

Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Given the expansion of our understanding of what's real in the physical world with multi-verses, with unbelievable profusion of possibility, how do – what is the landscape of possible different explanations for how this all came about? What's the universe? I'm not asking you to give me the answer, because nobody has the answer, but what is – what is – lay out, lay out on the table, what are the possibilities? And let's try to be universally exhaustive. Get them all out there.

John Leslie:

Are you asking what different kinds of universes there could be, or are you asking what kinds of different kinds of explanations could there be for why there is any universe at all? Or both.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

We're assuming that we have a universe, and we're assuming we have a multi-verse. We're assuming we have everything, all the possibilities. Now, what underlies those possibilities? What is the landscape of possibilities that can explain whatever we got?

John Leslie:

Okay. Well, I think you could take a platonic view as defended by people who tended to be called neo-Platonists who thought that an abstract principle of goodness was behind reality. And they thought God wasn't a person. God was a force of ethical requirement which brought things into existence.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Alright, that's one explanation.

John Leslie:

That's one explanation. Another explanation is this force of ethical requirement, the first thing it did was create God, who was a person who then created everything else. When I said the first thing he did, this is talking metaphorically. It did it from all eternity. From all eternity God was there because His existence was required by this forced requirement, and then you could take various views. You could say God, from all eternity, created universes, or you could take the view, well, He just decided recently to do so. There's different ways you could go with that.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So that's explanation one with an ethical requiredness, neo-Platonism, that may or may not have a God as part of that as a creative force. So that's one. I would put a second one is that same God but without the ethical requirement. That God was the superset, the existent role, eternity, or some more traditional Judeo-Christian religious kind of God that maybe created the ethical requirement, not the reverse. So that's a second category. What else is on our table? I want to fill the table with possible explanations, and when we're finished, I don't want any explanation that's not on our table. So what else do we need?

John Leslie:

Another possibility is that the universe just happens to be there. And a third possibility is that some universe had to be there. Some people think that the notion of total emptiness contains some sort of contradiction. Some people think that the basic nature of mathematics may have dictated that there be exactly this universe. Some people think that, if you correctly understand the nature of possibility, you have to understand that absolutely all possible universes exist. Some people think that the basic nature of the universe is mental. Some people think that the basic nature of the universe is physical. Some people think that the basic nature of the universe is both mental and physical, because the structure of the universe is as described by physics, but this is quite compatible with, for example, thinking that this structure is carried by a divine mind, and that we all exist inside the divine mind. One can go on putting out theories and the trouble is that some of them are very stupid theories that are hardly worth discussing, but I'd like to make the point that I think the theory I've just mentioned is not a stupid theory. It's the theory I have. [Laughter]

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, I think it is important, as a first step, to try to be universally exhausted, to see what all the possibilities are and to see which ones are the more fundamental. Because some of them, as you get to more theories, are really subsets of the more primary ones. But to list the categories, and let me try from what you said. You started with a fundamental, ethical requirement that may do various things. Next was a traditional God, if you will, that everything flowed from. Next is a mathematical certainty that drives all reality, that underlines physics and all the laws. Another is that the mental consciousness, if you will, has some fundamental carrying power or creative power that engenders all the rest. And, I guess, some of the others are subsets of all of the above.

John Leslie:

Of the above. If, for example, some people say there's no problem with the universe existing today because it exists yesterday. And why did it exist yesterday? Well, because it existed the day before. So the universe has always been there. There is no need to explain the existence. Ah, but you'll say, what about the Big Bang? Doesn't that tell us the universe hasn't always been there? Well, the Big Bang may just have been an episode in an eternally existing universe. There could have been the universe which expanded in the Big Bang then recontracted, then bounced out again, then recontracted, and so on. It's been there for all eternity. Or it could be that the Big Bang is just part of a constantly, characteristically inflating situation which has big bangs occurring at intervals inside it. In that case, reality has always been there, and the sort of people here thinking of it are saying, well, there might be a problem if reality suddenly came into existence when previously there was a blank, but that's not the case here. It's always been there. You'll find other clever people saying, well, there's no problem with the existence of the universe because it's always been there, and you say, didn't you just say a moment ago that it's only been there for ten billion years? Oh, yes, but that's always. Previously, there wasn't any time so the universe has always been there. You can have an awful lot of fun here. Funnily enough, I was asked to, in the Blackwell Companion to Metaphysics, write an article on why there's

something. And they gave me sort of 2,500 words for cosmology and another 2,000 for cosmos and a couple of thousand for finite and infinite. How much do they give me for why is there something rather than nothing? You can have 200 words. [Laughter] So that's how a lot of philosophers apparently treat this question. They can't take it seriously. I've devoted all my career to trying to look into this question. I think it's a very interesting question.