

Thinkpiece

THE VARIETIES AND REVISIONS OF ATHEISM

by William Schweiker

Abstract. The philosopher Antony Flew has argued for decades that theistic arguments cannot meet criteria of truth. In this essay I respond to Flew's recent announcement that research into the emergence of DNA provides grounds for rational belief in an intelligent orderer, a "God." Flew's theistic turn is important for philosophers of religion and the wider science-and-religion dialogue. It becomes apparent, however, that Flew's "conversion" is not as decisive as one might imagine. While he admits growth in scientific and philosophical understanding, he rejects the idea of growth in religious understanding. Further, he endorses a version of "theoretical theism" while denying the practical importance of belief. Such denial of practical conviction is part of a modernist mindset that separates freedom from the embeddedness of human beings in the natural world. I conclude by noting that the entanglement of human action and wider physical processes, an entanglement seen emblematically in the environmental crisis, requires not only considering the importance of intelligence and order in the emergence of life but also the significance of human agency in claims about the divine and the natural world.

Keywords: deism; falsification; Antony Flew; intelligent design; moral proof for the existence of God; practical atheism; religious understanding; verification.

VARIETIES OF ATHEISM

Atheism, it seems, is under revision or in intellectual retreat. For the great masters of suspicion, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur called them, religion was nihilistic will-to-power (Friedrich Nietzsche), class ideology (Karl Marx),

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or expressions of repression (Sigmund Freud). These distinctly modern criticisms of religion built on earlier work, by David Hume and others, about the natural origins and history of “religion,” usually identified with belief in some invisible power. Similarly, whether in doctrines of creation or the rational ordering of the universe by a purpose, or final end, of reality, claims about “God” had functioned in most premodern classical metaphysics as an explanatory principle. The order of the world was taken as proof of an Orderer, a God. Modern science from Francis Bacon through Charles Darwin to recent sociobiologists has revoked the idea that God helps explain the origin and development of the world. Not surprisingly, much of modern theology and religious thought has been a long-winded response to these varieties of atheism—cultural, psychological, and natural scientific.

The theological tactic in response to the modern forms of atheism was usually to engage the triumph of secularism and the relentless march of science. Untold numbers of books were written on “faith and the modern world.” Theologians wisely saw that if religious conviction was to make any sense, current thought had to be addressed lest one endure cognitive dissonance. However, in the light of the early twenty-first century it is hardly clear that the “secular world” ever really arrived, or it did so only in faint glimmers. Around the globe the religions are on the march. And, surprisingly, the certainty of scientific criticisms of religious belief now seems shaken by the critics themselves. All of these developments call for new directions in religious reflection at the intersections of the sciences and sociocultural studies.

ATHEISM IN RETREAT?

The revision in the scientifically inspired criticism of theism has come from an unexpected source. British philosopher Antony Flew, who has taught at Oxford, Aberdeen, and Reading Universities, made his name in the middle of the last century around debates about how to verify or falsify arguments. Over the course of several decades, Flew produced a stream of books and articles, including *God and Philosophy* (1966) and *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955), refining his argument against the rational plausibility of religious conviction.¹ He has remained one of the most articulate and ardent voices in the debate between religion and science and has deployed with skill and grace the rigors of analytic philosophy. In the middle of the last century, Flew and others opened with a new gambit in the debate about theism by sorting out the different questions surrounding meaning, conviction, and proof.

A central concern in the twentieth-century debate about religion was how one goes about validating claims to truth. Two tactics were used, the so-called verification and falsification criteria. The criterion of verification was formulated by logical positivists and thinkers such as Bertrand Russell. The positivist’s contention was that for a proposition to be cognitively

meaningful it had to meet one of two tests: either it had to be “analytically” true (a proposition that is self-contradictory to deny), or it had to be able to be verified just like other factual, propositional claims. Russell denied the so-called ontological proof of God’s existence, because he held that the idea *God*, as a supposed truth of reason, does not analytically entail existence. Scientific procedures for the validation of claims were extended to cover all purported claims to truths of fact. While human convictions, psychologically considered, might motivate actions, they need not be rationally meaningful or open to proof. Conviction, or belief in some idea or factual reality, does not in itself validate or invalidate reasonable claims. Thinkers thereby drew a strict line between truths of reason and truths of fact as well as between descriptive (factual) and normative (motivation) claims. Some participants in the debate, especially Flew, saw that religious prescriptions had, by the nature of the case, to be related to descriptive claims about the deity (Flew 1984, 93–117; 175–88).

