

Why is there *something* rather than *nothing*? Biblical ontology and the *mystery of existence*

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‘Penetrating so many secrets, we cease to believe in the unknowable. But there it sits nevertheless, calmly licking its chops’.

H. L. Mencken

ABSTRACT

In metaphysics, perhaps the most fascinating but also the most commonly misunderstood problem presents itself in the question, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ This is the mystery of existence and it has proved to be insoluble as long as it is properly understood. One popular misconception with regard to the problem includes the belief that biblical ontology was concerned with a similar query, in response to which it supposedly offered the ‘god-hypothesis’ as a pre-philosophical solution to the riddle of the Real. In this paper, these assumptions are critically evaluated and shown to be both anachronistic and presumptuous. Protological aetiologies in the Hebrew Bible show no trace of familiarity with the problem of Being and the assumed deity-reality relation was never intended as a solution to the mystery of why things are the way they are, or why they are at all.

A INTRODUCTION

Why is there *something* rather than *nothing*? This question, properly understood, represents what the philosopher Martin Heidegger considered the most fundamental problem of all philosophical inquiry (see Long 2000:113). It concerns the mystery of existence – a riddle that in some form or another has vexed thinkers in both Eastern and Western philosophy since their inception. Already in ancient Indian religious literature the puzzle concerning the origin of *Being* was acknowledged as essentially insoluble (see Thrower 1980:28). Since the time of Parmenides (5th century B.C.E.) a related perplexity motivated philosophers to begin spending a substantial amount of time arguing whether *nothingness* is possible (Sorensen 2006). By the time the Modern Era arrived fashionably late the question of why anything happens to exist asserted itself with a vengeance to such an extent that following its (re)formulation in the writings of Leibniz, other philosophers including Hume, Kant, Schelling,

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Sartre all felt compelled to say something in response to it (see Sorensen 2006). In the present postmodern period the question of why anything exists enjoys a somewhat ambivalent reputation. While some claim it to lie at the foundations of all metaphysical inquiry (e.g. Kolak 1994:442) others (typically dismissive of all metaphysics) insist that it is nothing more than language on holiday, i.e. a pseudo-problem (see Cupitt 2001:77; Rundle 2004:165).

For better or for worse, the question of why there happens to be something rather than nothing is something that is of interest outside the circles of professional philosophers. In the context of religious debates in particular the problematic is interpreted to involve the origins of what is understood to be 'created reality'. On this assumption there is no mystery and the reason why there is something rather than nothing is because there is a God who created it all. Those sceptical of theism share the assumption that the question is a) about causation and b) about the origins of the world. However, the sceptics differ from the believers in denying the need for a 'god-hypothesis' to explain why things are the way they are, or why they are at all. The question itself is therefore heard now and again when arguments arise with reference to creationism vs. evolution, supernaturalism vs. naturalism, theism vs. atheism, etc. Whereas the apologists intend to use the question as a knock-down argument in order to convince the sceptics of the absurdity not to believe in an 'intelligent Designer' as 'first cause' (claiming everything could not just have come about by accident), the atheists in turn argue that there is no evidence to suppose that whatever caused this Universe to be is also a divine being (cf (Hick 1993:12; Harris 2002:177; Rundle 2004:75)

Interestingly, both theistic and atheistic interpretations of the question of why there happens to be something rather than nothing seem to assume that the question concerns cause and effect, that it is only about the Universe, and that some sort of answer to it is possible. In this regard, many philosophers would beg to differ and will argue that both camps have misconstrued the meaning and scope of the mystery of existence in its proper philosophical sense. For example, Kolak (1994:441) suggests that anyone who responds to the riddle of the Real by answering 'God' or 'Nature' has simply not understood the problem. For the mystery of existence is not about accounting for 'creation' or 'the Universe' – instead, it concerns the existence itself as a phenomenon, i.e. Being (which is inclusive of anything and everything assumed to exist). This means that if one believes God/Nature to exist (in any sense of the word), these entities are existents and therefore included in the mystery of Being. As such they cannot be called upon as any sort of explanation in response to the question since they too are 'something' rather than nothing. Perhaps a better understanding of the scope of the problematic may be obtained if the question is understood to mean, 'Why is there anything (*including* God/Nature), rather than nothing?'

