THE NEW ATHEISM

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Antony Flew (1923–2010) was one of the most important English speaking philosophers of the twentieth century. Over the course of his long career, Flew taught at Oxford, Aberdeen, Keele, and Reading, and lectured all over the world. He authored dozens of works, including “Theology and Falsification,” God and Philosophy, An Introduction to Western Philosophy, Darwinian Evolution, The Presumption of Atheism, and God: A Critical Inquiry. Flew’s philosophical interests were varied, but his career is widely known to be dedicated to the articulation and defense of atheism. Flew was a committed atheist for over fifty years, arguing that religious language was essentially meaningless. Theistic claims suffered from the need for qualifications to a fatal extent. Moreover, the problem of evil did not fit into the traditional theistic system in which God was all powerful and all loving. Further, Flew had followed English common law tradition by arguing that the atheist makes a negative assertion (no God exists), and thus does not carry the burden of proof. The burden of proof instead is borne by the theist, who is making a positive assertion (God exists). Therefore, Flew had claimed that the responsibility for providing justification for belief falls on the theist, while the atheist holds the default position.

Recently, however, Flew abandoned atheism and adopted a deistic form of theistic belief. After years of considering the philosophical question of the existence of God through teaching, writing, lecturing, and debating, Flew confided to Gary Habermas of Liberty University in 2003 that he was an atheist “with big questions.”1 This, of course, was welcome news for Habermas, a Christian philosopher and apologist who had developed a friendship with Flew after many years of debating the issue of the resurrection of Jesus with him. Later, in January 2004, Flew told Habermas that he had indeed changed his mind and become a theist. Still, Habermas reported that Flew “quickly [added], however, that he was ‘not the revelatory kind’ of believer.”2

2Ibid.
That is, Flew was clear from the beginning that he was not converting to Christianity. Instead, he was affirning deism, accepting the attribute of divine transcendence while rejecting divine immanence.

Flew began giving interviews describing his move from atheism to theism, including one to Habermas which appeared in *Philosophia Christi* in 2004 and to James A. Beverly of *Christianity Today* in 2005. His *There Is a God* appeared in 2007 and serves as a comprehensive statement of Flew’s journey from atheism to theism. Along with Flew’s description of how he became a theist, the work includes a preface penned by Roy Abraham Varghese. The preface briefly describes Varghese’s association with Flew followed by a short account of atheist responses to Flew. The book closes with two appendices, one written by Varghese and the other by N.T. Wright. Varghese’s appendix is a critique of “new atheism” and a defense of theistic belief. N.T. Wright’s appendix is a defense of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. While these essays are not directly related to the account of Flew’s move from atheism to theism, both appendices were included in the work at Flew’s request because he believed they would complement his stated reasons for turning away from atheism. He stated, “I included both appendices in this book because they are both examples of the kind of reasoning that led me to change my mind about God’s existence” (160).

In the preface to *There Is a God*, Varghese noted that Richard Dawkins wrote disparaging remarks about Flew’s shift of belief and even seemed to attack him personally. Dawkins used the term “tergiversation” to describe Flew’s abandonment of atheism and attributed Flew’s actions to his age. Dawkins was not the only person in the atheist camp to react this way to Flew. Atheist critiques of Flew are numerous, considering Flew’s undeniable influence on the intellectual advancement of atheism. There was also a significant response from the believing community. What is it exactly that Flew claimed in his book? How has Flew’s book been received? What is the significance and value of this work? These questions will be addressed in the following paragraphs. Flew’s work is valuable in that it underscores the importance of honestly asking and answering the right questions on the appropriate basis. Contrary to how some believers may wish to see it, Flew’s work does not represent the triumph of theistic over atheistic arguments, nor does it represent any triumph of Christianity over secularism. But it does explain what occurs in one atheist’s mind when the starting point for the question of the universe’s origins is no longer the material universe itself.

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In the ten chapters of *There Is a God*, Flew addressed five broad issues: 1) the content of his belief at the time of writing; 2) the content of his prior beliefs; 3) the reasons for changing those beliefs; 4) the specific aspects of theism that he accepted; and 5) the extent to which he was willing to develop his theism. First, Flew declared at the outset, “I now believe there is a God” (1). Following this clear and concise statement of belief, Flew stressed that he was neither losing his mind, nor was he experiencing a “deathbed conversion” nor “placing Pascalian bets” (2). In an effort to give an answer to those wondering what happened to the philosopher Flew of years past, he maintained that he did not accept the idea of an afterlife and noted that he had changed his mind before on other topics. For example, he had once been a Marxist as well as a determinist, but changed those beliefs upon further consideration. His most recent change of mind from belief in atheism to theism was driven by the Socratic admonition to follow the argument wherever it leads.

