

Champion of Atheism Admits, “There is a god”

Jeffrey Stueber

Antony Flew is a well-known philosopher, and was, until 2004, a well-known atheist. That year he became a deist. His book, *THERE IS A GOD: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, brings out not only his poor assumptions when he was an atheist, but also brings out the fallacies inherent in atheist thinking. Flew was born in 1923, the son of a pastor, but seems to have never had Christian faith. Flew says,

I could never see the point of worship and have always been far too unmusical to enjoy or even participate in hymn singing. I never approached any religious literature with the same unrestrained eagerness with which I consumed books on politics, history, science, or almost any other topic. Going to chapel or church, saying prayers, and all other religious practices were for me matters of more or less weary duty. Never did I feel the slightest desire to commune with God.¹

Flew says that he reached his conclusion about the nonexistence of God too early. One of these reasons was the existence of evil, particularly the antisemitism in Germany prior to World War II. Such experiences, he says, “presented an inescapable challenge to the existence of an all-powerful God of love.”²

Nor is Flew the only atheist to choose such a belief system so early in life. Richard Dawkins was born and raised in Kenya. When he eventually came to England, he attended a Christian school and was confirmed

¹ Antony Flew, *THERE IS A GOD: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 10.

² Flew, 14.

there. Despite his upbringing, by his mid-teens he found Darwinism more intellectually satisfying than Christianity.³

Dawkins' arguments in favor of Darwinism are, however, not compelling. What I have found upon reading Dawkins' defense of the standard evolutionist model of origins is that evolution is based on many poor arguments. Dawkins seems to have embraced evolution because atheism is the only alternative to Christian beliefs.⁴

Peter Hitchens, brother of atheist Christopher Hitchens, set fire to his Bible at the age of fifteen.⁵ At that age he felt that the Bible "was the enemy's book."⁶ He knew "there was no God, that the Old Testament was a gruesome series of atrocity stories and fairy tales, while the gospels were a laughable invention used to defraud the simple."⁷ Later in life he converted to Christianity as he explains in his book *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith*.

In addition to other atheistic reasons for not believing in God, Flew discusses a few of his own erroneous presumptions starting with what he calls the "presumption of atheism." What Flew means is that one should naturally presume atheist beliefs are true, while religious claims must be proven in order to be believed. Atheistic naturalism need mount no firm evidence for its claims. Flew says this is not a prejudiced assumption but merely a principle about who bears the burden of proof.

³ Simon Hattenstone, "Darwin's Child," *The Guardian*, Feb 10, 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/10/religion.scienceandnature> (accessed April 8, 2019)

⁴ I critique Dawkins in several articles:

Jeffrey Stueber, "The Delusional Dawkins—a Review of The Greatest Show on Earth" on the website *The Secular Left—Why Most of What they Believe is Nonsense*. www.LutheranScience.org/DelDawkins

Jeffrey Stueber, "Games Richard Dawkins Plays," *LSI Journal*, vol. 32 no. 1 (winter 2018), 14-19. <http://www.lutheranscience.org/2018winter> (accessed April 8, 2019)

⁵ Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith*, paperback ed., (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 7.

⁶ Hitchens, 8.

⁷ Hitchens, ix.

Flew is not alone in this approach. I have found that in general many atheists and evolutionists reason just this way. Usually they argue that theistic (and, in general, Christian) beliefs are too unbelievable or unknowable to be true and only the most convincing arguments can overcome atheist presumptions. Usually any creationist evidence that is presented, then, is dismissed with a host of philosophically poor arguments.

This form of argument was echoed in 18th century philosopher David Hume's claim "That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."⁸ The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy puts it this way: "According to Hume, the evidence in favor of a miracle, even when that is provided by the strongest possible testimony, will always be outweighed by the evidence for the law of nature which is supposed to have been violated."⁹ To Hume, what counted against a claim that a man can rise from the dead is everyday experience – the same experience that tells other atheists that God does no miracles.

Michael Shermer argues similarly in his book, *How We Believe*, when conjuring up a mythical world of Flatland to explain that just as people who live in a world of only two dimensions cannot perceive anything in a third dimension, so we cannot perceive anything about God because we are limited to our world alone. To Shermer, God is simply unknowable. He writes, "God's existence is beyond our competence as a problem to solve."¹⁰

Geoffrey Berg also claims that God is unknowable even though

⁸ Quoted in John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 38.

⁹ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Hume's Argument," chap. 4 in *Miracles*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/miracles/#H4>. (accessed April 8, 2019)

¹⁰ Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York, W. H. Freeman, 2000), 7.

