
Geraldine Coggins, *Could There Have been Nothing? Against Metaphysical Nihilism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xii + 171 pp.

Geraldine Coggins's book is the first book on the issue of metaphysical nihilism. It is an interesting and challenging opinionated introduction to this topic. Sometimes the very existence of the world we are in appears mysterious to us. And it is not uncommon to wonder why there is something rather than nothing in such circumstances. But the question "why is there something rather than nothing?" does make sense only if it is assumed that there could have been nothing. Metaphysical nihilism is the view that there could have been nothing, and this is the view Coggins is challenging in this book.

Coggins's book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction in which Coggins displays her methodology and clarifies the debate between metaphysical nihilism and its anti-nihilist opponents. There Coggins undermines necessitarianism, the view that things could not have been different, and she understands metaphysical nihilism as the view that there could have been nothing concrete, while anti-nihilism turns out to be the view that there has to be something concrete. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the main argument in favour of metaphysical nihilism, the so-called subtraction argument. The original subtraction argument for nihilism relies on the following premises:

- (A1) There might be a world with a finite domain of concrete objects.
- (A2) These concrete objects are, each of them, things which might not exist.
- (A3) The non-existence of any one of these things does not necessitate the existence of any other such thing. (11)

(A1) appeals to the notion of a possible world. So in chapter 3 Coggins argues that metaphysical nihilism is incompatible with any view of possible worlds according to which worlds are composed of objects (the so-called compositionalist view) and is committed to either ersatzism about worlds or a substantivalism about space-time. Premise (A1) also appeals to the notion of a concrete object, which is the topic of chapter 4. In this chapter Coggins conceives of concrete objects as things that are in time, that are temporally located, and she dismisses alternative accounts of concrete objects. Helped with this elucidation of the concepts involved in the subtraction argument, Coggins, in chapter 5, carefully examines the premises of the subtraction argument and objects to (A3) on the basis of Jonathan Lowe's (2002) argument against metaphysical nihilism. Roughly, Lowe's objection consists in maintaining that abstract objects are necessary and

that they depend for their existence on concrete objects. If Lowe is right, then there has to be something. In chapter 6, Coggins elaborates on this objection arguing that the subtraction argument cannot succeed in establishing metaphysical nihilism because “by focusing only on the properties of concrete objects, the proponents of the subtraction argument ... have overlooked the possibility that something about another kind of object could make it necessary that concrete objects exist” (135). Moreover, Coggins argues that the subtraction strategy is unconvincing because it is akin to a downward induction reasoning that generalises from a large collection of uncontroversial cases to controversial cases. Chapter 7 summarises the whole argument of the book.

As the structure of the book makes clear there are three main arguments in Coggins’s book. The first argument, which is the topic of chapter 3, is that metaphysical nihilism, given the subtraction argument, incurs a commitment to some controversial view about possible worlds. The second argument is that proponents of subtraction arguments have overlooked the possibility that some truth about another kind of entities makes it necessary that there are concrete objects. And the third argument is that the subtraction strategy requires an unconvincing downward induction reasoning. The reader should notice that these arguments do not aim to establish that nihilism is false but only that metaphysical nihilism is controversial and that the main argument for metaphysical nihilism is flawed. For showing that one view is affirmed in the absence of good and uncontroversial grounds does not justify the claim that the opposite view is better motivated or less controversial. So given these arguments it would be wrong to interpret the book’s subtitle, “Against Metaphysical Nihilism”, as meaning that the book argues for anti-nihilism. Indeed, Coggins does not appear to be fully convinced by the few positive arguments in favour of anti-nihilism that she discusses in the book (92–115 and 140).

But let us consider Coggins’s objections to metaphysical nihilism in more detail. First, Coggins argues that metaphysical nihilism is usually taken to be “a common sense view, agnostic between accounts of what possible worlds are” (54), whereas metaphysical nihilism is not neutral regarding the account of possible worlds. Coggins’s affirmation seems puzzling to me. Why should a common sense view be agnostic between accounts of possible worlds? After all, *modalism*, which is a scepticism about possible worlds in general, is a common sense view about modality (Melia 2003). But the modalist is not agnostic between accounts of possible worlds: it denies them all! Moreover, metaphysical nihilists since Baldwin (1996: 231) have always been explicit about the fact that some compositionalist accounts of possible worlds, in particular Genuine Mo-

dal Realism and Combinatorialism, were taken by their proponents to be incompatible with metaphysical nihilism. It is true that some metaphysical nihilists have attempted to show the compatibility of these versions of compositionism with metaphysical nihilism despite their apparent incompatibility (see in particular Rodriguez-Pereyra 2004 and Efrid and Stoneham 2006). But these authors are aware of the fact that in order to make these views compatible some emendations of Genuine Modal Realism and Combinatorialism are required. Coggins rejects these attempts to show the compatibility of compositionism and nihilism on the grounds that they either are committed to a null-individual she finds problematic (27–38) or define possible worlds in terms of ontological categories that, according to her, do not cut reality at the joints (47–51). But whatever we think of her arguments against these views, they do not justify the fact that Coggins often writes as if metaphysical nihilists were not aware of the fact that their view is not agnostic about the analysis of modality.

