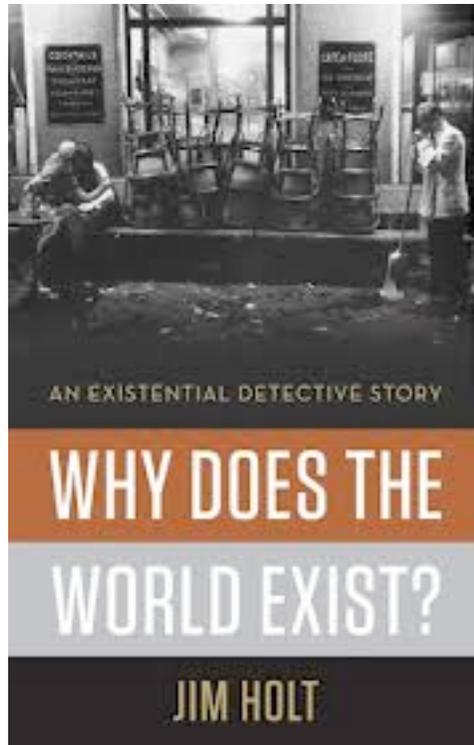


***Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* by Jim Holt
New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012.**



Book Review by Tom Lombardo

Why Does the World Exist? is exceedingly clear and well written. It is philosophically engaging and highly informative. And it artistically weaves together a personal narrative and quest with a deeply intellectual and highly abstract inquiry. All told, *Why Does the World Exist?* is one of the very best popular philosophy books I have ever read.

If any question were to be identified as the ultimate or most basic puzzle in the philosophical study of being or existence (ontology), it would probably be “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and this puzzle is the focus of Holt’s book. If you really think about question, which Holt’s book definitely provokes the reader into doing, it is a puzzle that can (and should) send one’s head spinning.

Throughout history innumerable thinkers have attempted to answer this question, and Holt examines many of their conclusions, both classical and contemporary, with a particular emphasis on the latter. Aside from religious, spiritual, and philosophical theories which attempt to explain “being” or “existence,” Holt also discusses a variety of

recent scientific ideas regarding the origin of the universe. The book is a great review of human thought on the question across the ages. I believe he is exceedingly clear in describing these various answers. He is just as clear why, one after another, he rejects the answers that have been provided throughout history and up to the present.

Early in the book, Holt sets out to first demonstrate that the question of “Why is there something rather than nothing” is meaningful. Something (the universe or being) did not have to exist--according to Holt, existence is contingent--and it is, at the very least, possible that nothing could exist. That is, nothing is logically possible. Indeed, for Holt, nothing is the simplest of all possible states, and consequently, “something” cries out for an explanation. Although I was not sufficiently convinced by Holt’s arguments that “nothing” is logically possible, intuitively I still agreed with Holt’s conclusion that the question of “Why is there something rather than nothing?” is a meaningful and valid question to ask.

Interspersed with a highly literary and sensory description of his travels across the globe, (Holt likes wine, good food, and scenic settings), as he searches out and converses with numerous philosophers, theologians, and scientists, Holt explains their views, as well as those of noteworthy historical figures who have grappled with the question as well. Along the way, we encounter the ideas of past thinkers, such as Aristotle, Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibnitz (whom Holt seems to greatly admire), Kant, Hegel, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, and Wittgenstein. In the now, we engage in debate and discussion with the contemporary philosophers, Adolf Grünbaum, Derek Parfit, and John Leslie, contemporary scientists and cosmologists David Deutsch, Roger Penrose, and Steven Weinberg, and even the great fictional writer John Updike.

Through an examination of these various thinkers’ ideas, as well as many others I have not mentioned, we grapple with: the meaning and wording of the question; the God hypothesis (and why Holt thinks it won’t work); the multiverse, the anthropic principle, and scientific hypothesis that something can arise out of nothing (Holt doesn’t agree with this hypothesis either); the ethical theory of existence--that existence is ethically required; and the Platonic idea of an abstract mathematical realm standing above the physical universe. Holt covers a plethora of ideas along the way and it makes for a fascinating read.

Toward the latter chapters especially, Holt introduces the mystery of consciousness, and ponders how the existence of consciousness enters into the perplexity of the origin and nature of being. Perhaps consciousness complicates the issue; perhaps consciousness and existence are connected; perhaps the issue of consciousness simplifies or reconfigures the whole puzzle of existence. Two things I am sure of though are: Pondering consciousness is as dizzying an experience as pondering existence, and the argument of Bishop Berkeley that “to be is to be perceived” has taken on a whole new meaning after finishing Holt’s book.

Does Holt answer the question of “Why does the world exist?” by the end of his book? Actually, Holt provides perhaps the clearest and most succinct answer at the beginning

of the book. By the time one arrives at the final pages of the book, Holt becomes more psychological, existential, and personal -- that is, philosophical in the deepest sense. The great ontological question penetrates to the core of his soul, engendering thoughts on the mortality of all of us. In the end Holt confronts and ponders the "nothingness" that hovers around the circumference of all being.

A great book. As enlightening on the idea of nothingness as on the idea of existence.