Given this all-inclusive scope the question now seems unanswerable. How does one account for the totality of the Real other than by referring to something that is itself believed to be real...and therefore ultimately willy-nilly included in the totality for which an explanation is being sought? What could possibly account for existence *per se* that will not itself be assumed to exist and therefore part of the problem rather than its solution? And if one cannot appeal to something that is itself real or existing, how can that which is neither real nor extant be any sort of answer? What explanatory function do fictional phenomena have? In the end, taking cognisance of this dilemma makes us realize that the mystery of existence is far more mysterious than popular theistic or atheistic interpretations of it would like us to believe. The question of why there happens to be something rather than nothing has therefore not without justification understood as being concerned with '*The Ultimate Unanswerable Unknown*' (Kolak 1994:449)

Of course, the idea of an unanswerable question runs counter to both religious and scientific types of common sense. In theory at least, it seems reasonable to believe that if one can meaningfully ask a question then there must be an answer somewhere out there – even if we do not and cannot know it. To be sure, even some philosophers get uncomfortable (or turn ecstatic) if they come across a question like this, giving rise as it does to a sneaking suspicion that no possible answer in response to it will ever be sufficient. Not surprisingly, frantic attempts have been made to demystify the *mystery*. And yet all attempts to deconstruct the *riddle of the Real* have failed most spectacularly as a result of the *protean* nature of the question itself. The mystery seems to have the ability to reconfigure itself into a problematic format relative to the ontological assumptions of the particular explanatory paradigm summoned to solve it. The mystery seems to rearrange its own internal structure even as one is putting the pieces of the puzzle together. Hence the illusion that one is on the point of completing the jigsaw only to find that there is always a piece left over. It's like walking into a maze that changes its shape as one seeks to traverse it; like a mirror that offers different backgrounds for different objects; like someone waking up every morning as somebody else.

Theistic attempts to deal with the question have in common their claim that the god-hypothesis is in fact a sufficient explanation and that God is not to be included in the mystery of Being since the ontological status of deity is alleged to transcend the problematic.

According to the first view, God is a 'necessary being' and therefore the question of why God exists is meaningless. The problem with this view is that it involves the nonsensical idea that existence can be predicated as logical necessity. Such is not the case in as much as the denial of something's existence does not constitute a logical contradiction. In addition, simply appealing to the existence of a necessary being does not justify the belief that there is in fact

such a being, that that there is just one necessary being, or that the necessary being has anything to do with what is meant by the concept of 'God' (which one?), etc. More problematic is the fact that the existence of a necessary being does not even begin to account for the phenomenon of existence *per se* but must presuppose it. A necessary being can necessarily exist if and only if there is something rather than nothing – Being – to begin with. The argument is therefore the result of a failure to understand that the question in the context of the assumption that God is a necessary being does not involve asking why God exists – rather, on these assumptions that question involves asking why reality *per se* as a *state of affairs* characterised by the existence of God as necessary being happens to be, rather than no reality at all. In other words, at best the objector's argument accounts for the existence of a necessary being but in doing so fails to show that Being itself is a necessity. And yet it is Being rather than beings whose presence is what constitutes the mystery of existence. Moreover, no being (not even a necessary one) can account for Being itself but must instead presuppose it. The argument therefore seem to involve a conceptually incoherent inversion of the Being-being relation since Being is a jointly necessary and sufficient condition for the instantiation of necessary beings, not vice-versa. Not surprisingly, not only atheistic but also theistic philosophers of religion dismiss the idea of God as a necessary being in as much as they consider the concept vulnerable to Heidegger's critique of onto-theology (cf. Davidson 2005, Miller 2002).

A second theistic approach seeks to do away with the mystery of existence (and aims to avoid the critique levelled against the first approach) by equating the deity with *Being* itself (e.g. Spinoza and Tillich). The problem with identifying God with the totality of the Real (as in pantheism or panentheism) is that even this reinterpretation of divinity does not solve the riddle of why there happens to be something rather than nothing. For assuming that God does exist and that God is identical to Being, the riddle simply reconfigures itself into a format otherwise conceptually incoherent but here perfectly valid as the oddest of questions, 'Why is there (a) God (Being) rather than *nothing* (non-Being)? As long as God was construed as a necessary being, the question of why the divine exists might seem meaningless. But now the identification of God with the logically non-necessary phenomenon of Being makes the same question perfectly meaningful. And should it be claimed *ad hoc* that the query makes no sense if God qua Being is assumed to be eternal, we can still ask why *this* particular state of affairs – eternal Being – happens to be, rather than no-Being, i.e. nothing at all. The appeal to divine eternity therefore does not answer the question – once more it simply invites a reformulated version of the same query adapted to the new set of ontological assumptions represented by the argument (cf. Kolak 1994:442).