Flew began the book by describing his atheism and what influenced him to come to this belief. He felt it was important to provide some context for the abandonment of atheism which he held and defended for so long. He wrote, “Since this is a book about why I changed my mind about the existence of God, an obvious question would be what I believed before the ‘change’ and why” (3). In describing how he became an atheist, Flew explained his upbringing in the home of a Methodist minister in England in the 1920s and 30s. It was not until he was fifteen that he settled on atheism, largely because he could not reconcile the evil in the world with an all powerful and all loving God. He kept his atheism a secret for as long as he could, but as often happens, his secret became known. Word of his beliefs managed to get to his family by the time he was twenty-three. He went on to describe key experiences and influences in his early career, such as how he discovered Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language at Oxford and his visits to the Socratic Club, presided over by C.S. Lewis. It was at the Socratic Club that Flew first attempted to critique theism by presenting his paper, “Theology and Falsification” in 1950, a paper which was influenced by the new philosophy of language.

In that paper, Flew set out to question the linguistic basis for the claim that God exists. When a theist makes a claim for the existence of a non-corporeal being, that claim cannot be verified or falsified. When theists claim that this non-corporeal being loves each person individually, they are again making a claim that cannot be demonstrated in observable reality. Flew wrote of any claim affirming God’s existence, “It effectively becomes empty. I concluded that a ‘fine, brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications’” (44). At this point, he was not making any categorical statements about the truth or falsity of theistic claims. He was simply attempting to compel believers to show how their theistic claims could make sense in the observable world.

By 1966, Flew had written *God and Philosophy*, a work which sought to question the coherence of theism. How could God be identified? In what
way could God be described meaningfully in human language? How are the attributes of God reconciled with facts of the universe that seem to count against them? Of further challenge to theism, how could God actually be separate from the universe which He is said to have created? And how could God as an immutable entity, separate from his creation, be actively involved in the space–time continuum? Flew was convinced that these were intractable problems for theists. Flew wrote that, “drawing on David Hume and other like-minded thinkers, I argued that the design, cosmological, and moral arguments for God’s existence are invalid. I also tried to show that it was impossible validly to infer from a particular religious experience that it had as its object a transcendent divine being” (49).

While Flew’s earlier works were influential, perhaps his most important defense of atheism was The Presumption of Atheism (1976). In this work, he argued that the burden of proof for the question on God’s existence lay squarely with the theist. In this, Flew claimed to be following in English common law tradition and the presumption of innocence. A positive claim of guilt in common law carries the burden of proof, while the negative claim of innocence does not. Similarly, the positive claim of theism—that God exists—carries the burden to present reasonable grounds for the claim while the negative claim of atheism—that no God exists—corresponds with a claim of innocence in an English court. It is the default position, and thus does not carry the burden of proof. Since he was convinced that theism could produce no sufficient grounds for belief, it failed to carry its burden and was thus unpersuasive.

It was in the course of debates Flew conducted with Christian theists from 1950 to 1998 that he slowly but surely experienced a shift in belief as the arguments led him toward theism. For example, in a 1985 debate with Terry Miethe of the Oxford Study Center, Miethe presented a form of the cosmological argument that, as Flew described it, “rested not on the principle of sufficient reason, which I rejected, but on the principle of existential causality” (71). Flew conceded that this form of the cosmological argument was helpful in explaining the big bang, which would require a finite universe with a definite beginning. This was an idea that Flew had earlier rejected, believing instead that the universe had no beginning.

By the time of his 1998 debate with William Lane Craig, Flew had come to the conclusion that humans possessed moral freedom. He believed that this fact was contradictory to what he viewed as a central tenet of a theistic system, namely predestination. His understanding of predestination was “that God predestines the damnation of most human beings” and he was thus “repulsed” by it (73). Flew seemed surprised by Craig’s position on predestination, since Craig seemed to deny its necessity to theism. Flew wrote, “An important feature of this debate was Craig’s rejection of traditional predestinarian ideas and his defense of libertarian free will. Craig held that God acts directly on effects and not on the secondary agents, and thus it was impossible for God to create a world of genuinely libertarian creatures who
always do the right thing” (73).5 This position seemed helpful in explaining the coherence of theism in the context of the problem of evil. Flew also seemed taken by Craig’s stated view, namely that God desired that all should be saved. The fact that this understanding of human freedom and divine sovereignty was consistent with the Methodist understanding doubtless was not lost on Flew, having been reared in a Methodist home.

