



A change of mind for Antony Flew

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Professor Antony Flew, 81 years old, is: 'a legendary British philosopher and atheist and has been an icon and champion for unbelievers for decades.'^[1] In his most famous book, *God and Philosophy*, Flew concluded:

Though as always subject to correction by further evidence and further argument, that the universe itself is ultimate; and, hence, that whatever science may from time to time hold to be the most fundamental laws of nature, must, equally provisionally, be taken as the last words in any series of answers to questions as to why things are as they are.^[2]

In other words, nature (probably) explains everything about itself that is explicable, and so there is no need to believe in any sort of Creator. One can read several debates in which Flew argues for atheism against Christian philosophers such as William Lane Craig, Gary R Habermas and Terry L Miethe.^[3] In recent years, Flew has been called: 'the world's most influential philosophical atheist.'^[4] Writing on the Secular Web, Richard Carrier acknowledges Flew as, 'one of the most renowned atheists of the 20th Century, even making the shortlist of "Contemporary Atheists" at About.com.'^[5]

The shortlist needs to be updated.^[6] Flew has changed his mind, and has let it be known that he is now a theist (at least in the broad sense of the term) because, 'the case for an Aristotelian God who has the characteristics of power and also intelligence, is now much stronger than it ever was before.'^[7]

Flew says that he simply, 'had to go where the

evidence leads.'^[8] His atheism truly was provisional and 'subject to correction by further evidence and further argument ...'^[9] 'It speaks very well of Professor Flew's honesty,' observes America's pre-eminent philosopher of religion, Alvin Plantinga. 'After all these years of opposing the idea of a Creator, he reverses his position on the basis of the evidence.'^[10]

Flew's change of mind is big news, 'not only about his personal journey, but also about the persuasive power of the arguments modern theists have been using to challenge atheistic naturalism'^[11], says philosopher Craig J. Hazen. Flew's acknowledgement of theism was greeted with not a little scepticism by some of his former atheistic comrades.^[12] In part, this scepticism has been fuelled by the fact that a rumour about Flew converting to Christianity hit the internet in 2001 and surfaced again in 2003. On each occasion, 'Flew refuted the claim personally ...'^[13] This time, however, Flew has personally confirmed that he is a convert to theism (not Christian theism), and the story has been covered by major news organizations such as ABC News^[14] and the BBC. If his new-found belief upsets people, well, 'that's too bad,' says Flew. 'My whole life has been guided by the principle of Plato's Socrates: Follow the evidence, wherever it leads.'^[15] As Jonathan Witt says, 'Those who admired [Flew's] intellect when he was an atheist should listen carefully to his reasoning now - for if a man suddenly becomes *persona non grata* for changing his mind, then the possibility of reasoned civil discourse withers.'^[16]

Tracing the News

I first heard about Flew's change of mind in June 2004, whilst attending the European Leadership Forum in Hungary. A number of well-placed sources said that Flew had recently come to believe in the existence of some kind of God, and that this shift in thinking was due in no small part to the kinds of arguments advanced by the Intelligent Design movement. Flew has since confirmed to The Associated Press that: 'his current ideas have some similarity with American "intelligent design" theorists, who see evidence for a guiding force in the construction of the universe. He accepts Darwinian evolution but doubts it can explain the ultimate origins of life.'^[17]

Then, in a letter to *Philosophy Now* magazine (Issue 47, August / September 2004, p. 22, cf. www.philosophynow.org), Flew pointed out, 'the limits of the negative theological implications of Darwin's Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection.'^[18] Quoting from Darwin, Flew noted that the theory of evolution by natural selection does not account for the origin of life, and observed that: 'Probably Darwin himself believed that life was miraculously breathed into that primordial form of not always consistently reproducing life by God . . .'^[19] Flew also said that:

'The evidential situation of natural (as opposed to revealed) theology has been transformed in the more than fifty years since Watson and Crick won the Nobel Prize for their discovery of the double helix structure of DNA. It has become inordinately difficult even to begin to think about constructing a naturalistic theory of the evolution of that first reproducing organism.'^[20]

Flew recommended two books that tackle this issue from a theistic perspective. The first book was Roy Abraham Varghese's *The Wonderful World: A Journey from Modern Science to the Mind of God* (Fountain Hills, Arizona: Tyr Publishing, 2003) [cf. www.thewonderoftheworld.com/]. The second book was Gerald L Schroeder's *The Hidden Face of God: Science Reveals the Ultimate Truth* (Touchstone, New York 2001).

