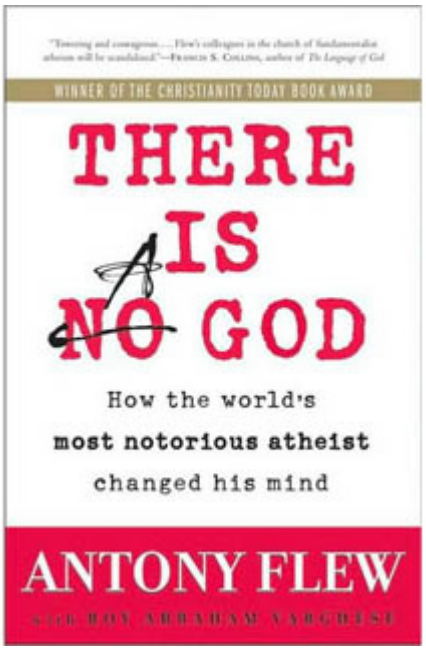
There is a God

In his 2008 article, Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines some of the arguments and evidence that led Antony Flew, the world's most notorious atheist, to change his mind about God. Dr. Flew died in April 2010. To our knowledge, he never entered into a saving faith in Jesus Christ. That is a point of great sorrow for us at Probe.

A Much-Maligned Convert



I remember how astonished I was when I first heard the news of his "conversion." In 2004, longtime British atheist philosopher Antony Flew publicly announced that he now believed in God! I could hardly believe it. Professor Flew had been an atheist for the greater part of his life and, until 2004, his entire academic career. As the "author of over thirty professional philosophical works," he "helped set the agenda for atheism for half a century."{1} But then, in 2004, at the age of eighty-one, he changed his mind!



As one might expect, the reaction to Flew's announcement varied widely. Theists naturally welcomed the news that one of the most important atheistic philosophers of the past century had come to believe in God. Skeptics and atheists, on the other hand, made little effort to conceal their contempt. Richard Dawkins characterized Flew's conversion as a kind of apostasy from the atheistic faith and implied that his "old age" likely had something to do with it.{2} Others suggested that the elderly Flew was trying to hedge his bets, fearful of the

negative reception he might have in the afterlife. And Mark Oppenheimer, in an article for *The New York Times*, argued that Flew had been exploited by Christians and that he hadn't even written the recent book that tells the story of his "conversion."{3} That book, *There Is A God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind,* is the subject of this article.

By his own admission, the eighty-four-year-old Flew suffers from "nominal aphasia" and has difficulty recalling names. Nevertheless, it's quite unfair to insinuate that his belief in God is due to something like senility. He may have problems with his short-term memory, but he's still capable of explaining what he believes and why. In the introduction to his book he responds to the charge that he now believes in God because of what might await him in the afterlife by pointing out that he doesn't even believe in an afterlife! "I do not think of myself 'surviving' death," he explains.{4} The charge that Flew didn't actually write his book is also misleading. While it's true that he didn't *physically* type the words, the *content* was based upon his previous writings, as well as personal correspondence and interviews with Mr. Varghese. In other words, the *ideas* in the book accurately represent the views of Professor Flew, even if he didn't type the text. With that in mind, let's now take a closer look at some of the arguments and evidence that led "the world's most notorious atheist" to change his mind about God.

Did Something Come from Nothing?

In a chapter entitled "Did Something Come From Nothing?" Flew addresses issues surrounding the origin of the universe. Is the universe eternal, or did it have a beginning? And if it had a beginning, then how should we account for it?

Flew observes that in his book *The Presumption of Atheism,* which was written while he was still an atheist, he had argued

that “we must take the universe itself and its most fundamental laws as themselves ultimate.” {5} He simply didn’t see any reason to think that the universe pointed to some “transcendent reality” beyond itself.{6} After all, if the universe has always existed, then there may simply be no point in looking for any explanation why.