I critique Shermer in: Jeffrey Stueber, "Why Michael Shermer Believes Weird Things" on the website *The Secular Left—Why Most of What they Believe is Nonsense*. (accessed April 8, 2019)

https://thesecularleftcritique.wordpress.com/critique-of-michael-shermer/#_ednref9 .

he, mysteriously, seems to know that God would not create a world with evil in it.¹¹

To sum up, with atheists, a common position is that belief in God requires extensive proof, while atheism requires no proof at all. Even more, they think theistic claims are nonstarters because we can't know anything about God no matter what the evidence, and everyday experience rules out the existence of miracles of any kind.

While Flew was still an atheist, theists responded to his atheist views by claiming that one is entitled to presume that theism is true before believing that atheism is true—a total reversal of what Flew claimed. Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, for instance, argues that theism is a “properly basic belief.” What he means by that is some beliefs are natural because a person's normal cognitive faculties favor them. For example, most people believe they have a mind and a free will. Theistic philosopher Ralph McInerny says that it is natural for human beings to think that a deity might exist because of the order and law-like nature of natural events. When you put both Plantinga and McInerny's views together, we could say that there is a natural knowledge of God because of the law-like order of the universe and, therefore, atheists should bear the burden of proof rather than the reverse.

Flew discusses Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, where Dawkins attributes our behavior to the attitudes and intentions of genes that, despite the fact they are not conscious, are supposedly selfish (hence the title of the book). Flew says that Dawkins, in making such claims, has missed fifty or more years of work in genetics that show traits in organisms are affected by the interactions of many genes while most genes have many different effects on many such traits.¹² To say that any particular gene can have a direct impact on our behavior, to the point we could say it comes as a result of the gene's selfish choice, is ludicrous. Dawkins ignored clear evidence against his theories.

¹¹ I review Berg's book in: Jeffrey Stueber, “Geoffrey Berg's The Six Ways of Atheism” *LSI Journal*, vol. 25 no. 1 (January-March, 2011), 8–11.

www.LutheranScience.org/Berg6Ways (accessed April 8, 2019)

¹² Flew, 78-80.

Later Flew responds to Dawkins' assertion that a deity is too complex a solution. Flew writes,

Richard Dawkins has rejected this argument on the grounds that God is too complex a solution for explaining the universe and its laws. This strikes me as a bizarre thing to say about the concept of an omnipotent spiritual Being. What is complex about the idea of an omnipotent and omniscient Spirit, an idea so simple that it is understood by all the adherents of the three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Commenting on Dawkins, Alvin Plantinga recently pointed out that, by Dawkins' own definition, God is simple—not complex—because God is a spirit, not a material object, and hence does not have parts.¹³

The Multiverse

One way some evolutionists attempt to get away from the evidence for design is to claim there are multiple universes so that eventually the correct life-permitting universe will come about by chance—in much the same way you or I might get rich by picking the correct lottery numbers if we play enough times. Flew cites physicist and cosmologist Paul Davies who is opposed to this idea of the multiverse. Davies says that “it is trivially true that, in an infinite universe, anything that can happen will happen.”¹⁴ This is not helpful, Flew says, because it explains everything but as a result explains nothing. A scientific theory must be precise in what it is attempting to explain and also allow for those things that falsify the theory (that is, those things that are not explained by the theory or refute the theory). A multiverse can explain anything because one can always claim that no matter what happens it's just an inevitable result of an infinite number of universes. Flew is devastating here when quoting evolutionist Paul Davies and then Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne.

A true scientific explanation, says Davies, is like a single well-aimed bullet. The idea of a multiverse replaces the

¹³ Flew, 111.

¹⁴ Flew, quoting Paul Davies, 118.

rationally ordered real world with an infinitely complex charade and makes the whole idea of “explanation” meaningless. Swinburne is just as strong in his disdain for the multiverse explanation: “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.”¹⁵

It is also worth pointing out that the multiverse claim (that there are an infinite number of universes, each different than the other) does nothing to explain how life came about in our universe. We know much about the universe in which we live, yet as Davies recently wrote in *Scientific American*, “We do not know the process that transformed a mishmash of chemicals into a living cell, with all its staggering complexity.”¹⁶

Why would evolutionists choose a theory that is thought of so poorly? I have come to the conclusion that they want to dismiss evidence of God’s creative action which is obvious in nature (See Romans 1:18–32).

I found Flew’s book valuable partly because it shows good reasons to be a Christian apologist and Christian debater. I can see clearly the effects of these debates in Flew as deist arguments began to have their root in his mind. If Flew can find reasons to disbelieve atheism, then possibly fellow atheists such as Dawkins and Shermer can too. Deists, though, are going to hell, just like atheists and agnostics. May God lead atheists, agnostics, and deists to listen to the gospel message through which they can learn about their Savior and come to saving faith in Jesus.

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¹⁵ Flew, 119.

¹⁶ Paul Davies, “Many Planets Not Much Life—We Still Have No Idea How Easy It Is for Life to Arise—and It May Be Incredibly Difficult,” in *Forum—Commentary on Science in the News from the Experts*, *Scientific American*, September 2016, 8.