

Rehabilitating a Negative Atheist

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The Berean Call Ministry

Professor Antony Flew, the rationalist philosopher who died on April 8 [2010], aged 87, spent much of his life denying the existence of God until, in 2004, he dramatically changed his mind.

Flew always described himself as a “negative atheist”, asserting that “theological propositions can neither be verified nor falsified by experience”, a position he expounded in his classic paper *Theology and Falsification* (1950), reputedly the most frequently-quoted philosophical publication of the second half of the 20th century.

He argued that any philosophical debate about the Almighty must begin by presuming atheism, placing the burden of proof on those who believe that God exists. “We reject all transcendent supernatural systems, not because we’ve examined or could have examined each in turn, but because it does not seem to us that there is any good evidence in reason to postulate anything behind or beyond this natural universe,” he proclaimed. A key principle of his philosophy was the Socratean concept of “follow the evidence, wherever it leads”.

When Flew revealed that he had come to the conclusion that there might be a God after all, it came as a shock to his fellow atheists, who had long regarded him as one of their foremost champions. Worse, he seemed to have deserted Plato for Aristotle, since it was two of Aquinas’s famous five proofs for the existence of God – the arguments from design and for a prime mover – that had apparently clinched the matter.

After months of soul-searching, Flew concluded that research into DNA had “shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved”. Moreover, though he accepted Darwinian evolution, he felt that it could not explain the beginnings of life. “I have been persuaded that it is simply out of the question that the first living matter evolved out of dead matter and then developed into an extraordinarily complicated creature,” he said.

Flew went on to make a video of his conversion entitled *Has Science Discovered God?* and seemed to want to atone for past errors: “As people have certainly been influenced by me, I want to try and correct the enormous damage I may have done,” he said.



<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/books-obituaries/7586929/Professor-Antony-Flew.html> [London] Telegraph Online, 4/14/10).

[TBC: Although Flew’s admission required an extraordinary courage after years of denial, some are quick to add “His God was strictly minimalist – very different from ‘the monstrous oriental despots of the religions of Christianity and Islam,’ as he liked to call them. God may have called his creation into existence, then, but why did he bother? To that question, it seemed, Flew had no answer.” For Flew, the time to find the answer to that question ran out.]