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Bibliographical Information

Antony Flew (1923-2010), for most of his life known as an outspoken and prominent defender of atheism, was raised in a Christian environment. Flew's father was a Methodist minister and Flew attended a Christian secondary school. Nevertheless, he departed from his father's beliefs and adopted atheism as a teenager because he could not reconcile the existence of God with the problem of evil.¹ Flew was educated at the Universities of London and Oxford and later, after serving in the Royal Air Force during World War II, taught at the universities of Oxford, Aberdeen, Keele and Reading, and at York University in Toronto.²

Flew's atheism informed his writing, which comprised many books and essays on a myriad of topics from ethics and free will to crime and evolution. Though Flew certainly wrote for an academic audience, many of his books were also accessible to a more general audience—part of the reason he was such a publicly recognized figure. Two of his most important works are *God and Philosophy* (1966) and *The Presumption of Atheism* (1976), both of which discuss religion, a topic of much intellectual interest to Flew.³ Flew's critiques of traditional arguments

1. Bernard J. Verkamp, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), "Flew, Antony (1923-)," accessed October 8, 2016, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com/content/entry/mcfphil/flew_antony_1923/0.

2. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Antony Flew," accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antony-Flew>.

3. Kenneth Grubbs, "Antony Flew 1923-2010," *Skeptic* 16, no. 1 (September 2010): 32-35, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rlh&AN=54338987&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

for the existence of God and other religious phenomena, along with many other aspects⁴ of his philosophical beliefs, were heavily influenced by the 18th century skeptic philosopher David Hume.⁵

In recent years Flew has garnered attention because of his declaration late in life (2004) that he had become an Aristotelian deist, persuaded to believe in an intelligent designer of some sort mainly by the enormous complexity of DNA.⁶ After this declaration Flew subsequently co-authored a book titled *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, which was published in 2007,⁷ and it is this book that stirred up the most controversy. It seemed to many that Flew's advanced age in tandem with the fact that he did not write most of the book himself rendered his conversion to deism suspect. In any case, while Flew may have accepted that there is a God of some sort, he certainly never accepted the idea of a personal, immanent God or the idea that the human soul lives on forever after death.

4. Stuart Brown, ed., *Dictionary of Twentieth-century British Philosophers* (London: Continuum, 2005), s.v. "Flew, Antony Garrard Newton (1923-)," accessed October 17, 2016, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com/content/entry/contbritph/flew_antony_garrard_newton_1923/0.

5. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Antony Flew," accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antony-Flew>.

6. Bernard J. Verkamp, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), "Flew, Antony (1923-)," accessed October 8, 2016, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com/content/entry/mcfphil/flew_antony_1923/0.

7. Kenneth Grubbs, "Antony Flew 1923-2010," *Skeptic* 16, no. 1 (September 2010): 32-35, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rlh&AN=54338987&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

In Christian circles, Flew is best known not only for his conversion to deism at the end of his life, but also for a short paper delivered at the beginning of his career (at the young age of 27) to Oxford's Socratic Club—at the time presided over by C.S. Lewis. This paper was titled "Theology and Falsification" and ironically argued against the very belief that Flew would come to accept about fifty years later.⁸ It is to this argument against the rationality of belief in God that this paper now turns.

Argument Summary from "Theology and Falsification"⁹

Antony Flew's argument against the rationality of religious belief, as presented in his short paper "Theology and Falsification," centers on a parable originally told by John Wisdom called "The Parable of the Invisible Gardener." In this parable, two explorers discover a clearing that has both many flowers and many weeds. One of the pair, the Believer, suggests that the flowers must mean there is a gardener who tends the plot, while the second of the pair, the Skeptic, feels that the presence of so many weeds and so much disorder renders that an unlikely, if not impossible, explanation. But to humor the Believer, he agrees to set up a number of tests to prove whether or not there is a gardener. Not only does the pair never see a gardener in person, but they also never even see footprints or signs of activity and their tests all come back negative. All the same, the Believer insists that there is a gardener who loves this garden deeply, but that he is simply "invisible, intangible, and insensible to electric shocks" and comes in secret to tend his garden. At this point the Skeptic throws his hands up in despair: what is the difference between a real gardener that has no perceivable effect on the world and an imaginary or nonexistent one? And what could possibly make the believer concede defeat?