Also from a non- or atheistic perspective, several attempted deconstructions of the riddle have been forthcoming. Again it is realised that there is no

possible answer and that the only option is to show that the question of why there happens to be something rather than nothing is ultimately meaningless (Cupitt 2001:185). Typically the arguments involve conceptual analysis, i.e. breaking the question up into its constituent parts and showing that the terms used therein are themselves devoid of content.

A first line of reasoning focuses on the concept of ‘something’ in the question. It claims that since there is now something and since nothing comes from nothing there must always have been something – in which case the choice between something and nothing has no basis in reality. Things just are what they are and that’s it – reality is a brute fact (see Sorensen 2006). Interesting as this notion may be, such a ‘just-so’ argument involves the fallacy of base assertion and begs the question in as much as the response simply invites the reformulated question of why there happens to be the state of affairs characterised by brute facts, rather than nothing. Moreover, since the postulation of nothing was never meant to refer to an actual alternative but only to a possible one, the claim that the question has no basis in reality fails to deal with the mystery in the context of modality metaphysics and possible worlds semantics (contra Cupitt 2001:88).

A second line of critique involves a dismissal of the question by way of a counter-question, ‘Why shouldn’t there be *something* rather than *nothing*?’ or ‘Why should there be *nothing* rather than *something*?’ (i.e., why think nothingness is the default condition?) In response it may be pointed out that the *mystery of existence* does not arise from the assumption that there *should* be *nothing* rather than *something* (or vice-versa). The *riddle* simply proceeds from the recognition that (a) *something* does in fact exist and that (b) it seems conceivable that there *could* have been *nothing*. Given these considerations, no logical necessity (‘should’) in the state of affairs is presupposed – rather, modal possibilities are merely acknowledged for what they are (Kolak 1994:443).

A third approach claims that there is no such thing as *nothingness* and that the very notion of *nothing* as opposed to *something* is both meaningless and absurd. No-one will ever verify there being *nothing* and let’s face it, *nothingness* does not exist (see Cupitt 2001:89; Sorensen 2006). To this it may be replied that, of course, there is no ‘thing’ that the concept of *nothingness* refers to. Since *nothingness* by definition has no ostension there is nothing to point to so we need not be surprised to find literally no-thing denoted. Yet one can infer an extension for the concept of *nothingness* since its intension actually requires as necessary and sufficient condition the impossibility of ostension (and the extension being an empty set). Conceiving *nothingness* is simply to imagine the absence of *everything* (Heidegger 1927:31). In addition, the concept of *nothingness* should once more be understood in the context of modality metaphysics with nothingness ‘existing’ only in a semantically-construed ‘possible world’. No *actual*-world instantiation of *nothingness* is required – or needs to

be postulated – for the question to make sense (cf. Sorensen 2006).

A fourth naturalist attempt to demystify the mystery of existence involves the claim that the metaphysical problem involves the assumption that the so-called *principle of sufficient reason* can be applied to the totality of *the Real*. According to this principle it is the case that for every x (where x may denote an entity, state of affairs or event) there is a reason or cause for why x is what it is (cf. Schopenhauer 2005:22) But surely, so the objector argues, this same principle ceases to be valid on the level of the totality of the Real (both spatially and temporally). For by definition there can be no causal relation between reality (of any kind) as a whole and some cause extrinsic to it – there is by definition nothing outside the Whole (otherwise it is not the Whole). *Reality* as totality cannot have a cause since the cause must itself be real to cause anything to begin with, in which case it too is part of the totality of the real with reference to which it is invoked to account for. The problem with this argument is not that it is invalid but that it is presumptuous and has succeeded only in knocking down a Straw Man. It assumes that the question of why there happens to be something rather than nothing presupposes *the principle of sufficient reason* as *causal* principle when there it does no such thing. The question is not asking for a *causal* explanation, merely a reason which could but need not involve causation. Not all explanations are causal explanations and the inability of such explanations to make sense of the question concerning the reason for the existence of the totality of the Real says less about the supposed meaninglessness of the question than about the meaninglessness of a causal framework as explanatory paradigm. The same mistaken assumption –that the mystery can be solved by identifying a cause for the Real – lies behind religious and scientific explanations invoking God/Nature as ‘first cause’.