Flew ended with what the editor of *Philosophy Now* called his 'tantalising comments' by writing:

Anyone who should happen to want to know what I myself now believe will have to wait until the publication, promised for early 2005, by Prometheus of Amherst, NY, of the final edition of my *God and Philosophy* with a new introduction of it as 'an historical relic'. That book was a study of the arguments for Christian theism, first published in 1966 ... My own commitment then as a philosopher who was also a religious unbeliever was and remains that of Plato's Socrates: 'We must follow the argument wherever it leads.'

Yours, Antony Flew.

If Flew's letter didn't actually say he had come to

believe in God, it was a very heavy hint.

On 9 October 2004, American philosopher J P Moreland noted Flew's conversion to belief in God on national television, whilst arguing for theism in an episode of *Faith Under Fire*, hosted by journalist and Christian apologist Lee Strobel.^[21]

Following up the Varghese connection threw more light on Flew's thinking. In his review of Varghese's book, Flew refers to a point 'made in an Introduction for a possible new and final edition of my *God and Philosophy*':

First, a substantial case of agreement. Richard Dawkins has famously asserted that 'Natural selection ... the blind automatic process which Darwin has discovered ... we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life.' Against that claim I pointed out, after quoting a significant sentence from the fourteenth and final chapter of *The Origin of Species*, that one place where, until a satisfactory naturalistic explanation has been developed, there would appear to be room for an Argument to Design is at the first emergence of living from non-living matter. And, unless that first living matter already possessed the capacity to reproduce itself genetically, there will still be room for a second argument to Design until a satisfactory explanation is found for its acquisition of that capacity. You have in your book deployed abundant evidence indicating that it is likely to be a very long time before such naturalistic explanations are developed, if indeed there ever could be.

Our disagreements begin with any shift from the God of natural theology to the God of a Revelation. For the writings of Aristotle, which ultimately supplied Aquinas with most of his arguments for the existence of his God, contain no definition of the word 'God' and no concept of an omniscient and omnipotent personal Being unceasingly observing human thought and human conduct, much less a concept of a Being demanding our obedience and threatening us with an eternity of extreme torture for what He insists on perceiving as our unnecessitated and unforgiven disobedience. So the five Aristotelian arguments which Aquinas famously offered as proofs of the existence of the Christian God are surely today more appropriately to be seen as

arguments for the existence of a Spinozistic or Deistic 'God of Nature' who or which leaves Nature and its creatures (including its human creatures) entirely to their own devices. The nearest which Aristotle ever came to the God or Gods of Christianity or Islam was when in the Nicomachean Ethics (X, viii, 8) he argued that 'if as is generally believed, [not God but] the gods exercise some superintendence over human affairs, it is reasonable to suppose that they take pleasure in that part of man which is best and most akin to themselves, namely the intellect, and that they recompense with their favours those who esteem and honour this most because these care for the things dear to themselves and act rightly and nobly. Now it is clear that all these attributes belong most of all to the wise man. He therefore is most beloved by the gods, and, if so, he is naturally most happy.' Antony Flew.[22]

While Flew restricts the design argument to situations where no 'satisfactory naturalistic explanation has been developed' (something that not all design argument advocates, let alone all theists, would agree with), it is significant to find Flew arguing against Dawkins that natural selection does not explain the existence of life, affirming that there is today no satisfactory naturalistic explanation for the first emergence of living from non-living matter, or for the capacity of life to reproduce itself genetically, and observing that there isn't even any sign of such an explanation on the horizon 'if indeed there ever could be.'