8. Ibid.

9. Everything below is taken from the textbook, class notes, and class discussion

In this parable, Flew makes two key assumptions—two key premises that form the foundation of his argument. The first of these is the picture he paints of reality, which he asserts is more weedy and disordered than it is flowered and ordered; in other words, far more full of evil, ugliness, and suffering than of goodness, beauty, and design. It is an important to note that in Flew’s parable the world is not depicted as a garden, but rather a clearing in the woods; the very image Flew chooses makes an assumption about the world. Flew’s second premise, which stems from the first, is that a believer’s and a skeptic’s disagreement over the existence of God is only a matter of perspective. Neither believers nor skeptics see any evidence of God—believers simply describe what they see differently than skeptics, albeit nonsensically, or to use a more generous word, fancifully. Believers do not have any personal experiences in which they interact with God; they do not hear the gardener’s voice any more than the skeptic does. In summary, Flew assumes that Christians and atheists see and experience the exact same reality, a reality which does not suggest the existence of God because all the evil in the world.

It is from these basic assumptions that Flew’s argument takes shape, and that argument is essentially this: the faith of those who believe that God exists is not reasonable because it goes against an overwhelming amount of empirical evidence that everyone perceives in the world. From this one central theme spring three important facets of Flew’s argument:

“Death by a Thousand Qualifications”

The first facet of Flew’s argument, “death by a thousand qualifications” is perhaps the best known. Essentially, in this pithy phrase Flew is suggesting that while a handful of qualifications can be an important and logical part of making and giving nuance to a statement about the world, qualifications can also multiply to such a degree that a statement or argument is no longer being made at all, and nothing remains of what was originally said. For example, in

order to explain H.G. Well's invisible man, one must state that he is a man in almost all respects, *but*—and here is the qualification—that he is invisible. This single qualification is reasonable, because much is still being said about this man and his effect on the world. However, if one were to add too many qualifications on top of the fact that he is invisible, perhaps that he also cannot speak, cannot be felt, cannot move physical objects, and does not leave any trace of his presence, then the question would have to be asked: what is the difference between this man who has absolutely no effect on the physical world and an imaginary man, or no man at all?

In the same way, Flew asserts that Christians have to qualify their “absolute” assertions about God so much to explain an evil-filled reality, that their assertions no longer have meaning and simply become nonsensical ways of repeating what the atheist says about reality. For example, Christians often make statements that *sound* absolute, such as “God is good and he loves me” but then they have to tack on so many qualifications: “*but* there is a lot of evil and suffering in the world, sometimes he won't answer my cries for help, sometimes I won't feel loved, etc.” that their statements about God no longer have any meaning—they die the death of a thousand qualifications.

No Negation, No Assertion

The second facet of Flew's argument is the idea that a statement which denies nothing (because it has so many qualifications) actually asserts nothing. Every positive statement has meaning because while it affirms that one thing is true it simultaneously denies that something else is true. For example, if someone (perhaps an extreme feminist) were to assert that men and women are exactly the same in every way, then he or she would also be denying that any difference between men and women exists. The positive statement “men and women are the same” has no meaning if it is not also saying “there are no differences between men and

women.” As a result, if anything were to be found which proved that a single difference between men and women existed, then the assertion of extreme feminist would be shown to be false. To admit any difference between men and women would be to compromise the extreme feminist’s position, to concede a few exceptions would be to weaken it, and to concede a large number of exceptions would be to render the position meaningless.

In the same way, Flew argues that for a Belief in God to be tenable, for it to have any substance or meaning, it must deny something (or better yet, a number of things). But as his first point outlined above (the “death of a thousand qualifications”) observes, the believer seems to simply add any potential negative statements *against* his position as positive statements that become *part of* his position. Rather than asserting “God is good” and then admitting that that must be a denial that there is true evil in the world or that people have to suffer, the Christian simply adds those things on as a part of their positive statement about God: “Yes, there is suffering and evil in the world, but God allows those things for good reasons, not the least of which is to allow free will, and he is still absolutely good all the same.”

Unfalsifiable beliefs

It is on this very point that Flew concludes his argument, throwing up his hands in the air in exasperation and asking, alongside the skeptic in his parable: “Is there *anything* that would make you say that God’s existence is not true—anything that would disprove it? Is there any experiment that could be conducted that would be proof enough to you that God does not exist?” To Flew, it appears that the answer is no. There is no negation that an atheist can propose which a Christian will not simply explain away. A Christian’s belief in a good, loving, omnipotent, transcendent, immanent, etc. God is unfalsifiable. And that is exactly what makes that belief meaningless.

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