

Why is There "Something" Rather than "Nothing"?: Peter van Inwagen

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Peter, the question why is there something rather than nothing is perhaps the most fundamental, deepest, most difficult question that I can conceive of. As a, as a, as a preteenager, I thought about this and it so scared me, I was literally frightened for weeks. It seems like there's no progress we can make on such a question. Now what can you say about that?

Peter van Inwagen:

Well, let's think about it. What would count as an answer to the question? Of course, we can't describe in a way that nonexistent things interact with the other, with each other to produce existent things; the nonexistent is never going to produce the existent. So, it can't be like the questions about why are there living things, you know, which we tell stories about how non-living things interacted to produce living things. It would have to have some sort of answer, if it had an answer at all. Now one sort of answer that you might give would be that it was impossible for there to be nothing, that there being nothing is actually an impossible state of affairs. And that would of course, would explain why there was something rather than nothing, since the impossible doesn't occur. There have been two attempts at this in the history of philosophy, two attempts that I would describe that way. One is summed up under the name the ontological argument, and the other under the name the cosmological argument. Both those names are due to Kant, although the arguments certainly predate, and he was the one that gave them those names. The ontological argument is generally seen as a proof for the existence of God. But it also answers our question because, of course, if God exists, then it's false that nothing exists. If God has to exist, then it's true that it's impossible for there to be nothing. The cosmological argument is also seen as an, as an argument for the existence of God, but it isn't like the cosmological argument indirectly showing the non-existence of God is impossible, it's that if there is a world around, it tries to show this, if there is a world around us that looks as this world does, then in the background, there must be a being that who couldn't fail to exist. But since we see that there is a world around us like this, then we can see that there is in the background a being who couldn't fail to exist. So again, it's impossible for there to be nothing. So, in a sense that argument shows that if there is something, then it's impossible for there to be nothing.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Now both of those arguments have been subject to severe criticism.

Peter van Inwagen:

Yeah. To severe criticism. I don't find either of them convincing myself, I mean, we can go into them if you want. But it seems that the only way, the only way that I know of to show that it's impossible for there to be nothing would be to defend one of the other of those arguments. Another way of answering the question, however, would, the question, why is there something rather than nothing, would be to show, there is an argument that tries to show this, that it's vastly improbable for there to be nothing. And there's an argument, independently invented, I think, by Robert Nozick, and Robin Collins, and myself, that's essentially this, you think of all the possible ways that the world might be, and we mean a total possibility for the world, down to every detail, all these seem to be equally probable, and the probability of all of them seems to be zero, and yet one of them happened. It may be surprising.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

The probability of each individual one.

Peter van Inwagen:

Each individual one is zero. Just as--

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

There's an infinite number.

Peter van Inwagen:

Think of, think of God throwing a dart, a wall, each mathematical point on the wall represents a way the world could be, and the dart is infinitely sharp, it hits, that's the one that is. Well, each one is infinitely improbable, right? The probability of hitting any one point on the wall is zero. Even though it got hit, some people say that zero probability means impossibility. But no, that's not true. It just means, but it's as low as the probability gets, except to raise a rather technical issue, we might conduct this argument in terms of other kinds of probabilities called infinitesimals. But I won't go, I won't go into that. So, zero is as low as the probability gets, and yet it doesn't represent an impossibility. Now of all those points on the wall, of all those ways the world might be, how many represent there being nothing? Well, what could differentiate one way for there to be nothing from another way for there to be nothing? There's only one way for there to be nothing, right? It's just that there is nothing at all. There are no variants in that; that's one state of affairs, there being nothing at all. And it's a total state of affairs; that is, it settles everything. Every proposition has its truth value settled, true or false, usually false, by there being nothing. So, if we're right, then it's one way for the reality to be and all ways, total ways for reality to be are equally probable, and it's all zero, then the probability of there being nothing is zero. And that's doing pretty well with the answer, that is again, imagine throwing the dart board at the wall, one point out of all the points on the wall represents there being nothing, the dart didn't hit it, let's say, why is there something rather than nothing? Well, it was possible, but as improbable as the thing could be, the probability was zero. You know, throw the dart at the wall an infinite number of times, and the probability of hitting that point is still zero, even in an infinite number of throws. So, that does pretty well with the question of why there should be something rather than nothing.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Doesn't that assume though that, that a world that has something, all these other infinite numbers, it has the same probability, a priority from, that nothing does. But doesn't it require some other step? Don't you have to populate those worlds with things that requires something extra?

Peter van Inwagen:

Well, as to what brings the world into existence, that's another question, what makes it real, that's another question. But some world has to be real, even

if it's just the world of there being nothing, but just defining these worlds--

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Maybe you could put your question this way, could there be something that draws the dart toward that world where there's nothing? That there would have to, that's where it would naturally go, that's its natural trajectory, is toward there being nothing, unless something explains its going to one of the worlds where there is something. Because a world that has something would seem to have to have something added to it, that there would have to be a second step or a very large number of steps.

Peter van Inwagen:

That's part of its nature that what makes it that world, that there are zebras in it, that there are gold rings in it, that there are neutron stars in it, you know, that's just part of its identity, its which world it is. If these are all, if our diagram displays all the possible ways for reality to be, then reality is going to have to be one of them.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But I'm still troubled by the fact that to equate the probabilities of nothing with any world that is populated with things, there's additional steps you have to make to any one of those other worlds. So, to equate any one of those worlds with the world that has nothing in it, I think is false.