The distinction between descriptive and normative propositions was held by the positivist to signal that metaphysical and moral claims lack the conditions of rational, factual “meaning.” One could not specify the conditions for their (factual) verification. So, for instance, despite what classical philosophers believed, who can see the whole of being in order to validate metaphysical claims? And is it at all obvious what one means by claiming that something is “good” in any ontological sense of the word?

These judgments by the critics of religion reflect a decidedly modernistic mindset wherein the order and intelligibility of natural reality is supposedly morally neutral. Also, the domain of ethics, as Kant would put it, focuses on the laws of freedom not reducible to or even related with the laws of nature. As many commentators have noted, the modern scientific conceptions of reality deny any purpose or end to nature that can or should provide insight for the guidance of human personal and social life. Morality, accordingly, is grounded not in the nature of things or divine purposes but in human reason, will, feeling, or social convention. The rupture between the order of the cosmos and the human mind and will as a source of meaning and value stands in stark contrast to classical sources of Western thought and morality, Hellenistic as well as Jewish and Christian (see Dupré 1993; Gamwell 1990). For the ancients, one was to “live according to nature” precisely because nature has some purpose basic to the human good. And in the biblical traditions, the creator of the universe is also the gracious source of the laws of life. The twentieth-century debate about how to verify religious claims bespeaks a markedly modernist mentality. Granting that people have all kinds of convictions near and dear to their hearts, the verification criterion was quickly and rigorously extended to banish all speculative, moral, religious, and aesthetic discourses from the secure realm of rational meaningfulness. At best one remained an agnostic on these matters.

Ironically, the verification argument also eliminated itself. The criterion of verification could not be verified on its own terms, because it was neither an analytic proposition nor a truth of fact. Enter the falsification argument. The gist of this argument, made by Flew and others, about how to validate claims is that a statement's cognitive meaningfulness and validity rests on specifying the conditions under which it could in principle be falsified, or shown, if true, how it would make other statements false. In a famous essay, Flew challenged theologians with the story of a gardener (God) who is inaudible and invisible, yet there seems to be order in the garden (see Hick 1970, 464–66). Because one could not specify the conditions under which beliefs about the gardener could be shown false, and because beliefs about this gardener, if true, do not render other (empirical) claims about the garden false (its orderliness, beauty, and so on), the belief is rationally meaningless. As Flew put it elsewhere, "If statements about God are supposed to be statements of fact, as they obviously are, and if nothing which might conceivably occur in the world could show them to be false, then, surely, neither their truth nor their falsity could possibly be directly relevant to the world and what happens in it" (Flew 1984, 16). Religious beliefs cannot meet tests of validity and thus lack rational grounds for assent even if they continue to evoke conviction and (falsely) motivate behavior. Insofar as normative claims are intertwined with propositions about the being and activity of the divine, the practical bearing of faith cannot be rescued on its own terms. Thus spake Flew, for decades.

Recently, various news agencies, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, have reported that Flew, age 81, has changed his mind. Investigation into DNA has, he claims, "shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce [life], that intelligence must have been involved" (Ostling 2004). The emergence of life backs scientifically the rationality of the idea of God. Flew's latest argument is made with respect to the order and complexity of life that warrants the inference of intelligence necessary to explain that emergence and development. Importantly, Flew's God is about intelligence, purpose, and design but "utterly uninvolved in the lives of human beings." Presumably this idea of God meets the demands of the falsification criterion. The denial of the idea of God would, as a matter of fact, entail a chaotic and homogenous nonliving reality, which, of course, is counterfactual. DNA research negates the postulation of nonintelligence in the ordering of reality. Flew quickly notes that his "God" is more of a deistic version than traditional theism, an intelligence or first cause rather than a personal God (apparently the principle of the ordered garden but not a gardener). He muses, "I'm thinking of a God very different from the God of the Christian and far and away from the God of Islam, because both are depicted as omnipotent Oriental despots, cosmic Saddam Husseins." Still, atheism is in retreat at least with respect to scientific claims about the orderliness and complexity of life.

