

Dear all, greetings.

Over the past week, it has been my privilege to read “There is no/A God: How the world’s most notorious atheist changed his mind” by Anthony Flew. This book was published in 2007, and tells a most remarkable story.

Anthony Flew was raised in a Wesleyan Methodist preacher’s home in the UK, and went to a Christian boarding school – Kingswood School, established by John Wesley himself in the city of Bath. However, by the age of 16, Anthony had gone through a process of disenchantment and had lost any faith in God. The problem of evil, and the evils of Nazi Germany in the early 1940s, coupled with his doubts over the classic “free-will” defense by theists and whether or not God-given free-will absolved God of any responsibility for the existence of evil in this world, combined to shape his early thinking. By his mid-twenties, as a scholar at Oxford, he was a convinced atheist. He went on to become perhaps the most famous and most quoted modern atheist philosopher in the world during the 1950s – 1990s.

In 1950, he presented what is perhaps the most well-known and quoted paper in philosophy of the 2nd half of the 20th Century, “Theology and Falsification.” It was presented to the Socratic Club at Oxford, in which he sought to clarify the nature of the claims made by religious believers. He asked whether the numerous qualifications surrounding theological utterances result in the original utterances dying a death by a 1,000 qualifications. To illustrate, if you assert that the world is round, but it appears flat, this apparent contradiction can be explained by the earth’s great size. But, if you add contradictory phenomena and the associated qualifications keeps on multiplying, after a while the original claim becomes suspect. Flew argued that if theists assert that “God is love,” they must then reckon with millions of evidences of evil and pain and suffering. One may indeed come to the conclusion that, based on the evidence, it appears that God is not love, or at the very least, does not love us. If theists will not allow for any possibility that the original proposition – “God is love” – is indeed untrue, i.e. that no phenomena can count against it, then logically no phenomena can count for it, and what we are left with is an intrinsically meaningless proposition. Flew broadened his conclusions to argue that each and every religious statement would have to be counted as a meaningless statement. This is perhaps the most widely quoted paper in atheist philosophy over the past 70 years, and it was hugely influential for decades among professional scholars.

Yet, in Flew’s extended testimony, God was still at work with this confirmed and militant atheist. Unlike many today, Flew was honest enough as a philosopher to “follow the evidence” rather than to hold steadfast to a position regardless of the evidence. By the end of his life, Flew had come to believe in the Creator God. At a public debate between atheists and evangelicals at New York University in 2004, Flew announced to the astonishment of all present that he now accepted the existence of God. The world of philosophy was turned on its head. Uproar ensued. The announcer at the symposium announced that of all the great discoveries of science, the greatest discovery was of God.

One of the contributing factors to Flew’s acceptance of God at a philosophical level was Schroeder’s debunking of the well-known monkey theorem. This theorem discusses the possibility of life evolving by chance on planet earth, and uses the analogy of monkeys banging away on computer keyboards and eventually producing a Shakespearean sonnet.

Schroeder referred to an experienced held by the British National Council of Arts. A computer was placed in a cage with 6 monkeys. After a month of hammering away, the monkeys produced 50 typed pages – but not a single word. The shortest words of the English alphabet are “A” and “I” and these had not been produced – for to be words they require a space on either side. If a keyboard has 30 keys, and

there are 26 letters, then the probability of getting either "A" or "I" is $30 \times 30 \times 30$, which is 27,000. Schroeder then applied the monkey theorem to a Shakespearean sonnet, which has 14 lines. What is the likelihood of a monkey hammering away and getting 488 letters in correct sequence in the sonnet, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" You end up with 26 to the 488th power. Or in other words, base 10 to the 690th. Now, according to modern physicists, the # of particles in the universe – protons, electrons and neutrons, is approx. 10 to the 80th. There are thus not enough particles in the universe in the universe to write down the trials. If you took the entire universe, and converted every particle to a computer chip, and each chip was able to spin out 488 trials a million times per second in the production of random letters, the # of trials you would get since the beginning of time would 10 to the 90th trials. It would be off by a factor of 10 to the 600th. Thus, one can NEVER get a sonnet by chance from a team of monkeys. The universe would have to be 10 to the 600th times larger.

Flew accepted the debunking of the classical evolutionary biologists' argument that time plus chance equals life, based on the mathematical debunking of the monkey theorem.

What then was the evidence that convinced Flew of the existence of God, and which led to him renouncing his entire life's work and influence as an old man? Before we look at the specifics, Flew is clear that he had no "heart warming" experience like Wesley, and was "born again" in a revival meeting. No, his acceptance of God came as he followed the evidence in the natural universe – the natural revelation of God, which Paul speaks of in Romans 1, as providing clear evidence for God's existence. Flew was convinced by the following broad lines of thinking.

First, who wrote the laws of nature? What is a law of nature? It is a regularity or symmetry in nature. The laws of our universe, as physicists and mathematicians explore them, are increasingly seen to be mathematically precise, universal and tied together. Einstein spoke of the laws of nature as being "reason incarnate." How did nature come packaged in this fashion? Even atheist mathematicians, such as Stephen Hawking, recognize that in the mathematical intricacies of the laws of the universe, we are looking into the mind of God. The more we discover how the universe works, the more rational and logical and mathematically precise it is. Einstein, as he comprehended the beauty of the mathematics of the universe, spoke of a "superior mind," or of a "superior reasoning force" or of a "illimitable superior spirit." With the advent of quantum physics, the leading physicists veered from the mathematical to the philosophical, again recognizing the internal logic, internal compatibility and internal structure of the universe at the smallest possible level of matter. Such laws force the philosopher to ask key questions: why do we have the laws that we have? Where does the power come in the universe that upholds these laws? How is that we have a set of laws that drives feature-less gases to life, consciousness and intelligence? The laws of the universe point to purpose and design, with the end game being human flourishing. Flew came to the conclusion, like many atheist mathematicians and physicists before him, and in his life-time, that the laws of the universe are not random, but exhibit intrinsic beauty, and life-giving purpose....so the argument for a Creator God becomes compelling.

