, a nothing that has no scientific description as a something. Ultimately it is about human experience, reproducible and consensual that tells us we’re free and unprogrammed as we confront each other, an experience that as well exposes an absence, the absence of a completely explained cause or determinative influence directing or clouding our judgments and choices, in other words that nothingness which in this case constitutes the absence of the explainable by which judgments, decisions, and choices are explained on an analytical basis. In other words, the key to that nothingness in this case lies in our human capability to be free of a predetermined past, and as a consequence the failure of explanation to tell the whole story. Just how nebulous this nothingness of free will can seem to be is sampled in a recent newspaper article about a man in the subway who threw a total stranger, in this case a woman, in front of an oncoming train. Was it free will that made him choose to do it? This particular article was focused on cause—the man’s past, the mental disorder, street life, all this leaving a gap on the question of presumed guilt, the man’s responsibility, his decision to do what he did. Indeed do we use the word “guilt” at all or instead explain the crime as caused, which is so much more concrete, configurable, and specifiable than the nebulous assumptions of “free will”, a term for a kind of nothingness our humanity is assumed to possess, and by implication much of our language as well, words like “guilt”, “responsibility”, “heroism”, “courage”, “cowardice”, and even just

“thanks” and “Thank you for going out of your way. You didn’t have to do it”, words and expressions that connote and suggest the nebulous terrain of freedom and free will?

Reverse Scenario: A “Nothing” that Manifests from A “Something”

The focus in this talk has been on specimens of beginnings that can be said to arise out of a kind of nothingness that defies explainability in terms of a prior cause or a before/after sequential understanding of one thing leading to the next. We may also treat in reverse this subject of beginnings of something out of nothing, for example by considering an experience—parapsychological in nature—where the something of a landscape dissolves and loses traction with the world of things, and out of that change a nothingness emerges that has no relation with what was before. James Connor gives his account of such an experience as follows:

At last I lost all thought of myself. I lost the sense of myself watching myself, and was just there as the desert and the comet were there with the stars, the cold, ... Halfway through a single breath, the night revealed itself as joy. The joy did not rise up from me, nor was it in me—or if it was in me, it was only because I was in the night. It was more than a feeling; it was an understanding, a knowledge beyond words. (Connor, 2002, p. 2)

A “knowledge beyond words”, I would suggest, is another way of describing this literal nothingness—a nothing that emerges out of a something landscape and yet a nothing that has no comparative relation to what it has emerged from.

References

- Chalmers, D. J. (2010). *The character of consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Connor, J. A. (2002). *Silent fire: Bringing the spirituality of silence to everyday life*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Heidegger, M. (1967). *What is a thing?* Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company.
- Holbrook, D. (2018). *Blink of an eye: Material nature captured in the momentary now, a radical 1st person perspective*. Poznan, Poland: Adam Mickiewicz University. (about this book: (youtube) interview with Deepak Chopra: *Timeless existence: Blink of an eye*)
- Hooff, H. (2013). Genesis of conscious mental states. *Mind and Matter*, 11(1), 45-60.
- Polt, R. (1999). *Heidegger: An introduction*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.