Peter van Inwagen:

Maybe there's a need to distinguish here between a world in the sense of a great big object, like a cosmos, and a world as a possibility. Remember the worlds, I'm just talking about our ways that things might be, they're abstractions. The question is which of those abstractions is realized.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But just to create the abstraction, to define the abstraction, there are many more things you have to do with a world. If you have a world of nothing, and then you have a world of that has one quark in it, that's another world, that's a something world.

Peter van Inwagen:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But to go from a world that you have nothing in it, to a one quark world, you have to make a second step.

Peter van Inwagen:

But remember, the world that has nothing in it, we mean the world that always has nothing in it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yes.

Peter van Inwagen:

Not a world that has nothing in it at some time and then a quark later.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Correct.

Peter van Inwagen:

So, the question why is there something rather than nothing, must be the question why is there at any time something rather than nothing, or why isn't there always nothing?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Correct.

Peter van Inwagen:

So, you have one world in which there's always nothing. And so, you couldn't have more than one, because that doesn't, yes, and you could have, if it's possible to have nothing sometimes and something other times, then there'll be worlds be lots of worlds in which there's nothing sometimes. But there's just the one world in which there is nothing always. Why isn't that the actual world? Well, because it's equally probable with all the others and there's only one of them.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's where I have my problem. I agree there's only one, if it's forever, but I'm not convinced that it's equally probable with any of the other infinite number of worlds.

Peter van Inwagen:

Uh huh. Well, let's see what kind of models can we use here? We might, of course, think of the worlds as being represented by some big picture. Think of those big pictures of Chairman Mao that they used to have in arenas in China in the '60s, where everybody would hold up either a red card or a white card, and because everything was managed very carefully, suddenly a red picture of Chairman Mao appears. That's one world. Of course, you could hold up the cards and counterrevolutionary saboteurs might have made a picture of Chiang Kai-shek appear, that would be another arrangement. In fact, there would be trillions of arrangements that would count as pictures of Chairman Mao, trillions of arrangements that would count as Chiang Kai-shek, or the diagram of a paramecium, or anything you like, but only one that counts as nothing, and that's where they come up all white. And that's just as

probable as any other arrangement, any given arrangement. Of course, it's much more probable that you'll get Mao than nothing, because there's trillions of arrangements that count as Mao, and only one arrangement that counts as nothing. But each particular arrangement of all the cards that's an arrangement, that's as exactly as probable as any other.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Some people would answer this question very glibly, and say God, that there is something because God created it, but when we're asking if God is part of the something, and God is part of some of the worlds that we're trying to postulate.

Peter van Inwagen:

Well, either God is a necessary being or he's not a necessary being. If he's a necessary being, then there isn't any possibility of there being nothing. This question sort of presumes from the existence of a necessary being, and says, look, we don't know how to determine whether it's a necessary, whether it's God or something else, because for any necessary being, whether it's God or any other, then if there is that, then it's impossible for there to be nothing, and that's the answer to the question. If God is a contingent being, then we still have the question, why is there something rather than nothing, because one of the possible ways for there to be is that there is nothing, not even God. The doctrine of divine creation would just be well, if God exists and if anything else exists, that anything else must be because he created it. Then saying if God is a contingent being, then saying, well there is something besides God created it, because God created it, that's just to say, explain, answer the question why there's a physical world or something like that, not why is there something rather than nothing.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Right. So, at the end of the day, what do you feel in your guts to the answer to that question?

Peter van Inwagen:

I don't know about my gut. I know what I think is the right answer to it; that is, I think God exists, and that God is a necessary being, and therefore it's not possible for there to be nothing. But as I say, in this argument that I've just given, I was trying to address people, I was trying to find an argument that might be interesting to people that didn't accept that presupposition.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Let's start by defining nothing, because it's not so simple.

Peter van Inwagen:

It's not so simple because people are confused about it. Actually, it is pretty simple. To say that there is nothing is to say that there isn't anything. And that's all there is to it. No people, no cats, no Earth, no space, no time, no God. Maybe you could allow the existence of abstract things if you believe in them, like numbers or mathematical objects like that, maybe the question why is there something rather nothing is the question why are there concrete things or, or maybe not. But at any rate leaving that aside--

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But it's not just a vacuum, because physicists sometimes talk about--

Peter van Inwagen:

No, because a vacuum—

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

About, about the universe—

Peter van Inwagen:

That's right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Coming out of nothing because there's a vacuum with quantum foam, and particles separate.

Peter van Inwagen:

That vacuum, that vacuum is a physical object. But even your classical 17th century vacuum, the one that was supposed to be produced when you evacuated a jar, that wasn't nothing, because it had extension, it had a size. You know, you can, a vast emptiness is a vast emptiness. For there to be nothing, if there were really nothing, there wouldn't be points in space that were a certain distance apart, even a vacuum, if there is really nothing, there isn't even a big vacuum. It's just there isn't anything. For anything that you might mention, there isn't that.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And it is said that this question, if you think this is an ordinary question, you don't understand it.

Peter van Inwagen:

If you think it's a question like why are there living things, or why are there planets, you don't understand it. That's certain. And some people have suggested that they don't understand it in just that way by saying, well, if there were nothing there wouldn't be anyone around to ask it. Obviously, since we're here to ask the question there's something, but of course you could say too well if there were no living things, there wouldn't be anybody to answer the question, or if there were no planets, we wouldn't be here to answer the question. But nobody supposes that the question, why there are planets or why are there living things, are illegitimate questions. Nevertheless, you can answer those by appealing to some other things besides living things and planets. If you ask why is there anything, well you can appeal to anything, in addition to anything, because there isn't anything in addition to anything. That's what makes it such a difficult question. That's what makes it a non-ordinary question.