Some religious believers, theologians, and philosophers will take delight in this admission (repentance?) of an ardent old atheist. Advocates of creationism, intelligent design, or versions of process theology might chuckle "We told you so." The cottage industry of religion and science will have more papers to publish. Church boards and ecumenical working groups will continue, rightly, to align religion and the (post)modern world. At last, Flew and Faith, science and religion, agree that the complexity of life demands some origin in intelligence and purpose not involved in people's lives. These are important claims and genuine advances in understanding. Let the papers be published!

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Before theologians, religious thinkers, and believers rush to join in the triumph of theism, however, they ought to ponder how little Professor Flew is actually saying. Religiously and theologically considered, it is not at all clear that atheism is actually in retreat. It may have merely assumed another guise. The decidedly modern rupture between our being in the cosmos and the ordering of human freedom and conduct might well continue, just in revised form. As one assesses Flew's stunning admission, there are methodological and substantive points that must be parsed and considered.

First, Flew grants philosophers and scientists (methodologically speaking) the possibility of changed minds and so growth in understanding, even to the point of rejecting earlier judgments. He has doggedly and rightly insisted that one must consider all positions at their strongest and determine claims to truth in the light of the evidence and cogency of argument. The work of validation requires humility about one's claims, openness to other arguments, and a commitment to inquiry and dispute as intrinsic to human learning. Yet the possibility of growth in religious understanding apparently is never admitted. Indeed, according to Flew, the three great traditions of Mosaic theism, as he calls them, cling to a specific, and tyrannical, conception of the deity. It is true, of course, that in the distant past monotheistic faiths drew images of divine sovereignty from prevailing cultural forms. The heavenly court was often modeled on the political order and vice versa. In different ways this imagery is found in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Israel. In biblical times the connection between the divine and political realms was institutionalized in the Temple State. However, that religious concepts were intertwined with other cultural and social forms is hardly surprising. That is the case with all forms of human thought, including scientific rationality and the various images it has deployed to conceptualize natural reality. Human thought is finite and time-related if not time-bound.

Granting the descriptive point about the human mind does not mean that the "religions of the Book" remain fossilized in their conceptions of

God. Even the most cursory reading, let alone scholarly treatment, of the history of, say, Judaism, demonstrates the fantastic range of conceptions of the divine as well as growth and development in understanding (see Fishbane 2003). The same complexity is true of Islamic and Christian thought. Theologians, not to mention believers, must insist that there is deepening of religious insight and, further, that genuine faith reflects and empowers that growth. Faith seeks understanding. Does anyone really believe that the God to whom they pray is a cosmic despot? Is that what the theistic traditions are claiming when ideas about equality and human rights press for worldwide recognition? Is it not precisely the case that the religious traditions have undergone and embraced development in thought and practice? In this respect, the strident and violent forms of fundamentalism found on the world scene are out of step with their own traditions. Flew denies advances in any sphere of mind other than science and philosophy, a denial that makes his endorsement of "God" a narrow thing in the traffic of human ideas. Growth in understanding is not just the trophy of the sciences and analytic philosophy.

There is a second and more troubling fact about Flew's newfound theism. He apparently endorses theoretical theism arm in arm with practical atheism. His arguments merely reenact in new form that rupture between nature and culture, metaphysics and ethics, characteristic of the modern era. It is not at all clear what practical claims would be consistent with his newfound "God," despite his awareness of the entanglement of descriptive and prescriptive discourses. Because "God" is ordering the emergence of life, is one to infer that all forms of life are somehow sacred? This kind of theism could be taken in the direction of strident moral realism in which every form of life, rooted in the divine intelligence, is to be granted intrinsic, sacred worth. Yet despite the discourse about "God," Flew would hardly endorse any kind of ethical mysticism or ardent reverence for life or even a revised form of moral realism.