Ultimately, a-priori reasoning explains why we are dealing with what is indeed an *Ultimate Unanswerable Unknown*. For whatever answer involving an appeal to ‘something’ (x) could possibly be forthcoming, it will always in principle be possible to respond by asking why *that* state of affairs presupposed by the reality of x should *itself* exist, rather than *nothing* at all (not-x). It matters little if we adopt a non-foundationalist and infinitist attitude comfortable with an infinite regression of questions for it simply implicates the mystery in an infinite serious rather than removing the problem it poses. Given an infinite series of answers ($x^1 \dots x^n$) the question (y) cannot but attach itself to each and every element in that series, which in turn suggests that y will inevitably attach itself to any and every x, e.g., $x^1 + y \dots x^n + y$.

So what? Why is all of this important for a discussion of biblical ontology? First of all, it is impossible to appreciate the precise nature and scope of mystery in biblical ontology without understanding of the mystery of existence in its proper philosophical sense. Second, the Hebrew Bible is not a philosophical system and yet in Biblical Theology (and in popular beliefs about the Bible)

there exists an unspoken consensus that the metaphysical assumptions of the biblical texts contain both an awareness of the mystery of existence and offers its own version of the 'god-hypothesis' as a pre-philosophical response to it (cf. Groenewald 2006:832; Loader 2005:683). Given what was said above about religious misunderstandings of the problematic and about the mystery of existence being insoluble, such an assessment of biblical ontology is quite obviously mistaken. However, even if the Hebrew Bible cannot offer a solution to the riddle, the question to be asked is whether biblical scholars and believers (and sceptics) have been fair to biblical ontology in been expecting from it what it might never have intended to account for in the first place. To determine whether this is the case, the following questions may be asked (i.e. the research problem):

1. Do the ontological assumptions of the Hebrew Bible either explicitly or implicitly presuppose a concern with the mystery of existence in its proper philosophical sense? (i.e., as expressed in the question 'why is there *something*, rather than *nothing*?')
2. Were biblical protological aetiologies (creation accounts) composed with the aim of utilizing the 'god-hypothesis' (Yhwh as creator) in order to provide an answer to the question of why things are the way they are, or why they are at all?
3. What does biblical ontology presuppose with regard to the deity-reality relation (i.e., the relation between the reality of Yhwh and *reality per se*)?

In the rest of this paper, I shall argue that popular assumptions of what biblical ontology deals with (and intended to deal with) are mistaken and that that ancient Israelite metaphysical claims contain more residual ontological mystery than what is commonly believed. In addition, its ontological assumptions are not only pre-philosophical but also contrary to the metaphysics adopted in later philosophical theology. My hypothesis therefore is that also with reference to the metaphysical assumptions of ancient Israelite religion with reference to the philosophical question of why there happens to be something rather than nothing, what we encounter in biblical ontology can be summarised in the words of a quote attributed to Gertrude Stein in another context

I tell you boys, there ain't any answer, just you believe me, there ain't any answer, there ain't going to be any answer, there never has been an answer, that's the answer!

In other words, this paper does not itself intend to provide any sort of solution to the *mystery of existence*. Neither is it my objective to engage in an evaluative assessment of biblical ontology with the intention to defend or to discredit its metaphysical assumptions. Rather, the goal of the inquiry is the provisioning of a descriptive analysis of the ontological concerns taken for

granted in biblical protological aetiologies, specifically with reference to the deity-reality relation presupposed therein. However, before I will do so, a few hermeneutical and methodological considerations are in order to justify a philosophical approach to biblical ontology. For it is well-known that as a non-philosophical, theologically-pluralist and literary-complex corpus of texts, the Hebrew Bible is immensely problematic for philosophy of religion (Carroll 1997:39; Barr 1999:55; Gericke 2006b:677-599). Many biblical scholars, however, use this fact as an excuse to avoid philosophical analysis altogether and would agree with the verdict of Walter Brueggemann that ontological questions should be bracketed: One does not ask what is 'really real' (Brueggemann 1997:71).

