

**Antony Flew**

*God and Philosophy.*

Reprinted, with a new introduction.

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After decades campaigning for atheism, Antony Flew now seems to have become a deist. While continuing to criticize established religion, he is reported (in items easily accessible on the web) to be flirting with the idea that the universe was created by an intelligent being, one blameless for the misery and mayhem that has occurred since the job was done. While Flew has not explicitly admitted shifting his ground, it is difficult to shake the impression that shift it he has.

Before the appearance of the reprint of *God and Philosophy* (first published in 1966), Flew responded to questions regarding his religious beliefs with a promise to set the record straight in a new Introduction to the book. Unfortunately, however, he hasn't come through. In a brief seven-page discussion he mainly devotes himself to listing considerations 'any intending successor to *God and Philosophy* would need to take into account.' Such a book would, he avers, have to address a couple of points sometimes thought to give aid and comfort to the religiously inclined, specifically the claim that the universe is only part of what there is and the argument that human life would not have been possible had the fundamental constants of physics been ever so slightly different. Flew professes himself 'delighted' that a third point — that there is no negotiating the gap between animate and inanimate matter — seems to have been taken care of by 'protobiologists'. Moreover he suggests that a successor work would have to examine Varghese's 'extremely extensive presentation of the inductive argument from the order of nature to God as its Intelligent Designer,' Conway's revival of the classical philosophical conception of the universe as 'the creation of a supreme omnipotent and omniscient intelligence,' and Swinburne's 'radically new and extremely comprehensive case [in *Is There a God?*] for the existence of the Christian God.'

Presumably Flew mentions these 'developments' because he thinks they spell trouble for the atheism of the original text. But he keep his cards so close to his chest it is hard to know where he stands, still less whether he is, as has been alleged, attracted to the argument from design (and Varghese's argument for an Intelligent Designer). He is even cagey about Swinburne's argument for the existence of a Christian God, referring to it as one a believer 'may very reasonably see as further and very strong confirmation of [his or her theistic] conclusions.' This is all very puzzling. Flew has never been one to hedge his bets, and I can only conjecture that he tempered his views in response to the 'peer review (pro and con)' to which his remarks were submitted (in his 'Publisher's Foreword' Paul Kurtz states that the Introduction went through four drafts). In any event the final result is surprisingly bland and unhelpful.

In the original text (reprinted here without modification), there is none of the reticence of the new Introduction. Flew questions the coherence of the Christian concept of God, stresses the problem of evil, pillories the ontological, design and cosmological arguments, discounts the idea that there would be no meaning or morality were there no God, pooh-poohs arguments for the existence of God based on religious experience, miracles and faith, and dismisses attempts by Pascal and others to inveigle us into believing in God. The only snag is that these topics have been thoroughly discussed many times, before and since, and much less laboriously. Flew rounds up the usual suspects and sends them packing mostly for the usual reasons. Worse — as critics of the original edition were quick to point out — he does not select the strongest opponents, rarely considers what the theist might say in response and has little to say to religious thinkers who discount ‘rationalistic’ arguments for the existence of God. Indeed, even died-in-the-wool atheists are likely to find themselves wanting to defend the other side. There are, nonetheless, some nice paragraphs, for instance one on the shibboleth that ‘science tells us *how*, never *why*’ (108).

Whether or not Flew has become a deist, he doubtless remains committed to much of what he wrote in *God and Philosophy* some forty years ago. He is, I suppose, as antipathetic as ever to the Christian God — and ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel’ (21) — and just as unconvinced by the alleged deliverances of revelation and religious experience. But if he now believes that features of the universe are inexplicable in the absence of a deity, he can no longer repudiate the concept of God as incoherent and accept all his criticisms of natural theology, especially not everything he says about order and design. Beyond this, however, one can only guess that he would want to bring the original text into line with the new Introduction and, among other things, iron out the conflict between his description of Einstein as espousing ‘atheism ... decked out in theist clothes’ (79) and his present view of the great scientist as an Aristotelian deist (13). Nor, I might add, is it clear that a book expressing Flew’s new position would find many takers. It is easy to poke holes in the theory of Intelligent Design and one can well imagine the mincemeat that Flew in an earlier incarnation would have made of the notion of a God beyond good and evil.

*God and Philosophy* is reasonably priced and well-produced (though lacking an index). Whether it warrants reprinting, however, is another matter (it has already been reprinted once). The original text is too academic for a polemic, too opinionated for a work of scholarship, and the additional material only muddies the water. (And why, I ask myself, the snide swipe at Rawls’ ‘apostles’ in footnote 11 of the new Introduction?) It would be different if Flew had a new or special angle and the thinkers from the 1950s and 1960s he targets continued to be seriously discussed, but he doesn’t and they aren’t. If one is looking for ‘a classic in the philosophy of religion’ (6), there are much better books, by Hume or Russell for example.

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