By the time he presented himself at his next debate six years later with Gerald Schroeder and John Haldane, Flew had abandoned atheism. Flew made the announcement of his departure from atheism at this debate in May 2004. It is unclear from the book how much of an influence the 1998 debate had on Flew’s shift, but his experience there seems to have been important. What is clear is that Flew was deeply impressed with the complexity demonstrated within the system of the DNA molecule and the apparent intelligence required by such a system. He asserted that science has shown at least three sufficient grounds for theism: 1) nature obeys laws; 2) life is understood in terms of telos; and 3) the very existence of nature.

Still, Flew stressed at this point, that as convincing as science was, science alone was not sufficient to persuade him to change his beliefs. He wrote, “I have also been helped by a renewed study of the classical philosophical arguments” (89). Philosophy explains the meaning of the facts that science uncovers. In asking the questions related to the origin of the laws of nature, of life, and of the universe, Flew realized that to reach satisfactory conclusions he would have to think as a philosopher. He said that his concern was not ultimately with “this or that fact of chemistry or genetics, but with the fundamental question of what it means for something to be alive and how this relates to the body of chemical and genetic facts viewed as a whole” (90). He would have to go beyond the facts of science to answer such questions. So, Flew changed his starting point, which in turn, changed his answers to the question of origins. As an atheist, Flew’s starting point for the question of origins was the material universe itself. Later as a theist, his starting point became “the God of the monotheistic religions” (92). Again, as an atheist, Flew was willing to allow for non-life to generate life spontaneously from random processes because he was starting from the non-living, material universe. But later he realized the absurdity of such a notion. Flew asked the question, “How can a universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and `coded chemistry’?” (124). Flew understood that science apart from philosophy, specifically theistic belief, cannot meaningfully answer a question like that.

In abandoning atheism in favor of theism, just what species of theism was Flew adopting? That is, perhaps, the most important question in

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5Flew seemed to mean that Craig does not hold to a determinist or Calvinist view of predestination. However, this is not to say that Craig does not hold to any view of predestination. Craig has repeatedly affirmed that divine foreknowledge and human (libertarian) freedom are compatible. See, for example, William Lane Craig, The Only Wise God (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
the mind of theists. First, Flew accepted the reality of a transcendent, non-corporeal Being willfully acting upon a world from which he was separate and distinct. While Flew had earlier rejected such a notion as incoherent, later he accepted it. As Flew described it, this Being can act “as an agent outside space and time that uniquely executes its intentions in the spatio-temporal continuum” (153–54). Second, Flew’s theism is arrived at solely by reason, and not through faith. Flew wrote that reason “has led me to accept the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being” (155). In other words, Flew was persuaded by scientific and philosophical arguments to theistic belief, not by traditional religious means such as special revelation. Third, Flew’s conception of God is an Aristotelian one, the God of deism. This God is not immanent. God’s relationship to and activity in the universe is transcendent. This is not to say that Flew claimed it was impossible for God to communicate on a personal, self-revelatory level, but only that, as best he could tell, God has not done so. Such communication would remain a distinct possibility for Flew, because it was not precluded by reason.

How has the secular community reacted to Flew’s change of mind? Described simply, the reaction has been strenuous and vociferous. There are a few noteworthy aspects that recur in several pieces responding to Flew, including 1) assertions that Flew’s advanced age has handicapped his mental acuity; 2) Flew was manipulated by various Christians including Habermas, John Haldane, Gerald Schroeder, Richard Swinburne, Varghese, and even Biola University—most of whom supposedly feigned friendship for Flew while possessing nefarious intentions; 3) Flew did not actually write any of There Is a God, and possibly did not even know what it contained upon publication; and 4) Flew appealed to a God-of-the-gaps argument, thereby committing the argumentum ad ignorantiam fallacy.

