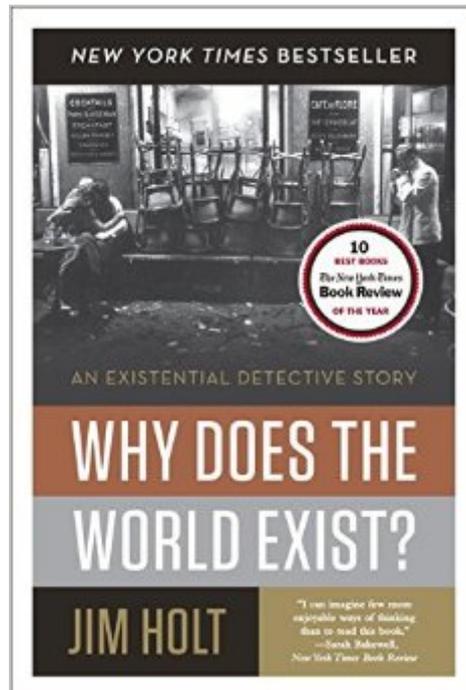


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Why Does The World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story



Synopsis

The Washington Post Notable Non-Fiction of 2013 — you can imagine few more enjoyable ways of thinking than to read this book. — Sarah Bakewell, New York Times Book Review, front-page review Tackling the darkest question in all of philosophy — with raffish erudition — (Dwight Garner, New York Times), author Jim Holt explores the greatest metaphysical mystery of all: why is there something rather than nothing? This runaway bestseller, which has captured the imagination of critics and the public alike, traces our latest efforts to grasp the origins of the universe. Holt adopts the role of cosmological detective, traveling the globe to interview a host of celebrated scientists, philosophers, and writers, — testing the contentions of one against the theories of the other — (Jeremy Bernstein, Wall Street Journal). As he interrogates his list of ontological culprits, the brilliant yet slyly humorous Holt contends that we might have been too narrow in limiting our suspects to God versus the Big Bang. This — deft and consuming — (David Ulin, Los Angeles Times) narrative humanizes the profound questions of meaning and existence it confronts.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Liveright; 1 edition (April 8, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0871403595

ISBN-13: 978-0871403599

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars — See all reviews — (339 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #128,548 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #31 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Metaphysics #42 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Existentialism #165 in Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Cosmology

Customer Reviews

Reading this book feels like working out in one of the finest philosophical and intellectual gyms in town. In it Jim Holt takes us on a journey which tackles one of the oldest and most profound questions that humans have asked; "Why is there something instead of nothing?". To his credit Holt does not try to answer the question but instead leads us through a set of meetings with some of today's leading philosophers and scientists who all have their own fascinating takes on the problem.

Holt starts the book with accounts of different schools of philosophy which have tried to stake out paths from something to nothing. It turns out that it's far from easy to define the existence of "nothing" partly since the very entity defining that nothing is something. Interestingly a few of the philosophical attempts also fly in the face of the latest insights from theoretical physics, and in fact one of the goals of the book is to demonstrate the creative tension between science and philosophy, hinting that both disciplines will continue to learn much from each other. To explain nothingness, philosophers resort to various logical proofs of God and existence while physicists think that the universe could have been a random quantum fluctuation that fed upon itself. Listing various attempts to explain nothing and something, Holt dwells on the work of thinkers like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer and Leibniz, giving us a sampling of philosophical speculations on the question over the last five hundred years or so. The heart of the book however involves Holt's conversations with some very smart thinkers even as he criss-crosses the globe and spends his time in French cafes contemplating the quirks and facts of his own existence, sometimes poignantly so as he thinks about the demise of his dog and then even more sadly of his mother (practical instances of the transformation of something into nothing?). Holt's accounts of these encounters are in equal parts clear, moving and enormously intellectually stimulating, making us confront a wide variety of questions about meaning and existence. Some of the conversations feel like intellectual ping-pong, and Holt's great strength is his ability to ask these people tough questions and spar with them on an equal level; this turns the interviews into exchanges of real substance rather than simple Q&A sessions. Among the cast of fascinating characters that Holt talks to are celebrated scientists, philosophers and writers. For instance there is the Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne who thinks that the simplest explanation for the presence of such a complicated universe is that it must be created by God. Then there's the Oxford physicist David Deutsch who is convinced of the existence of multiple universes, a fact which then posits our universe as simply one of many other worlds, albeit one containing sentient humans. An even more bizarre idea comes from the physicist Andre Linde who is sympathetic to the existence of our universe as a simulation created by other sentient beings with awesome powers of matter and energy creation. A healthy antidote to those who seem astonished by the complexities of our cosmos comes from the Pittsburgh philosopher Adolf Grünbaum who thinks there's no reason to be awed by the presence of something and that a fondness for considering nothing to be the "natural" state of the universe is really rooted in Judeo-Christian philosophy which imparts special significance to creation. Many of these thinkers hold diverse and even opposite views of the topic, but it's clearly this variety that makes pondering the question such an intellectual treat. There are many others who Holt talks to, including the