Of course, in this case one needs to remember that the kind of ontological speculation biblical scholars have reservations about involve *speculative* and *evaluative* approaches in mainstream philosophy of religion where one will find arguments in which the Hebrew Bible is alluded to for the purpose of the *construction* or *deconstruction* of some or other contemporary systematic ontological theory (which is not the objective of this paper). But as far as I know, no objection exists with reference to the use of *analytical* philosophy of religion as *auxiliary* subject *within* biblical interpretation for the purpose of a *historical-descriptive reconstruction* of the Hebrew Bible's *own* ontological *assumptions* (the alternative opted for in this paper). The latter approach does not ask what is 'really real' but is phenomenological in orientation in that it simply seeks to provide a philosophical perspective on what texts in the Hebrew Bible themselves presuppose about reality, irrespective of whether the metaphysical assumptions are true, coherent, credible, orthodox or not..

Taking cognisance of the above distinction between utilising the biblical texts as part of constructive speculative metaphysical philosophy (as in systematic and philosophical theology) and my own attempt at reconstructive philosophical analysis of the metaphysical assumptions in the texts themselves (as an analogue to biblical theology) is vitally important. Particularly scholars dismissive of asking philosophical questions on the grounds that the biblical authors did not have any such concerns and in the belief that all philosophical concepts are alien to the texts would do well to reconsider their views. For the arguments used to justify anti-philosophical sentiment are riddled with inconsistencies (Gericke 2006a: 588). For instance, consider forms of biblical interpretation focused on linguistic, historical, sociological or literary-critical forms of analyses. Here one also encounters terms and concerns not found in the text itself, e.g. in the exegete's use of words like 'hermeneutics', 'syntax', 'history', 'culture', 'characterisation', 'religion', and 'theology' are alien to the Hebrew Bible. As for questions and concerns, no biblical author ever wrote about the hermeneutical circle, showed interest in cognitive semantics, debated the historicity of the exodus, provided a sociological analysis of prophecy in ancient Israelite religion, utilised narrative criticism to analyze biblical stories, identi-

fied Ugaritic mythological parallels for biblical conceptions of Yhwh, sought to identify the centre of the Old Testament's theology, etcetera. In this sense, *all* our concerns and queries are anachronistic and alien with reference to what the biblical authors themselves wondered about. This cannot be helped and merely the fact of having anachronistic concerns should not be confused with distorting the data via anachronistic dogmatic eisegesis. And while the use of the text for speculative philosophical metaphysics will no doubt be prone to commit the latter, providing a philosophical account of what is presupposed in the text itself is something altogether different.

B THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE AND THE DEITY-REALITY RELATION IN BIBLICAL ONTOLOGY

1 The absence of the ultimate question in protological aetiologies

In the Hebrew Bible itself, a certain inquisitive sense of mystery concerning certain phenomena in existence is clearly evident (cf. Barr 1984:101; 1993:20). Adam marvels at Eve (Gen 2), Moses is perplexed at the durability of the burning bush (Ex 3), the psalmists gaze in awe at the wonders of creation (Pss 8, 104, etc.) and stand astounded by the incomprehensibility of the divine mind (Ps 139), while a sage in Proverbs is dumbfounded by human and animal behaviour (Prov 30), etcetera. Even so, no biblical character is ever depicted as having any interest in ideas that presuppose the question 'Why is there *something* rather than *nothing*?'

The *mystery of existence* – in its philosophical sense as inclusive of reality as a totality – does not seem to have been the kind of question in response to which the creation accounts in the Hebrew Bible were composed (contra Groenewald 2006:632). The notion that biblical protological aetiologies derive from a concern with the *riddle of the Real* stems from anachronistic philosophical assumptions uncritically projected back onto the pre-philosophical world of the Hebrew Bible. In reality, biblical ontology appears to have been more interest in the fact that something does or does not exist, than in the reason as to why it or anything for that matter happens to exist in the first place. Even the denials that there is a god (Ps 10:4, 14:1 (53:1)) or the assertion that foreign gods are 'nothing' (Isa 41:21-24) presuppose a concern with particular existents rather than with existence per se. Ultimately, the questions to which such ideas represent 'answers' are more ethical than ontological and concern beings (contingent and necessary) rather than Being.