Interestingly, earlier deists understood the need to relate claims about God to practical existence and a moral order of human life. William Paley in his *Natural Theology* ([1802] 2003) argued on the grounds of design that (1) there is a God; (2) God demands virtuous living from persons; and (3) there is a future life in which God will reward the virtuous and punish the wicked. These concerns are not argued by Flew. In fact, he has denied the plausibility of any moral proof of God, in Kantian or any other form, in his deistic position. Flew has consistently denied the intelligibility of ideas about mortality, and, what is more, rejects (rightly, I think) ideas about a God who condemns souls to eternal torture. Yet, once again, the force of his denial of development in religious understanding becomes obvious. He takes it as given that the most morally problematic image of the divine to be found in the Mosaic religions is and will be the only possible conception of the divine consistent with those faith traditions.

Flew disconnects practical and descriptive claims about the intelligent ordering of life. This disconnection, I suggest, is part and parcel of what many thinkers, myself included, see as the main challenge to religious and moral thinking in our age of astonishing scientific discovery. What is the import of these new scientific findings not only for understanding the physical universe but also for the conduct of human life? The inverse question can also be asked (see Jonas 1984). How can we consider scientifically as well as morally the profound impact that human cultural forms and activities have on the development of species, ecosystems, and even the human reality? Sad to say, the modernist rupture continues to dog much of the religion-science dialogue in that one finds too little sustained attention to cultural and moral questions (Polkinghorne and Welker 2000, 63–140). Insofar as one must insist that human freedom and intelligence emerge within the wider compass of reality, however one conceives of this emergence, a hard and fast distinction between the domains of nature and of freedom seems difficult to sustain. The science-religion dialogue cannot be satisfied with arguments that forgo considering the entanglement of religious ideas, moral values, and cultural forms with natural processes—arguments that Flew, despite his new insights, seems to continue to make.

It also is important for those who would celebrate Flew's "conversion" to grasp that the equation of God just with intelligent purpose might in fact strip the idea of God of any genuine religious significance. In that case it would be an instance of what is often called *practical atheism*. By this Jews and Christians and Muslims mean the belief that God is utterly uninvolved in the lives of human beings, indifferent to love, justice, mercy, and the striving for goodness. From Hellenistic Stoic philosophers and early Christian theologians through the great medieval scholastics (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish) to the present, religious thinkers have always insisted that the term *God* must be specified with respect to the highest good and deepest norms of right human conduct, individually and socially. Many, including Flew, think that the only conception of God held by the great monotheistic traditions is that of a cosmic commander willfully imposing duties on human subjects and punishing sinners in some realm of the afterlife. In reality, these traditions have exceedingly complex accounts of the relation between God's being and doing and the domain of moral knowledge.

A practical atheism is, religiously speaking, a betrayal of faith: to confess belief in God as creator or intelligent orderer in the emergence of life and yet to conduct life as if matters of justice, goodness, and virtue do not strike to the root of things. It is also a continuation of modernist conceptions of reality parceled between "nature" and "culture" that seem hard to sustain given radical advances in science and our increased awareness of the force and impact of human participation in the wider compass of reality. This type of practical atheism is exceedingly widespread in our time,

maybe all times. It rests on the false notion that “faith” is nothing more than beliefs—valid or not—about the ordering of reality removed from normative conceptions of what is good, right, and just. The object of that false faith is not a God worthy of worship but simply an explanatory item in the philosopher’s tool bag. The moral orientation of human life appears to be uncoupled, in Flew’s new theism, from beliefs about the shape of reality. Alas, there has not really been much change in the atheistic story.