Points one, two, and three each amount to ad hominem attacks. Examples for these kinds of statements are found in Dawkins’ work God Delusion, but also in an article by Mark Oppenheimer, which appeared in The New York Times on 4 November 2007. Oppenheimer’s piece is an attempt to discredit There Is a God by postulating sinister motives on the part of Habermas, Schroeder, Haldane, and Varghese. These men are presented as scholars in name only, who manipulated Flew—a mere shell of the great thinker he once was—into abandoning a lifelong career of responsible atheistic philosophy and embracing what amounted to a simpleton’s worldview which relies on superstition and fairy tales to explain cosmology. Oppenheimer cited Dawkins and Paul Kurtz: “‘He once was a great philosopher,’ Richard Dawkins . . . told a Virginia audience last year. ‘It’s very sad.’ Paul Kurtz of Prometheus Books says he thinks Flew is being exploited. ‘They’re misusing him,’ Kurtz says, referring to the Christians. ‘They’re worried about atheists, and they’re trying to find an atheist to be on their side.’” They found one, and with less
difficulty than atheists would have guessed.” Describing a video produced in May of 2004 in which Flew appeared with Schroeder and Haldane, Oppenheimer wrote,

Under their prodding, Flew concedes that the Big Bang could be described in Genesis; that the complexity of DNA strongly points to an “intelligence”; and that the existence of evil is not an insurmountable problem for the existence of God. In short, Flew retracts decades’ worth of conclusions on which he built his career. At one point, Haldane is noticeably smiling, embarrassed (or pleased) by Flew’s acquiescence.7

Gottlieb Anthony is another writer who called Flew’s lucidity into question, as well as the virtue of Varghese’s intentions, and his credibility as a scholar. Anthony dismissed Varghese’s earlier published works, The Wonder of the World and God Sent: A History of the Accredited Apparitions of Mary as “wondrous apparitions and the Sci Fi Channel”8 and asserted that Varghese was the true author of There Is a God, with Flew having nothing substantial to do with the project. He wrote, “Instead of trying to construct a coherent chain of reasoning in Flew’s own words, the authors present a case that often consists of an assemblage of reassuring sound bites excerpted from the writings of scientists, popularizers of science and philosophers.”9

Interestingly enough, neither Oppenheimer nor Anthony offered much substantive critique of Flew’s arguments. Their only critiques of Flew’s justification for his theism appear in the form of generalizations made about the book’s structure, the aesthetics of its form and prose, and the dismay at the change in Flew’s conclusions about atheism. The bulk of their work seems to be aimed at discrediting those Christians who helped with the project, Christians who were associates and friends of Flew, and even Flew himself. It is as if they meant to destroy the reputations of anyone coming to the conclusion that God is a rational explanation for reality.

Kenneth Grubbs also speculated on the motives and credibility of Varghese and others in the production of Flew’s work. To his credit, Grubbs did question the relevance of such speculation but then went on to indulge in a substantial amount of that which he called irrelevant. The thrust of his critique is that Flew inappropriately appealed to a God-of-the-gaps argument. Flew’s wonder at the structure and function of the DNA molecule, the apparent purpose inherent in life forms, and the fine tuning of the universe


7Ibid.


9Ibid.
each pointing to a transcendent God are all descriptors of the way things are, not evidence leading to a conclusion, according to Grubbs. He wrote, “the unspoken conclusion we are to infer is, what else could it be, but God? . . . The logic proffered fails as an argument because it requires us to accept the lack of knowledge as knowledge, and the lack of evidence as evidence. This is Argumentum ad Ignorantiam, or, appeal to ignorance. . . . This argument is invalid.”

On the surface, this critique seems strong. But it must be remembered that Flew’s justification for his belief in God, while drawing on science, does not rely on science without philosophy. The questions of the origin of the laws of nature, of life, and of the universe are of a different order than questions of their composition. Flew recognized this important fact, and this is what accounts for Flew’s abandonment of atheism—not an appeal to God-of-the-gaps.

Even if Flew did make this appeal, there is no necessary error in doing so when dealing with the question of origins. Certainly, appealing to God-of-the-gaps out of sheer laziness would be irrational. However, it appears that Grubbs’ critique of Flew and rejection of the design argument was based on an a priori commitment to naturalism. Grubbs asserted that “So desperate are we to understand the universe . . . that for untold centuries we have refused to accept any ‘gap’ in that understanding.”

But according to William Dembski, it is not necessary to reject completely appeals to God-of-the-gaps as explanations of reality. Dembski wrote,

There is no compelling reason why . . . we should in every instance be able, even in principle, to tell a gapless naturalistic narrative. Nor is it the case that the God-of-the-gaps always constitutes a fallacy. Indeed the fallacy arises only if an ordinary explanation suffices where an extraordinary explanation was previously invoked. But that ordinary explanations should always have this capacity cannot be justified. Whether an extraordinary explanation is appropriate depends on the event that needs to be explained and the circumstances surrounding the event.