The second line of evidence that convinced Flew was the question of purpose in the mathematics of the universe. This is linked to the first line of evidence – the laws of nature. Imagine, if you would, arriving at a hotel in a foreign land. When you arrive, your favorite music CD is playing in your room. Your favorite colors form the color scheme. Your favorite drinks are in the mini-bar. Your favorite clothing is laid out on the bed. Your favorite cookies and candy are by the bed. Your favorite book is on the bookstand. Your favorite brand of bottled water is on the table. Your favorite personal grooming and hygiene products are in the bathroom. You switch on the television, and playing there is your all-time favorite TV show. With each new discovery, would you dismiss these phenomena as being coincidence, or evidence

that someone who intimately knows you has specifically prepared the hotel room for your stay? You would almost certainly conclude that someone knew you were coming....and the room was specifically prepared for you.

This line of reasoning is analogous to the fine-tuning argument for the universe. This is a well-known argument, so I won't dwell on it here. Essentially, the mathematics of the universe are finely tuned to the nth degree to support human life. The laws of the universe, rather than being random recurring phenomena, are finely-tuned to the emergency and sustenance of human life. Some philosophers argue that we live in a multi-verse, with an infinite # of parallel universes, all with different mathematical properties, and that we are fortuitously in the only universe whose mathematical architecture supports life. However, the multi-verse theory is not strong. It seeks to explain the life-supporting properties of our universe by suggesting an infinite # of universes out there, most of which are not life-supporting. This however still doesn't explain why our universe has a mathematical infrastructure which appears to be designed with 1 purpose in mind: to support human life. It is crazy, as one philosopher argued, to suggest trillions upon trillions of universes to explain the features of our universe, when accepting the reality of the One Creator God will do the same job. Furthermore, if one postulates trillions of universes, this still doesn't answer the question of where all their laws came from – sooner or later one comes back to the Creator God.

The next line of reasoning has to do with life. In particular, how did the earliest life form, in the evolutionary model, come into existence with an existing and finely tuned reproductive mechanism? The so-called simple cell, which somehow evolved, must have come with a fully complete and functional reproductive system, or it would simply have existed and died. Rather than being random, every living organism possesses intrinsic purpose – a reproductive function that enables the organism to propagate itself. Such purpose contradicts the randomness and purposelessness of the evolutionary model. Furthermore, as our knowledge of DNA explodes around us, and we understand more and more of the process of DNA, RNA transcription, and the reality of genetic code – a priori information that guides the development of an organism, we are asked to believe that the first living creature / cell came spontaneously into existence from random chemicals but with existing pre-written code throughout trillions of particles of protein, DNA and RNA. Even more problematic is how did those trillions of particles know that they were code? What gave them the self-awareness that they were no longer random particles in the primordial swamp, and now were the very code of life itself? Essentially, the question of how meaningful or semantic information can emerge spontaneously from a collection of mindless molecules subject to blind and purposeless forces presents a profound philosophical challenge to proto-biologists, evolutionists and atheists.

The next line of reasoning came with the emergence of the “Big Bang” theory. Until then, many scientists argued that the universe had no beginning and no end. It simply is, in a state of flux, but ultimately all energy and matter zeroes out. With the BB theory however, there must be a beginning, and with the arrival of matter we must also have the arrival of time and space – as per Einstein's theories of space-matter, i.e. we live in a universe where time-space-matter are intimately linked. Even if, like Hawking, you argued there could be a mathematical equation that detailed the probability that something can emerge from a vacuum, something from nothing, one must still ask what is the creative factor that breathed fire, or gave life, into the mathematical formula....and how did that mathematical formula exist in nothingness anyway? The first cause of the Big Bang remains a mystery to scientists, but that first cause must have been something / someone infinitely greater than the energy and matter and mass and time contained in the Big Bang, an infinite intelligence whose mathematical architecture gave rise to a biophilic universe – a universe that loves and supports human flourishing.

As he pondered where the evidence led, Flew came to the conclusion that there exists a “self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent and omniscient Being.” Determined to follow the evidence where it leads, Flew then entered into a discussion with the Bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright, one of the foremost biblical scholars in the world today. How does one move from a belief in an omniscient Being to Our Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.....that was the focus of the discussion between Flew and Wright, and their dialogue is fascinating. Maybe we will turn to that issue on another day.

For now, let us reflect for a moment on Flew’s honesty and integrity. While we may uphold integrity and truthfulness as being Christian virtues, it also exists among the unreached, and among those who are adamantly opposed to the Gospel. However, with time, patience, and having interlocutors willing to invest the time and energy into honest discussions – as Flew had – the Holy Spirit is still leading those who are honest at heart and who have the integrity to accept the demands of reason and logic – into His Kingdom. Let us always therefore be ready to help someone “follow the evidence” and walk with them into the Kingdom.

I pray we will all have a wonderful Sabbath day!

Conrad.