

**TEXTE MAITZEN**

There's a straightforward, if often overlooked, reason why the question "Exactly how many things are you holding in your hand?" lacks an answer. The term 'thing' is what we can call a dummy sortal, a term that (despite how it may sometimes appear) fails to denote a genuine kind of object— 'object' being another dummy sortal, along with 'individual', 'item', 'entity', 'being', and (in the metaphysical sense) 'substance'. Such terms lack criteria of identity governing the instances that are supposed to fall under them, and hence there can be no correct answer to the question of exactly how many things (objects, individuals, items, entities, beings, substances) occupy a given location or to the question "Exactly which things exist?" if we construe 'things' in an unrestricted way. Even though such dummy sortals function grammatically as count nouns, they don't function logically as count nouns and thus the senselessness of the literally meant question "Exactly how many things are you holding?" arises from its confusion of grammatical and logical function. Criteria of identity also supply conditions for the persistence of the instances they govern, which explains why you can't answer the question "Did the thing(s) you're holding survive the last ten seconds?" if you construe it at face value. One potential referent of 'thing' is a collection of matter having perfectly precise spatial boundaries, whose precision therefore means it probably didn't survive even that long.

By contrast, the term 'pen' functions both grammatically and logically as a count noun, and so the question "Exactly how many pens are you holding?" admits of a right answer: "one" if our common-sense ontology is true, "zero" if it isn't (if, say, the fuzzy boundaries that common-sense objects must possess are incoherent). Similarly, the questions "Exactly which pens exist?" and "Did the pen you're holding survive the last ten seconds?" have right answers depending on whether our common-sense ontology is true and on the empirical facts.

To be sure, sortalist theories aren't without controversy, but despite the controversy we can see from the foregoing considerations the deep confusion in the literally meant questions "Exactly how many things are you holding?" and "Did the thing(s) you're holding survive the last ten seconds?" These considerations, I believe, also show that the question "Why is there anything?" (i.e., "Why is there any thing?") confuses grammatical and logical function and hence necessarily lacks an answer, even though the question "Why are there any pens [or plums, or penguins]?" has an answer. Only the latter sentence contains a true sortal, a term whose presence allows the sentence to ask a genuine question. But it's also a question that there's every reason to think natural science can answer. Once we abandon the ill-posed "fundamental question" in favor of a question that invokes only true sortals, we no longer get the sense that natural science can't in principle answer it. [...]

The nature of my complaint may become clearer if we imagine the following exchange:

A: Why is there anything?

B: What do you mean? Are you asking why numbers exist?

A: No. If numbers exist, they had to exist. Why is there anything that didn't have to exist?

B: So you're asking why there are any contingent things. Well, there are pens, which are contingent things, and here's how pens come to exist—

A: —No! I'm not asking why there are any pens.

B: All right then. Penguins exist, and they're contingent. Penguins evolved from—

A: —No! I'm not asking why there are penguins either. I'm asking why there are any contingent things at all.

B's answers may seem deliberately obtuse, but they bring out the emptiness of A's questions: A rejects each of B's attempts to supply determinate content to the dummy sortal 'contingent things', but without such content there's no determinate question being asked. Once 'contingent things' takes on content (e.g., in one of the ways B suggests), the resulting question becomes empirical and scientifically answerable

Stephen Maitzen, "Stop Asking Why There's Anything", 2011.