THE TASK AT HAND

The task facing contemporary religious thinkers is to show that growth in understanding “God” comes precisely with the insight that matters of love, justice, and mercy are at the core of the human project (Schweiker 2004). Explanations of DNA are to be sought and treasured; scientific findings about the ordering of reality provide limits on plausible claims about God’s interactions in the world and aid in grasping the meaning of the integrity of life. Ideas of divine causality, for instance, must be interpreted in ways that are at the very least consistent with what is presently known about the workings of reality (Gustafson 2004). On this point, Flew’s arguments, past and present, are well taken. Exalted claims about God’s interventions in the world that interrupt the workings of the natural order of things might evoke commitment, insight, and moral fervor, but they can hardly withstand carefully scrutiny. Ideas about an eternity of torture or bliss might be engines for devotion, but they require careful moral critique by all thoughtful persons. Normatively considered, the limit that scientific knowledge places on theological assertions means the rejection of extremely voluntaristic accounts of “divine commands” in favor of some version of moral naturalism or what Jews and Christians call “natural law.” Yet the point is also that, removed from the labor of justice and love, scientific conclusions and their “theological” correlates are hardly the stuff that brings forth lives worth living.

In this light, it might be possible to cross the modernist rupture not simply by isolating valid reasons for belief in some intelligent purpose, some “God,” and then infer its practical, moral consequences, but to work the other way—from the human participation in reality as moral beings to what this means for understanding natural reality. One could do so by recasting the so-called moral proof of God. Classically, this approach to thinking about the being and activity of God begins with questions about the orientation of human existence and also the reality of human beings as practical agents who can and do bring about changes in reality with respect to some ideas about what is good, right, and fitting. So, one might examine the confluence of the experience of the power to act, the emergence of human capacities for agency within the natural world, conjoined to the sense of intrinsic worth disclosed in the sensibility of being an agent

(see Schweiker 1995, esp. chap. 8). Human beings regularly sense that it is good to be an agent, to be a force in the world. What is the source of this sensibility? How is it related to claims that the religions make about the being and activity of the divine? What does it tell us about reality that this sensibility conjoined to the power to act appears in the physical universe?

This argument would reject any image of God as demonic torturer or one who rewards the obedient and subservient, precisely because at the core of the “proof” is the insight that the power to act is conjoined to the worth of being. It articulates the divine as the source of the conviction that one is to respect and enhance the integrity of life. Cast in this way, the moral argument itself is revised so that claims about the divine are not postulated on the condition of the laws of freedom, as Kant would emblematically argue. Rather, it is precisely the emergence of human freedom and power within the physical universe that becomes the field of inquiry for reconsidering the practical import of theological claims. Traditional moral realism is then revised as well, but without the reduction of all moral and religious norms and values to their source in human choice. To be sure, these are complicated matters that require careful elaboration and consideration. Yet, without a renewed engagement with this kind of argument, the science-religion dialogue merely continues the modernist rupture and fails to grasp, religiously speaking, the problem of practical atheism.

Taking the above methodological and substantive points together, I conclude that it is better to endorse theoretic openness, even skepticism, bound to a practical, living faith. Conceptions of reality, divine causality, and even moral norms must be validated in the rough-and-tumble of inquiry and debate. However, it is essential that one grasp that the process of validation carries with it implied normative demands. Inquiry into the nature of reality is inseparable, religiously and philosophically, from the question of the practical tenor and orientation of life as itself a search for truth about how rightly to conduct personal and social existence. In this light, the religions of the world at their best are truth-seeking communities. Open inquiry and debate, fostered in various forms and at various times within all the religions, are the discursive instruments by which we fallible human beings learn and attain the truths in our reach, including understandings of the “revealed” truths of our religions.

One can readily see the limitations of Flew’s newfound theism, the strange mixture of theoretic theism with practical atheism coupled with the denial of religious learning. But that limitation ought not to provide believers with false consolation. There is religious, practical work to be done. Persons of good will must struggle to live the truth of convictions about God, goodness, and justice, lest images of cosmic tyrants fuel human discord. The hard intellectual work, theologically speaking, is precisely to aid the struggle for responsible and faithful existence that emerges at the meeting of theoretical and practical concerns.

NOTE

1. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* was edited by Alasdair MacIntyre along with Flew. It is interesting that while Flew now admits of some "God" on the grounds of the complexity of life, MacIntyre too has taken the turn to religion and in fact has become an ardent advocate of some version of Roman Catholic thought (see MacIntyre 1990).

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