Coggins is certainly right that being agnostic about the nature of possible worlds would be dialectically advantageous for metaphysical nihilists. For then they could expect to convince readers whatever their view about possible worlds. But what is wrong with the fact that one's modal intuitions yield the rejection of some view of possible worlds? The role of an analysis of modality is to account for our modal intuitions. If some possible world analysis of modality fails to account for one's modal intuitions, then this is a good reason to reject this analysis of modality rather than a good reason to deny our modal intuitions. Coggins seems to think otherwise (123–125), but I am not convinced.¹

To conclude on possible worlds, I should say that I have been astonished to find that the possibility that metaphysical nihilism is not committed to any view of possible worlds is not considered anywhere in the book. It is true that the subtraction argument, in particular premise (A1), has been formulated using possible worlds discourse. It is also true that proponents of metaphysical nihilism often defend their view using possible worlds discourse. But the thesis of metaphysical nihilism – that there could have been nothing concrete – does not involve reference to possible worlds. If you think that no account of our everyday modal idioms is satisfactory unless it appeals to possible worlds discourse, then you will maintain that we need possible worlds in order to make sense of metaphysical nihilism. But some philosophers, the modalists, have denied that we need possible worlds in order to analyse our everyday modal idioms. And it seems plausible to me that, with the help of adequate technical de-

¹ Coggins also denies that metaphysical nihilism is based on intuitions (132–135). I found this argument unclear.

vices,² a modalist version of the subtraction argument can be proposed that does not quantify over possible worlds. If so and if modalism is indeed a common sense view on modality, then, contrary to Coggins's (54–6) claim to the opposite, metaphysical nihilism is compatible with a common sense view of modality that is also ontologically parsimonious (since it does not commit us to *any* ontology of worlds). So the compatibility of nihilism with modalism is an open research project that should be explored and it is regrettable that it is not explored in this book.

Coggins's third objection to metaphysical nihilism is closely linked to her first objection. Her third objection is that the subtraction argument is unconvincing because it requires a downward induction reasoning that generalises from uncontroversial uses of subtraction to controversial ones (125–132). The controversial cases, according to Coggins, are uses of subtraction in worlds which contain exactly one concrete object, so-called singleton worlds. But why are these uses of subtraction controversial? Because worlds where there is only one concrete object are “ontologically different from other worlds in a way that is relevant to the ontology of the subtraction procedure, namely the very nature of possibility or of what a possible world is” (131). Of course, it seems undeniable that whether the subtraction procedure can be applied in the case of the singleton worlds is relevant to our conception (if not “ontology”) of subtraction and to the ontology of possible worlds. But why should this entail that the singleton worlds are “ontologically different”? Whether we can subtract from the singleton world may yield some controversial choice regarding the nature of all worlds. So, in this way, singleton worlds are different from many-concreta worlds in that they teach us something more about the nature of worlds and the concept of subtraction. However, this difference is fairly extrinsic and unnatural and does not warrant the claim that singleton worlds are ontologically different in a way that would justify the claim that possible worlds, whatever they are, are all of a same ontological kind. And if so it is not clear to me why applying the subtraction procedure to the singleton world should be any more controversial than applying it to any other world.

Coggins's second objection is that metaphysical nihilists have overlooked the possibility that some truths about another kind of entities (abstract objects or worlds) makes it necessary that there are concrete objects (pp. 119–123). This argument relies on Lowe's argument that abstract objects are both necessary and dependent on concrete objects and on Cog-

² It is plausible that in order to formulate an adequate version of the *subtraction premise* (A3) in modalist discourse, we would need to appeal to Vlach or indexed modal operators; Forbes (1989).

gins's argument that some accounts of possible worlds make it necessary that there are objects. However, metaphysical nihilists have been busy arguing that there are plausible accounts of possible worlds that do not make the existence of concrete objects necessary (see above) and they have offered a plausible reply to Lowe's argument (see in particular Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002). So Coggins's second objection seems unfair to me. Of course, Coggins is not convinced by accounts of possible worlds that are compatible with nihilism (see chapter 3) nor is she convinced by replies to Lowe's objection (101–111). And perhaps she is right not to be convinced by the latter. But that is not a reason to accuse the nihilists of having been careless.

Despite these criticisms I recommend Coggins's book as an excellent introduction to this fundamental topic of traditional metaphysics.³

References

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