However, as the Big Bang model of the origin of the universe became increasingly well-established among contemporary cosmologists, Flew began to reconsider the matter. That’s because the Big Bang theory implies that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. And as Flew observes, “If the universe had a beginning, it became entirely sensible, almost inevitable, to ask what produced this beginning.”{7}

Of course, many scientists and philosophers felt quite uncomfortable about what a universe with a beginning might imply about the existence of God. In order to avoid the absolute beginning of the universe, an event which seems to smack of some sort of supernatural creation, they proposed a variety of models that were consistent with the notion that the universe had existed forever. Unfortunately, all these models essentially suffer from the same problem. When carefully examined, it turns out that they can’t avoid the absolute beginning of the universe. Thus, according to Stephen Hawking, “Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and *time itself*, had a beginning at the Big Bang.”{8}

Reflecting upon his initial encounter with the Big Bang theory while he was still an atheist, Flew writes, “it seemed to me the theory made a big difference because it suggested that the universe had a beginning and that the first sentence in Genesis (‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth’) was related to an event in the universe.”{9} He concludes his discussion by noting that “the universe is something that begs an explanation.”{10} He now believes that the best explanation is to be found in a supernatural creative

act of God. Interestingly enough, this view finds dramatic confirmation in the exquisite "fine-tuning" of our universe which allows for the existence of intelligent life.

Did the Universe Know We Were Coming?

Flew observes that "the laws of nature seem to have been crafted so as to move the universe toward the emergence and sustenance of life."{11} Just how carefully crafted are these laws? According to British physicist Paul Davies, even exceedingly small changes in either the gravitational or electromagnetic force "would have spelled disaster for stars like the sun, thereby precluding the existence of planets."{12} Needless to say, without planets you and I wouldn't be here to marvel at how incredibly fine-tuned these constants are. The existence of complex, intelligent life depends on these fundamental constants having been fine-tuned with a precision that virtually "defies human comprehension."{13}

So how is the observed fine-tuning to be explained? Flew notes that most scholars opt either for divine design or for what might be called the "multiverse" hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, our universe is just one of many others, "with the difference that ours happened to have the right conditions for life."{14}

So which of these two theories best explains the amazing fine-tuning of our universe? Flew correctly observes that "there is currently no evidence in support of a multiverse. It remains a speculative idea."{15} The fact that multiple universes are logically *possible* does absolutely nothing to prove that they *actually* exist. Indeed, the multiverse hypothesis appears to be at odds with the widely recognized principle of Ockham's razor. This principle says that when we're confronted with two explanations of the same thing, we "should prefer the one that is simpler, that is, the one that uses the fewest number of

entities . . . to explain the thing in question."{16}

Now clearly in the case before us, the theory of divine design, which posits only *one* entity to explain the observed fine-tuning of our universe, is much simpler than the multiverse hypothesis, which posits a potentially *infinite* number of entities to explain the same thing! The philosopher Richard Swinburne likely had Ockham's razor in mind when he wrote, "It is crazy to postulate a trillion (causally unconnected) universes to explain the features of one universe, when postulating one entity (God) will do the job."{17}

The observed fine-tuning of our universe is one more reason why Antony Flew now believes there is a God. And as we'll see next, the mystery of life's origin is yet another.

How Did Life Go Live?

One of the reasons consistently cited by Flew for changing his mind about the existence of God has to do with the almost insuperable difficulties facing the various naturalistic theories of the origin of life. In particular, Flew observes, there is a fundamental philosophical question that has not been answered, namely, "How can a universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and 'coded chemistry'?"{18}

When considering the origin of life from non-living matter, it's crucially important to note a fundamental difference between the two. "Living matter possesses an inherent . . . end-centered organization that is nowhere present in the matter that preceded it."{19} For example, lifeless rocks do not give evidence of goal-directed behavior, but living creatures do. Among the various goals one might list, living beings seek to preserve and reproduce themselves.

This leads naturally to the second difficulty, namely,

providing a purely naturalistic account of the origin of organisms that are able to reproduce themselves. As philosopher David Conway points out, without this ability "it would not have been possible for different species to emerge through random mutation and natural selection." Since different species can't emerge from organisms that can't reproduce themselves, one can't claim that self-reproduction emerged through the evolutionary process. Conway concludes that such difficulties "provide us with reason for doubting that it is possible to account for existent life-forms . . . without recourse to design."{20}

The final difficulty Flew raises concerns a purely naturalistic origin of "coded chemistry." Scientists have discovered that the genetic code functions exactly like a language.{21} But as the mathematician David Berlinski asks, "Can the origins of a system of coded chemistry be explained in a way that makes no appeal whatever to the kinds of facts that we otherwise invoke to explain codes and languages?"{22} In other words, if every other code and language we're aware of results from intelligence, then why think the genetic code is any different? As physicist Paul Davies muses, "The problem of how meaningful . . . information can emerge spontaneously from a collection of mindless molecules subject to blind and purposeless forces presents a deep conceptual challenge."{23}

Ultimately, such challenges became too much for Flew. He concludes his discussion of these difficulties by noting, "The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of such 'end-directed, self-replicating' life as we see on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind."{24}

The Self-Revelation of God in Human History

In a fascinating appendix to his book, Flew has a dialogue with prominent New Testament scholar N.T. Wright about Jesus.