Biblical *protological* aetiologies (creation myths/mythological motifs) seem to presuppose partial inquiries concerning what was perceived to be created phenomenal reality only. As such they should not be confused with *ontogenetic* aetiological inquiries that involve complete questions concerning reality per se as Kantian *noumenon* or *thing-in-itself*). *Protological* aetiologies presuppose the question, 'Who configured contingent states-of-affairs?', which

is an altogether different question than that which gives rise to *ontogenetic* aetiologies, i.e., ‘Why is there any state of affairs to begin with?’ Such a question is light-years away from what we have in the ontological assumptions presupposed in ancient Israelite metaphysical claims. The query lying behind biblical ontology was therefore not one involving a concern with existence *per se* (Being). It only concerned *existents* (beings). Contrary to popular assumptions regarding the concerns of biblical ontology then, the metaphysical question(s) evidenced in protological aetiologies seem to presuppose the Real as a Trope – as instantiated in particular realities – rather than being a Universal whose instantiation could itself become an object of inquiry. Hence there was no way of conceptualising the *philosophical* (as opposed to folk-aetiological) question of why things are the way they are, or why they are at all (Nisker 1998:22).

2 The absence of purported answers in protological aetiologies

Even if the ultimate question is never explicitly asked, many readers of the Hebrew Bible seem to assume that biblical ontology provides (or *intended* to provide) a satisfactory (or *allegedly* satisfactory) response to the *mystery of existence* via recourse to the ‘god-hypothesis’ (i.e. the notion of Yhwh as creator and necessary being). Several arguments may be put forward to show that this belief distorts both biblical ontology and the question of why things are the way they are, or why they are at all.

First of all, one possible reason why *ontogenetic* explanations are absent from biblical ontology is the fact that the concept of ‘*existence per se*’ as an abstraction inferred from and vis-à-vis concrete instantiations of it in actual existents is absent from ancient Israelite metaphysics. Thus we encounter the verb ‘*to be*’ but not the generic noun ‘*Being*’. Even if we suppose with Eichrodt (1961:55) and others of similar persuasion (as was popular a generation or two ago) that the LXX was correct in translating the divine name ‘Yhwh’ to mean ‘He-who-is’ (i.e. exists), the reference is not to *existence per se*, nor is the deity equated with *Being* itself. Even on that reading the focus is on the existing subject (‘*He who*’) and the name is *not* a definition of *reality* or an equation of the deity with *Being* (i.e., the name is not ‘He who *is* existence’). It functions only as a polemical predication, not as a philosophical conclusion following ontological deliberation (cf. Preuss 1992:87).

Second, if we take a closer look at the explanatory function of ancient Israelite varieties of the ‘god-hypothesis’ as represented in the belief in Yhwh-as-necessary-being-and-creator we find that the scope of the supposed answer is far too limited to deal with existence *per se*. Yhwh was assumed to exist, to be sure, but the ‘god-hypothesis’ does not pretend to explain *why* Yhwh happens to exist. Biblical ontology does not offer us some aetiology of divine reality and we are not told what the meaning, function or significance of divine existence was assumed to be. Of course, looking at what Yhwh creates, what he

does in relation to his creation and what Yhwh seems to expect from it (based on inferences from instances of divine displeasure), we can to some extent discern some implicit reasons as to why Yhwh wants to continue in being (aside from having little choice given his immortality). But why Yhwh as a type of being should be a necessary part of Being – and why there is Being for Yhwh to necessarily be – does not seem to have been something with reference to which an explanation is forthcoming (if possible at all). Ultimately we are not told why the pre-creation reality characterised by the existence of Yhwh was assumed to be the way it was, or why it was at all.

Interestingly, even if one erroneously limited the mystery of existence to the created world, biblical ontology's 'god-hypothesis' actually increases rather than diminishes residual ontological mystery. For example, given Yhwh as creator it becomes a mystery as to *why* Yhwh created the things he did (rather than something else), in the manner he did (rather than by other means), when he did (rather than sooner or later in eternity). In fact, why Yhwh as self-sufficient being would *want* to create *anything* in the first place is never explained. In other words, if the 'god-hypothesis' is taken to have represented an answer to the mystery of existence (per se or created) it must be considered as extending and complicating the riddle of the Real rather than solving it (contra Jacob 1958 who follow Karl Barth in the absurd claim that the world was created for the purpose of establishing a covenant).

