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Flew's Flight from Atheism (Faith & Science Update)

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John T. Baldwin

“I have followed the argument where it has led me. And it has led to accept the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being” (Antony Flew).

When a world-renowned philosopher and atheist announced that the scientific evidence had shifted his opinion toward belief in God, the resulting reception could be well described as a seismic shift amongst communities that follow developments in Intelligent Design circles. This conversion is shared in world-renowned philosopher Antony Flew’s recent (2007) book, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. But aside from the ensuing discussion (some have suggested Flew was manipulated; that his age, then 84, affected his decision, and that his book was solely the product of his editors, which Flew has denied) over the authenticity or nature of Flew’s “conversion,” a brief examination

FLEW’S FLIGHT FROM ATHEISM

into some of the specific evidences that led him to his decision might prove insightful.

First, however, to be clear: Flew has rejected any notions that he has converted to Christianity or anything of the like. His belief is self-described as simply a basic deism; he still rejects the concept of a personal God. In his own words, “I have become a deist like Thomas Jefferson.”¹ In his book he states, “I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that this universe’s intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source.”²

Concerning the actual evidence that has sparked his change of mind, Flew observes that “science spotlights three dimensions of nature that point to God. The first is the fact that nature obeys laws. The second is the dimension of life, of intelligently organized and purpose-driven be-

ings, which arose from matter. The third is the very existence of nature.”³ It is the second aspect that this column will address, as it points us, as clearly as nature itself can, toward one of the greatest scientific mysteries the natural world has revealed, and that is the “mind of man.”

In an appendix to Flew’s book, co-author and Christian apologist Roy Abraham Varghese concurs with Flew’s observations and further discusses five readily available phenomena that he sees as only explainable in terms of the existence of God. He lists them as “first, the rationality implicit in all our experience of the physical world; second, life, the capacity to act autonomously; third, consciousness, the ability to be aware; fourth, conceptual thought, the power of articulating and understanding meaningful symbols such as are embedded in language; and fifth, the human self, the “center” of consciousness, thought, and action.”⁴ All five of these elements struggle to find any adequate or generally accepted explanations in our current generation’s studies of atheism, or “new atheism,” as Varghese labels it. And all five are centered on or related to the mysterious thing called human nature and more specifically our ability to think.

Although within the Adventist Church much time and effort has been expended (and justifiably so)

on issues related to origins and biological complexity, and the biblical exegesis of relevant portions of Scripture to these issues, relatively little research has been done, by Adventists, concerning the philosophical issues related to mind-body studies and the issue of physicalism, a common viewpoint among naturalistic atheists. Perhaps this should not remain so, as this field is ripe for new discussions of God and human nature. And, unlike the studies conducted by Michael Behe and others concerning irreducible complexity at the biochemical and molecular level of our bodies, consciousness strikes directly at the core of how the “image of God” is reflected in humanity, with further implications for how we understand Scripture.

Thought, cognition, and awareness, as articulated by Varghese, provide some of the most puzzling mysteries and potentially useful arguments in defense of Scripture’s portrayal of human nature. As Varghese observes, “At the foundation of all of our thinking, communication, and use of language is a miraculous power.”⁵ And one unobservable “scientifically.”

Many advocates of atheism concede this point! As Richard Dawkins acknowledges, “Neither Steve Pinker [a fellow atheist] nor I can explain human subjective consciousness—what philosophers call qualia.”⁶ And they (and others) are often honest enough to admit that it “beats the

Timm: Flew's Flight from Atheism (Faith & Science Update)

heck out of me” where subjective consciousness comes from. Another atheist, Wolpert, deliberately avoids the entire issues of consciousness by stating so succinctly: “I have purposely avoided any discussion of consciousness.”⁷ One can only wonder at the creative power of God to leave humankind speechless.

Finally, and in the context of Flew’s new perspective, he concludes his book with a powerful evaluation of N. T. Wright’s exposition, in Appendix B, of Jesus and the Resurrection. It is utterly moving to hear Flew, the former agnostic and perhaps atheist, write the following about Wright’s account of Christ’s resurrection: “It is absolutely won-

derful, absolutely radical, and very powerful.”⁸ Truly, the Word of God stands forever to His glory.

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REFERENCES

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/april/29.80.html>.

² *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 88.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

“If the existence of one universe requires an explanation, multiple universes require a much bigger explanation: the problem is increased by the factor of whatever the total number of universes is. It seems a little like the case of a schoolboy whose teacher doesn’t believe his dog ate his homework, so he replaces the first version with the story that a pack of dogs—too many to count—ate his homework” (Anthony Flew).