In a recording of the 2004 symposium 'Has Science Discovered God', organised by *The Institute for Metascientific Research*, Professor Flew says: 'What I think the DNA material has done is show that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements together ... The enormous complexity by which the results were achieved look to me like the work of intelligence.'[23]

Together with an increasing number of scholars, Flew believes that the prospects of a satisfactory naturalistic explanation for certain facets of biological reality are dim ('It has become inordinately difficult even to begin to think about constructing a naturalistic theory of the evolution of that first reproducing organism').[24] He also thinks that the best explanation of the evidence is

to posit some form of intelligent design, even 'the God of natural theology' (Flew only parts company from Varghese, 'with any shift from the God of natural theology to the God of a Revelation').

However, while it was clear from Flew's review of Varghese that he now believes in a God, it was still unclear exactly what sort of God Flew has in mind. One source reported that Flew had described himself to a mutual contact as a 'minimal deist' (a deist is usually defined as someone who believes in a God who created the universe but then left creation to its own devices).

Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism

Clarity on the question of the nature of Flew's theism is provided by an exclusive and wide ranging interview Flew has given to *Philosophia Christi*, one of the top-circulating philosophy of religion journals in the world.[25] The interviewer was Christian philosopher and historian Dr. Gary R. Habermas, a Professor of Philosophy and Theology who is on the editorial board of *Philosophia Christi*, and a long standing personal friend of Flew: 'despite their years of disagreement on the existence of God.'[26]

Philosophia Christi reveals that 'certain philosophical and scientific considerations were causing [Flew] to do some serious rethinking'[27] on the God question as long ago as January 2003: 'He characterised his position as that of atheism standing in tension with several huge question marks.'[28] Then, 'in January 2004, Flew informed Habermas that he had indeed become a theist. While still rejecting the concept of special revelation, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic, nonetheless he had concluded that theism was true.'[29]

The title of the article presenting Flew's interview with Habermas is: 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew.' So what of 'minimal deism'? Asked whether his view might be called deism Flew replies:

Yes, absolutely right. What Deists, such as the Mr. Jefferson who drafted the American Declaration of Independence, believed was that, while reason, mainly in the form of arguments to

design, assures us that there is a God, there is no room either for any supernatural revelation of that God or for any transactions between that God and individual human beings.[30]

It seems that Flew is prepared to accept the label 'Deist' on the grounds that deists believe in God but neither revelation nor relational transactions between God and individuals concerning salvation or any afterlife. Indeed, Flew says: 'I am open to ... but not enthusiastic about potential revelation from God.'[31]

Flew also clarifies his comments about Spinoza's God made in his review of Varghese: 'for me the most important thing about Spinoza is not what he says but what he does not say. He does not say that God has any preferences either about or any intentions concerning human behaviour or about the eternal destinies of human beings.'[32] Hence Flew is not implying, with some interpreters of Spinoza, that God is pantheistic (i.e. that everything is God).

The 'minimal' part of Flew's deism may stem from the fact that Flew is not committed to the goodness of God, being unconvinced by the moral argument for God,[33] and noting that 'what Aristotle had to say about justice ... was very much a human idea'[34] that had nothing to do with God. Regarding J P Moreland's use of Flew's change of mind in support of belief in the supernatural, Flew has said: 'my God is not his ... Mine is emphatically not good (or evil) or interested in human conduct.'[35] Flew reports how, 'as a schoolboy of fifteen years, it first appeared to me that the thesis that the universe was created and is sustained by a Being of infinite power and goodness is flatly incompatible with the occurrence of massive undeniable and undenied evil in that universe ...'[36] Flew's belief in a God who is not defined as being infinitely good is compatible with his belief that the logical problem of evil is a sound argument because that argument only claims to rule out the existence of a God who has infinite power and goodness (and knowledge).[37]