Platonist mathematician Roger Penrose, the writer John Updike and the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg. From a scientific viewpoint the cleverest idea seems to come from the physicist Alex Vilenkin who defines nothingness as the result of a sphere of spacetime shrinking to zero radius; presumably the universe could then arise out of this nothingness as a quantum fluctuation. As noted above, Holt's meetings with all these thinkers are interspersed with poignant personal ruminations about life, death and existence, mostly done while lounging around in the French cafe that Sartre frequented. Interludes between conversations cover a smattering of related topics, including various logical proofs for God's existence and Holt's own criticisms of them; in Holt we find a penetrating thinker who is entirely capable of asking the most revealing questions about the topic. In addition many of the discussions are spiced with humor. Ultimately Holt does not find the final answer to the question "why is there something rather than nothing", but I don't think he is disappointed. Neither are we. This is one of those cases where the journey is far more important than the destination; like the traveler in C. P. Cavafy's poem "Ithaca", it's the sights and sounds that we see on the way which really count. The investigation exemplifies the kinds of deep questions that humans are capable of addressing through science, philosophy, literature and poetry. We should all be glad that there are people who think about these questions in such deep and diverse ways, and we can thank Jim Holt for being a patient, witty, insightful and poignant guide on this wonderful journey.

As the book's title suggests, the question that animates Holt is, "Why does the world exist?" By "the world," Holt means everything that exists, not just the Earth. Of course, Holt's question only makes sense if there are other possible ways things could have been, and Holt thinks that there are. In fact, there are infinitely many other alternative possibilities. The simplest is that nothing at all exists, and but there also are infinite variations on how an existing world could be, with different features and/or histories. So, given all of those possibilities, why do we have the world we have? Holt also is curious about why the world we live in has its many improbable features that have permitted intelligent life to emerge--does the unlikelihood of such a world provide evidence of a benign God who designed this world to support human life? The subtitle of the book is "An Existential Detective Story," and Holt is cast as the p.i. and leading scientists and philosophers are cast as the experts he consults to untangle the mystery. Holt got access to top-flight thinkers, so the conversations take place at a high level, but Holt does a masterful job explaining the background material so that an attentive reader can follow the twists and turns of the conversations. Holt generally doesn't go deeply into the science, so if you want a book that thoroughly explains, say, quantum physics or the big bang, you

should look elsewhere, but Holt provides enough background so that the reader can assess the pros and cons of the scientists' ideas about why the world exists. Holt generally provides more thorough explanations of philosophical theories that arise in the book. I am a professional philosopher, so I am better equipped to analyze how well he handles the philosophical parts of the book, and I'd say he acquits himself very well, showing a masterful ability to make these abstract and difficult philosophical ideas come alive. Like when tackling a detective novel, the reader spends much of our time inside the head of the p.i. (Holt) as he thinks through the mystery at the heart of the book, but Holt is not cogitating alone: Many chapters involve Holt interviewing prominent philosophers or scientists. Although Holt lets the other person drive the conversation, Holt is not just passively taking notes--he asks insightful and interesting questions and raises important objections. Holt is a generous conversationalist who is open to exploring ideas, however counter-intuitive and surprising they may be. At the end of the conversation, Holt tells the reader what he took away of value from the conversation, as more pieces of the puzzle of existence come into place. Near the end of the book, Holt offers his own answer to the question of why the world exists, an answer heavily influenced by the work of the English philosopher Derek Parfit, whom Holt talked to in the previous chapter. Has Holt unlocked the mystery of existence? That is for each reader to decide, but I found Holt's answer to be fascinating. Holt's book differs from most "academic" works of philosophy in that he personalizes the issues and thinkers. He ties our interest in nothingness to our fear of death, which is our own inevitable plunge into nothingness, and he probes the personalities and biographies of the scientists and philosophers he interviews for a window into why they gravitate to different types of answers about why the world exists. His "investigation" is as much about human hopes and fears as it is about the mysteries of existence, as we see when he copes with the death of his mother and of his pet and thinks about what it means for a conscious being to no longer exist, to return to the void. The only criticism I have of the book--a criticism that would make me drop the book's rating to 4.5 stars--is that its organization can be haphazard. This may be an inevitable byproduct of the author's method of talking with so many different people, but certain ideas, such as the physicists' concept of a "multi-verse," come up in different chapters where they get different partial explanations; the book would be clearer with a single, more comprehensive explanation earlier in the book. Indeed, I sometimes found myself thinking, "Didn't I read about this in an earlier chapter?" but not remembering exactly where. It can be hard to find those passages in earlier chapters because the chapter titles usually don't announce clearly whom Holt is talking to in that chapter. Because I had the Kindle edition of the book, the book's index, which references page numbers in the printed volume, was useless. (Of course, the Kindle edition has a search

function.)The copy of the Kindle edition looked clean to me. I noticed no typos, except for a possible mistake on the chart that Holt uses to explain Parfit's theory in chapter 12. I would like to look at the hardback copy of Holt's book to see whether the chart there matches the one in the Kindle.

Although this point will only be of interest to people who have read through chapter 12 of the book, I'm wondering whether it is an error that the arrow that goes from "Goodness" to "Axiarchic" is x'd out as circular. If anyone has any comments on that issue, please leave them here for me. So, if you're the least bit inclined to ask "the big questions" and want a readable, state-of-the-art introduction to where scientists and philosophers stand on trying to explain the most mind-boggling question of all, namely, why the world exists, you are fortunate to have Jim Holt as your tour guide through the intellectual wilderness. Beginners to science and philosophy and more experienced hands should all enjoy the trip.

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