Of course, protological aetiologies were not meant to be complete metaphysical explanations based on a rigorous and sustained application of the *principle of sufficient reason*. Of course, the biblical authors were not philosophers and it would be unreasonable and anachronistic to expect them to have been such (cf. Barr 1993:73). But that is the point, and in noting the absence of explanations I am simply *describing* the scope of residual ontological mystery in the text – *not* claiming that the presence of such mystery is a bad thing or the result of some oversight on the part of philosophical incompetents. Moreover, such observations are significant as they suggest that biblical theologians and philosophers of religion defending biblical theism are mistaken if they assume that biblical ontology utilised the 'god-hypothesis' in protological aetiologies, to account for the existence either reality per se or the reality of the created world. Recourse to Yhwh as 'answer' was never intended as an explanation of why *things are the way they are or why they are at all*.

3 The deity-reality relation in biblical ontology

Given that the Hebrew Bible neither asks nor wholly answers the question of why there happens to be *something rather than nothing*, and in view of the fact that philosophers of religion like to distinguish the ontological status of God from that of created beings, it might be interesting to revisit the Hebrew Bible's own assumptions about the relation between deity and reality (Gericke

2006c:872). In this regard, three possible perspectives on the matter will be tested with reference to the textual data, i.e.,

1. Yhwh as *identical* to reality per se
2. Yhwh as the *source/cause* of reality per se
3. Yhwh as *part* of reality per se

The first possible deity-reality relation some people might assume to be presupposed in the text is to think of Yhwh as *identical* to reality itself. This view is of course by implication denied in the Hebrew Bible's ontological assumptions with reference to reality in the post-creation period. The texts know nothing of pantheism or panentheism and, contrary to the God of popular philosophical theology, Yhwh was not assumed to be omnipresent (as is evident from divine actions involving movement, the deity's spatially limited form, etc). The question, of course, is whether the view equating Yhwh with the Real could have been assumed with reference to the pre-creation scenario. Interestingly, even in this case, the scanty references to such a set-up seem to presuppose that the phenomenon of *the Real per se* as already a given, yet also both distinct from and inclusive of the reality of Yhwh himself. This is readily apparent in – and presupposed by – the depiction of Yhwh in dialogue with other beings prior to creation (Gen 1), in allusions to his primordial battle with the Leviathan (Isa 51; Ps 74), in representations of Yhwh as creative agent operating on chaos matter within a non-created *spatio-temporal*(!) location (Gen 1, Prov 8; Job 38), etc. In all these instances, the action occurs in reality without occurring in *Yhwh*. That Yhwh is depicted in pre-creation settings as acting, speaking, observing, relating, and moving about *within* some or other uncreated reality implies that the divine being is IN Being, not vice versa.

A second view of the deity-reality in biblical ontology might claim that Yhwh was not seen as reality per se but rather as its *source or cause*. *Prima facie* this seems to be a more biblical and orthodox notion, particularly in view of the belief in Yhwh as creator. However, the discussion earlier on the impossibility of reality as a whole having a cause, the distinction between Yhwh and uncreated pre-creational reality, and the absence of the concept of reality as itself a phenomenon show that this view too seems overly simplistic as an account of what biblical ontology assumed about the deity-reality relation. To be sure, Yhwh was seen as the source of created reality and its existents, but he is nowhere depicted as the source of reality per se (which includes his own reality and the reality in which he existed prior to creating the heavens and the earth). Since biblical ontology did not assume Yhwh to have created himself (the logically impossible notion of being 'self-caused') or as being the creator of reality as state of affairs in which he himself existed (the inversion of the Being-being relation noted earlier) this view too seems distortive both of the mystery of existence and biblical ontology's own intentions.

A third and final possible way the deity-reality relation could have been construed was to see Yhwh as existing *within* reality as *part* of the Real (to use spatiality as conceptual metaphor). On this view, Yhwh was assumed to be a necessary being and indeed, from both a logical and ontological perspective this state-of-affairs seems to be the least distortive (even if most problematic) of the Hebrew Bible's own assumptions about the deity-reality relation. Of course, being influenced by systematic and philosophical theology, many a biblical theologian might find the idea of Yhwh as a part of *the Real* (not to be confused with creation) as problematic since it suggests a god ontologically dependent on there being reality to begin with and as necessary condition for his own existence. The unease with such a view is rampant in philosophical theology where the ontological status of Yhwh is distinguished from that of creatures (Harris 2002:219).