Although Flew is not a Christian and continues to be skeptical about the claims for Jesus' bodily resurrection, he nonetheless asserts that this claim "is more impressive than any by the religious competition."{25} But why is this? And what sort of evidence is there for the resurrection of Jesus? This is one of the questions to which N.T. Wright responds in his dialogue with Flew.

Although we can only scratch the surface of this discussion, Wright makes two points that are especially worth mentioning: the historicity of the empty tomb and the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. But why think these events actually happened as the Gospels claim? Because, says Wright, if the tomb were empty, but there were no appearances, everyone would have concluded that the tomb had been robbed. "They would never have talked about resurrection, if all that had happened was an empty tomb."{26}

On the other hand, suppose the disciples saw appearances of Jesus after His crucifixion. Would this have convinced them of His resurrection if His tomb were not empty? No, says Wright. The disciples knew all about "hallucinations and ghosts and visions. Ancient literature—Jewish and pagan alike—is full of such things."{27} So long as Jesus' body was still in the tomb, the disciples would never have believed, much less publicly proclaimed, that He had been raised from the dead. This would have struck them as self-evidently absurd. For these and other reasons, Wright concludes that the empty tomb and appearances of Jesus are historical facts that need to be reckoned with. The question then becomes, "How does one account for these facts? What is the best explanation?"

Wright concludes that, as a historian, the best explanation is that "Jesus really was raised from the dead," just as the disciples proclaimed. This is clearly a *sufficient* explanation of Jesus' empty tomb and post-mortem appearances. But Wright goes even further. "Having examined all the other possible hypotheses," he writes, "I think it's also a *necessary*

explanation."{28}

How does Flew respond to this claim? Asking whether divine revelation in history is really possible, he notes that "you cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible. Everything else is open to omnipotence."{29} Flew has indeed come a long way from his former atheist views. For those of us who are Christians, we can pray that he might come further still.

Notes

1. Roy Abraham Varghese, preface to Antony Flew, *There Is A God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), vii.
2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 82; cited in Varghese, preface to *There Is A God*, xviii-xix.
3. Mark Oppenheimer, "The Turning of an Atheist," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2007, http://tinyurl.com/2lvkaj.
4. Flew, *There Is A God*, 2.
5. Ibid., 134.
6. Ibid., 135.
7. Ibid., 136.
8. Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, *The Nature of Space and Time, The Isaac Newton Institute Series of Lectures* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 20; cited in William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 478.
9. Flew, *There Is A God*, 136.
10. Ibid., 145.
11. Ibid., 114.
12. Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations*, 483.
13. www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-2/s2-excursus-on-natural-theology/existence-of-god-part-14
14. Flew, *There Is a God*, 115.
15. Ibid., 119.

16. Craig and Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations,* 244.
17. Richard Swinburne, "Design Defended," *Think* (Spring 2004), 17; cited in Flew, *There Is A God*, 119.
18. Flew, *There Is A God*, 124.
19. Ibid.
20. David Conway, *The Rediscovery of Wisdom* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 125; cited in Flew, *There Is A God*, 126.
21. Walter L. Bradley and Charles B. Thaxton, "Information and the Origin of Life," in *The Creation Hypothesis: Scientific Evidence for an Intelligent Designer*, ed. J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 205.
22. David Berlinski, "On the Origins of Life," *Commentary* (February 2006): 30-31; cited in Flew, *There Is A God*, 127.
23. Paul Davies, "The Origin of Life II: How Did It Begin?" tinyurl.com/yq4geu; cited in Flew, *There Is A God*, 129.
24. Flew, *There Is A God*, 132.
25. Ibid., 187.
26. N.T. Wright, "The Self-Revelation of God in Human History: A Dialogue on Jesus with N.T. Wright," in Flew, *There Is A God*, 210.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 212-13.
29. Flew, *There Is A God*, 213.

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