Grubbs’ critique fails in its goal of defeating Flew’s inference of God from the complexity of the universe because he has refused to be open to any supernatural explanation, even if that is the best explanation. Dembski wrote, “to suppose that all the gaps in extraordinary explanations must be fillable by natural causes cannot be justified.”

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11Ibid., 35.
13Ibid., 245.
door to appealing to God-of-the-gaps arguments on questions of nature's composition. For these kinds of questions, naturalistic explanations are to be expected. But as Flew recognized, questions of origins are of a metaphysical nature, and there is no possible way naturalistic methods will suffice to explain the existing gaps in knowledge. Here is where the explanation of God does suffice and indeed, is the only viable explanation.

The debate over the existence of God has not been closed by Flew’s book. While assertions are made by theists and atheists alike, there will always be responses to those assertions. Some of those assertions and responses will be fair and intelligent, others not so. Taking this reality into account, what is the value of Flew’s book?

First, examine how his approach to the question of the origin of the universe and the existence of God developed and matured over time. For most of his career, Flew approached the question as every atheist must. His starting point for answering the question was the universe itself. Flew would have been in agreement with Victor Stenger, who in his 2005 critique of Flew wrote, “There is no reason why the physical universe cannot be it’s [sic] own first cause.” When using the universe as the starting point for answering the question of origins and the existence of God, certainly the atheistic argument that there is no God is valid. If the universe is truly all that there is, if matter comprises the sum of reality, if naturalism is the only logical explanation for existence, and if the mind is merely the brain, then atheism is a viable option. What if, however, the starting point for answering the question of origins and God’s existence were not the universe itself, but something or Someone transcending the universe? This is exactly Flew’s point in his parable of the satellite phone found by native islanders in chapter four of his work. The confused scientists of the primitive island civilization were all perplexed by the voices coming from the phone, and believed that the voices were part of its physical workings. The lone sage challenged the scientists to use a different starting point when trying to account for the voices. Rather than start with the actual phone to ascertain what these voices actually were, why not start from the notion that the voices were not part of the phone at all, but consisted in a reality separate from the phone, and could actually be contacted? That is the contribution Flew has made to the conversation about origins and God’s existence. When approaching this question, one must not rule out supernatural explanations from a naturalistic a priori commitment. One must follow Flew’s lead, as he followed where the evidence led him.

One final word of warning to evangelical Christians prior to becoming too enamored with Flew. It must be remembered that Flew’s theism is weak. Flew defined his position as deism, and it is an anemic version of deism at that. Flew did not claim that God was active and involved in daily events. Furthermore, this God was not concerned in the least with morality.

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or obedience on the part of humanity. This ought to be of concern to evangelicals. William Schweiker of the University of Chicago reminded his readers that Flew’s newfound theism is nothing more than a philosophical postulate. The result of Flew’s brand of theism is a baptized atheism, a theism that has zero practical relevance. Schweiker wrote, “the equation of God just with intelligent purpose might in fact strip the idea of God of any genuine religious significance.” Schweiker’s point is that Flew’s belief in God’s existence, at least as he articulated it in Aristotelian terms, may merely be atheism in “another guise.”

Still, Flew’s theism was the result of his being guided by reason, so we see in his change of mind a successful effort of natural theology and apologetic argumentation in bringing a person to belief in God, so to speak. For this, we evangelicals can be thankful. Flew’s stated move from atheism to theism based on the evidence of design and purpose in the universe is powerful as evinced by the force of the atheist critique of his newfound theism. This does not, however, represent the intellectual triumph of Christianity over secularism or even of deism over atheism. Schweiker’s warnings are well taken here. A triumph of Christianity in Flew’s life would have resulted in his coming to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, by faith in his death, burial, and resurrection. This step of faith is precisely what Flew explicitly denied had occurred. Flew’s God was not the God of Scripture. Yet Flew’s God did not stand against the God of Scripture. To be sure, Flew’s God and the God of the Bible are both, as he claimed, “self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient” (155). Flew was an honest man, who had honest motives, who was engaged in diligent study, and was characterized by careful consideration, and benefitted from the sincere friendship of believers, abandoned atheism and adopted theistic belief. Flew’s story teaches us that similar results can be counted on to occur under similar circumstances, and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, belief in Christ and the subsequent salvation from sin and death may be produced. We evangelicals can be encouraged to continue to engage our unbelieving friends, neighbors, and associates in open discussion and continue to study to show ourselves approved so that we are ready to give an account for the hope which lies within us when the opportunities to do so present themselves (2 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 3:15).

16Ibid., 271.