

Why Anything at All?: Robin Le Poidevin

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Robin, the deepest question that we can deal with and the one that drives me crazy, is why is there anything at all? Why isn't nothing the best explanation? And you know, you hear the theists talking about God has to self-exist, and quantum physicists say that the universe can pop into existence through quantum fluctuation. From a metaphysical point of view as a philosopher, how do you analyze that question?

Robin Le Poidevin:

I think, first of all, it's a perfectly legitimate question to ask why is there anything at all. Some people have said it's, it's an illegitimate question, it's based on a misunderstanding. I think it's perfectly intelligible. You and I are what we might call contingent beings; we exist, we might not have existed. I think a lot of the things that we encounter in our everyday lives are similarly contingent things; they might not have existed. The universe as a whole might not have existed, there might have been nothing. So, why is there something rather than nothing? Now we have to be careful how to answer that kind of question; we can't simply help ourselves to the existence of something else. And that might seem to rule out an explanation in terms of God because we're helping ourselves to the idea of an existent thing, God. But God is different, arguably. You and I may be contingent beings, uh, traditionally God has been regarded as a necessary being, he could not fail to exist. So, if the universe exists because God wills it, that's a, that's a, that's a necessary state of affairs. God couldn't have failed to exist and couldn't have failed to bring the universe into existence.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's a, that's a statement, but is there any substance behind it? Is there any way that you can justify it other than to make the statement that, that God was a necessary being and does that mean like God was like the number 12? The number 12 has to exist because it's an abstract object, no matter what. If there were nothing they'd still be the possibility of, of 12 things.

Robin Le Poidevin:

Yes, to say that God is a necessary being is something that really requires quite a lot of our (unpacking). Um, so it's, it's not the same kind of necessity as the necessity of $1 + 1$ is, is 2. You might say, well that's just the way we use those terms. They're defined in relation to each other. That's a constraint on, on language. We would say God is a necessary being, we're not just making a point about language, we're making a point about reality. And here it's, it's very difficult to understand how a being can be necessary. (I) can contain the reason for their own existence in their own, in their own person. My own view of, of, of divine necessity is to take it not as a property of God, as a feature of our own attitude towards God, that the committed theists takes the existence of God as something non-negotiable, that it underlies everything, it colors their view of the whole of reality. It's necessary in that sense. It tells us more perhaps about the nature of belief than it does about the nature of God. If that's the case, though, it's no longer satisfactory to say there's something rather than nothing because God exists of necessity.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, what do you do at that point?

Robin Le Poidevin:

Well there is an alternative explanation, one that doesn't have any reference to, to, to God at all and that is to say that there is something rather than nothing because that was the most probable outcome. So, imagine if you like a number of stories one might tell about reality. So, one story is the universe as it is. Another story is the universe as it is but slightly different and so on and so forth. You've got an infinite number of possible stories to tell, each of them different in some respect. Some of the stories are going to be of a universe that is radically different from this one. Now (in) just one of these stories, it's a really boring story actually because it's the story that says there's nothing. There's just one of them; one story among an infinite number. Now if you were going to place a bet on what story ended up describing reality, you would not put your bet on the story that says there is nothing because the chances of that coming out the case is one over infinity.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

The fallacy in that argument is that there's an equal probability of all of your stories being true and I would agree that the universe where my hand is like this or like that, they're equal. But the, but the, the, the prior probability of there being nothing would seem to be much higher than all the others because you don't need anything in the nothing, whereas all those other things you need a lot of stuff to happen.

Robin Le Poidevin:

Well, the, the, the story in which there's nothing that's just one story among an infinite number.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yeah, but I'm saying the weighing of that has to be much higher because you don't have to...

Robin Le Poidevin:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Do things with that, whereas all your other stories you have to have zillions of different things to happen in those stories.

Robin Le Poidevin:

So, you imagine a sort of a branch and you, you take a decision right at the beginning. You either go for there's nothing or there's something and then you can tell a number.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's the alternative bargain.

Robin Le Poidevin:

So, it's, it's actually sort of a 50/50 probability.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And I don't even know it's 50/50. I mean, you know, I may think it's 99 for nothing and 1% for something because no matter what kind of something you have, that's hard.

Robin Le Poidevin:

Yeah, yeah.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Nothing's easy. But hard, but something is hard.

Robin Le Poidevin:

Well I agree with you. The, the, there's no sort of objective way of deciding the, the, the probabilities, it just depends on how you want to lay them out, how you, how you explain the, the, the permutations. So, I would agree, that although a very influential philosopher has put that forward as, as the best explanation of why there's something rather than nothing, it's not the one that I buy myself.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, what is your idea?

Robin Le Poidevin:

Right. My suggested answer to the question why is there something rather than nothing relates to another philosophical problem and that is the problem of negative truths. So, there are many truths about the world, which are, are negative; I'm not a hamster; the shirt I'm wearing is not pink, and so on and so forth. We think that there's something that makes truths true, so what makes negative truths true? We don't want to say that there's a sort of a negative fact; the absence, absence of hamsterness about me, that, that seems a crazy kind of property. So, my suggestion is that negative truths have, what we might call positive truth makers. My shirt is not pink is made true by the positive fact that it is white. My not being a hamster is made true by the positive fact that I am a human being. Now, take the proposition there is nothing. That, if true, would be a negative truth but there could be no positive truth maker for it because a positive truth maker would require the existence of something. So, in so far as you think negative truths require positive facts, positive truth makers, the proposition there is nothing could not possibly be true.