However, Flew's position is not deistic if one defines deism in terms of rejecting the belief that God has acted as a primary cause (as opposed to acting via secondary causes) within creation. This is because Flew now posits God as the best

explanation for the origin of evolvable life. He does not accept the view of theistic evolutionists that nature has the capacity to produce evolvable life-forms using only its God-given resources. Flew says that naturalistic efforts have never succeeded in producing 'a plausible conjecture as to how any of these complex molecules might have evolved from simple entities.'[38] Flew observes: 'I think that the most impressive arguments for God's existence are those that are supported by recent scientific discoveries ... I think the argument to Intelligent Design is enormously stronger than it was when I first met it.'[39] Flew returns to his critique of Richard Dawkins:

It seems to me that Richard Dawkins constantly overlooks the fact that Darwin himself, in the fourteenth chapter of *The Origin of Species*, pointed out that his whole argument began with a being which already possessed reproductive powers. This is the creature the evolution of which a truly comprehensive theory of evolution must give some account. Darwin himself was well aware that he had not produced such an account. It now seems to me that the finding of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design.[40]

Flew also tentatively mentions that: 'There does seem to be a reason for a First Cause',[41] which implies 'creation "in the beginning"'[42], although he is 'not at all sure how much we have to explain here.'[43]

Conclusion

It is now clear that Flew has become a philosophical theist – someone who believes in the existence of a God (a transcendent intelligence of perhaps infinite power but not infinite goodness) who created the cosmos and has acted within it, although not to produce any supernatural revelation, or to interact with humans on an individual basis concerning any scheme of salvation or any sort of life after death. The primary reason Flew has become a theist is that scientific evidence has convinced him that the origin of life required intelligent design. In Flew's assessment, the scientific data indicates that one cannot argue, as he once argued, that 'it does not seem ... that there is any good evidence [to]

postulate anything behind or beyond this natural universe'[44] and that 'the most fundamental laws of nature, must ... be taken as the last words in any series of answers to questions as to why things are as they are.'[45] Instead, Flew now argues that there is good reason to 'postulate something behind or beyond the natural universe' precisely because the 'fundamental laws of nature' cannot 'be taken as the last word in all series of answers to questions about why things are as they are'. Specifically, this can not be done with regard to the origin of life.

On the one hand, says Flew, naturalistic efforts have failed to provide 'a plausible conjecture as to how any of these complex molecules might have evolved from simple entities',[46] and, 'It has become inordinately difficult even to begin to think about constructing a naturalistic theory of the evolution of that first reproducing organism.'[47] On the other hand, 'The enormous complexity by which the results were achieved looks to me like the work of intelligence.'[48] As Jonathan Witt comments:

Such evidence has drawn Flew from atheism to a non-specific theism. He isn't ready to accept the God of a particular religion, nor does he believe in an afterlife. The change is, nevertheless, significant. He no longer inhabits a worldview where the miraculous and the irrational are synonymous.

The amazing complexity of even the simplest cell; the information-bearing properties of DNA; the exquisite fine-tuning of the laws and constants of physics that make organic life possible ... these signs of intelligence do not compel our belief in a God who thundered from Mount Sinai, lay in a manger or hung from a cross. But the evidence does have metaphysical implications, drawing us to a still place of wonder where such notions can be reasonably entertained.[49]

Recommended Reading

Greg Bahnsen, 'The Problem of Evil'

Joe Carter, 'Antony Flew and the Flight from Atheism: Part I'

Joe Carter, 'Antony Flew and the Flight from Atheism: Part II'

Catholic World News, 'Famed Atheist Concedes: Evidence Points to God'

Kelly James Clark, 'I Believe in God, the Father, Almighty'

William Lane Craig, 'The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality'

Antony Flew, 'Letter From Antony Flew on Darwinism and Theology', *Philosophy Now*, (Issue 47, August/September 2004, p. 22)

Craig J. Hazen, Gary R. Habermas & Antony Flew, 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew'

Stephen C. Meyer, 'DNA and Other Designs'

Roy Abraham Varghese, *The Wonder of the World*

Peter S. Williams, 'Intelligent Design Theory – An Overview'