Unfortunately, what is taken for granted in philosophical theology are completely anachronistic in the context of biblical ontology where there is in fact no distinction to be found between the ontological status of Yhwh and that of other beings. In biblical ontology the deity was in fact assumed to 'exist' in the same sense that (created and other) reality 'exist'. The only difference is the necessary existence of the deity versus the contingency of creaturely phenomena, which involves the degree of being and not the kind. Yhwh was therefore not assumed to be 'Wholly Other' with reference to this reality. This conclusion cannot be avoided by way of a theory of the nature of religion language. In a very real sense, the nature of biblical ontology's religious language (another anachronistic concept since there was no religious-secular dichotomy) was unashamedly *univocal*, and not equivocal or analogical as later philosophical recasting of biblical ontology claimed. The idea that all religious language in the Hebrew Bible is metaphorical is an overrated generalization (contra Ward 1998:62).

In other words, even though Yhwh was not assumed to be ontologically dependent on the reality he *created*, biblical ontology *does* appear to assume the deity to be such in relation to *reality per se* (even if there was no awareness of this assumption) The deity may have been thought to be 'spiritual' in nature but this was never understood in the modern sense of the concept as referring to an other-dimensional incorporeal substance – 'spirit' was as 'physical' and 'natural' as the wind or breath itself – even if endowed with animistic qualities. The popular theological physical-spiritual dichotomy is therefore anachronistic with reference to biblical metaphysical assumptions. So too is our supernatural-natural metaphysical binary opposition: in ancient Israelite metaphysical assumptions the divine realm was itself assumed to be a *natural* (if uncreated) state of affairs in as much as the deity and other divine beings were believed to members of a *Natural Kind* (i.e., theology and biology was not distinguished and the gods was seen as a distinct genus or species in the cosmic hierarchy). In biblical cosmography there was no 'supernatural' realm assumed to be *outside*

nature – Yhwh’s abode above was located *within* the cosmos or natural realm (Fretheim 1984:29). For this reason, even our distinction between transcendence and immanence is distortive of biblical ontology if by the former concept we mean something from another reality or world. The world of divinity was assumed to exist in relation to the world of mortals by way of physical-spatial *Apartheid*, not inter-dimensional incommensurable substance dualisms. Finally, biblical ontology knows little of our notion that divine reality is ineffable or that the depiction thereof inadequate and necessarily anthropomorphic. Instead, the texts assume humans and human existence to be theomorphic.

Ultimately, when it comes to the deity-reality relation presupposed in biblical ontology what we encounter is indeed what Heidegger called ‘onto-theology’ (the notion of deity as the highest or greatest being rather than *Being itself*). But the biblical authors were not bothered by these presuppositions or implications of their metaphysical assumptions for the simple reason that they neither reflected on them philosophically nor were they even aware of them. They were not aware of all of their own metaphysical presuppositions or of what the implications of these assumptions amounted to with reference to the deity-reality relation. If we find such assumptions and implications conceptually problematic we should not distort the data to salvage its credibility but simply admit that the texts were not meant to be philosophical-theological explanations of why the relation of the deity vis-à-vis *reality* is such and not otherwise.

D CONCLUSION

From the above considerations we conclude the following:

1. The Hebrew Bible and its ontological assumptions contain no traces of familiarity with the *mystery of existence* in the form of the question, ‘Why is there *something* rather than *nothing*?’
2. *Protological* aetiologies in biblical ontology meant only to account for *some* aspects of the existence of *created* phenomena and never intended to function as *ontogenetic* aetiologies to explain *reality* as *noumenon*.
3. The deity-reality relation in biblical ontology is onto-theological and assumes Yhwh to be inextricably part of *the Real* – he was never equated with *reality per se* or seen as its *source* or *cause*.

Contrary to popular assumptions, therefore, in the Hebrew Bible the ‘god-hypothesis’ was never called upon to solve the *riddle of the Real* and biblical ontology cannot be considered as having presented readers with any sort

of attempted response to the *mystery of existence* in its philosophical-metaphysical sense (contra Groenewald 2006:832; Loader 2005:683). Even in the context of biblical ontology, why anything should exist therefore remains an '*Ultimate Unanswerable Unknown*' (Kolak), if only for the reason that the problem of *Being* was not yet even conceivable. For this reason, Jewish and Christian philosophers of religion should not bracket the history of religion and assume that their metaphysical theories are grounded in biblical ontology. Hebrew Bible scholars, for their part, should realise that the notion of Yhwh as creator did not arise from a utilisation of the *principle of sufficient reason* in mythical guise and was never intended to be an answer to the question of why things are the way they are, or why they are at all.

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