Michael J. Behe, William A. Dembski & Stephen C. Meyer, *Science and Evidence for Design in the Universe*, (Proceedings of the Wethersfield Institute, 2000)

Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, (Prometheus, 2005)

R. Douglas Geivett & Gary R. Habermas (ed.'s), *In Defence of Miracles*, (Apollos, 1997) (Includes a chapter by Antony Flew arguing against miracles and a response by Norman L. Geisler)

Gary R. Habermas & Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?: The Resurrection Debate*, (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003)

Roy Abraham Varghese, *The Wonder of the World: A Journey from Modern Science to the Mind of God*, (Fountain Hills, Arizona: Tyr Publishing, 2003)

Stan W. Wallace (ed.), *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*, (Ashgate, 2003)

Footnotes

[1] Craig J. Hazen, Preface to the pre-publication release of **'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew'**

[2] Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, second edition, (Hutchinson of London, 1966), p. 194.

[3] cf. Stan W. Wallace (ed.), *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*, (Ashgate, 2003); Gary R. Habermas & Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?: The Resurrection Debate*, (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003); Terry L. Miethe & Antony Flew, *Does God Exist?*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991)

[4] Comment quoted by Gary R. Habermas, 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew', *op cit.*

[5] Richard Carrier, **'Antony Flew Considers God. . . Sort Of'**

[6] cf. **'Contemporary Atheists'**

[7] Antony Flew, 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew', *op cit.*

[8] *ibid.*

[9] Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, second edition, (Hutchinson of London, 1966), p. 194.

[10] Alvin Plantinga, **'World's Most Famous Atheist Accepts Existence of God, Cites Modern Science!'**

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' (2001)

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[16] Jonathan Witt, **'Entertaining the notion of a place of wonder'**

[17] ABC News, *op cit.*

[18] **'Letter From Antony Flew on Darwinism and Theology'**, *Philosophy Now'*

[19] *ibid.*

[20] *ibid.*

[21] cf. www.faithunderfire.com

[22] www.thewonderoftheworld.com

[23] **'World's Most Famous Atheist Accepts Existence of God, Cites Modern Science'**, *op cit.*

[24] cf. www.discovery.org, www.arn.org/docs2/news/100scientists0929.htm

[25] cf. www.biola.edu/philchristi

[26] Hazen, Preface to the pre-publication release of **'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew'**, *op cit.*

[27] **'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew.'**

[28] **'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew'**, *op cit.*

[29] *ibid.*

[30] Flew, *ibid.*

[31] *ibid.*

[32] *ibid.*

[33] cf. **William Lane Craig**, 'The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality'

[34] Flew, *op cit.*

[35] Carrier, *op cit.*

[36] Flew, *op cit.*

[37] **On the problem of evil**, cf. **Greg Bahnsen**, 'The Problem of Evil'; **Kelly James Clark**, 'I Believe in God, the Father, Almighty'; **Gregory Koukl**, 'Evil as Evidence for God' (free registration necessary); **Peter Kreeft**, *The Problem of Evil*; **Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.)**, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1996); **John Perry**, *Dialogue on Good, Evil, and the Existence of God*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999)

[38] **Antony Flew**, 'God and the Big Bang', (Lecture, 2000).

[39] **Flew**, 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew', *op cit.*

[40] *ibid.*

[41] *ibid.*

[42] *ibid.*

[43] *ibid.*

[44] **Antony Flew**, in debate, quoted by 'World's Most Famous Atheist Accepts Existence of God, Cites Modern Science', *op cit.*

[45] **Antony Flew**, *God and Philosophy*, second edition, (Hutchinson of London, 1966), p. 194.

[46] **Flew**, 'My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew' , *op cit.*

[47] **Antony Flew**, *Philosophy Now*, Issue 47, August/September 2004, p. 22.

[48] **Antony Flew**, quoted by 'World's Most Famous Atheist Accepts Existence of God, Cites Modern Science', *op cit.*

[49] **Witt**, *op cit.*

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