

News Article: JAF175

## ATHEISTS AND THEISTS ANALYZE ANTONY FLEW'S NEWFOUND DEISM

This article first appeared in the News Watch column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 28, number 3 (2005). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Oxford University-educated philosopher Antony Flew—son of a Methodist minister, atheist since age 15, and participant in C. S. Lewis's Socratic Club at Oxford—recently shifted from atheism to “positive belief in an Aristotelian God.”

Flew told the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL that his newfound deism has not affected his daily life. If Flew notices beauty in a garden, is he now inclined to think “God made that”?

“No,” he answered, matter-of-factly.

Flew has expressed some weariness with the frequency of inquiries from skeptics and journalists, but not with the opportunity to discuss his reasons for changing his mind. “I’ve never been afraid to admit that I was wrong about something,” Flew said by phone from his home in Reading, England. “I’m prepared to explain it to people who want an explanation.”

Flew has discussed his deism at length with philosopher Gary Habermas of Liberty University, Flew's occasional sparring partner in public debates. Habermas has turned their interview into a question-and-answer feature for the Winter 2005 *Philosophia Christi*, the journal of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

Habermas and Flew speak by phone with some frequency. Habermas told the JOURNAL that he began noticing changes in Flew in 2000. By early 2003, Habermas said, Flew described himself as “an atheist with big questions.” Philosopher Douglas Geivett of Biola University said he became aware of Flew's movement away from atheism when he received a personal and unsolicited letter in which Flew announced his acceptance of a certain argument for God's existence.

“Here's a guy who may be more open-minded than I thought,” Habermas said. “I think over the years we haven't taken him at his word when he says he goes where the evidence leads.”

The evidence, in this case, led to Flew's conclusion that naturalism was an inadequate explanation for how life began. “Darwin saw that there was a problem with the origin of life,” Flew told Stuart Wavell of the *Sunday Times*. “It is simply out of the question that the first living matter evolved out of dead matter and then developed into an extraordinary, complicated creature of which we have no examples. There must have been some intelligence.”

Flew has stressed repeatedly that he has come to believe in God only as the Creator, but not as a deity who has remained involved with His creation. In affirming belief in an Aristotelian God, Flew stresses that he has not come to believe in the God described by Islam or by Christianity. In both of these religions, Flew is troubled by teachings on hell—which he rejects as incompatible with God's holiness—and on what he describes as God functioning like a despot, demanding to be feared and obeyed.

“Even the greatest monsters of our time—like Hitler, Lenin, and Mao Zedong—might be subjected to a few millennia of hard labor, but not to an eternity of torture,” Flew told the JOURNAL. “If my argument is wrong, then I ought to be much more concerned about my fate in the universe, which is apparently in the hands of this monster [God].”

Flew says that he's not fond of *any* idea of eternal life, whether in hell or in heaven. Wavell of the *Sunday Times* wrote that when he pressed Flew on whether he yearned for proof of an afterlife or of a benign God, Flew "became cross" and said, "I don't want a future life. I want to be dead when I'm dead and that's an end to it. I don't want an unending life. I don't want anything without end."

Richard Carrier of The Secular Web wrote a critical review of Flew's changing views, first treating them with skepticism because of two previous false reports, in 2001 and 2003, that Flew had become a Christian, then deriding them after receiving letters of confirmation from Flew at the end of 2004. In a January 2005 update to his critical review, Carrier wrote that Flew "has not made any effort to check up on the current state of things in any relevant field...[and] has thus abandoned the very standards of inquiry that led the rest of us to atheism. It would seem the only way to God is to jettison responsible scholarship."

As Carrier noted, Flew wrote in his latest letter, "I am just too old at the age of nearly 82 to initiate and conduct a...radical controversy about the conceivability of the putative concept of God as a spirit." Carrier wrote, "This would appear to be his excuse for everything: he won't investigate the evidence because it's too hard. Yet he will declare beliefs in the absence of proper inquiry. Theists would do well to drop the example of Flew. Because his willfully sloppy scholarship can only help to make belief look ridiculous."

Douglas Geivett said that Carrier seemed concerned that Flew's new beliefs "would disturb people's faith that God *does not* exist." Geivett also expressed discomfort about Christians drawing too many conclusions from Flew's movement to deism. "Our apologetic does not depend on the conversion of a notable atheist, and I don't like the approach of 'He's one of us now, so there.' I'm much more concerned that Flew is given the space he needs to draw his own conclusions and report them on his own terms."

Geivett stresses the difference between Flew's new beliefs and historic deism. Historic deists were moving away from Christianity and toward atheism. Flew, however, seems to be moving in the opposite direction from his decades-long atheism.

Geivett believes deism gives greater breathing room than atheism to any philosopher who's willing to follow evidence where it leads. "There's a problem with staking a reputation on your denial of God's existence," he says. "It's much more difficult to retreat from that position."

"Flew's views are fluid and a little dynamic right now," Geivett says. "What he objects to in Christianity is the idea of double predestination—which many Christians also object to. Why that is such a sticking point...I don't quite understand."

Both Geivett and Habermas say they have enjoyed their friendship with Flew, who contributed a chapter to their book *In Defense of Miracles*. "He's a very amiable person," Geivett says. "I respect him, and I regret the churlish attitude of some who are scandalized by his intellectual honesty and his cautiously nuanced position."

Habermas counts Flew as one of several skeptic friends, and he is considering writing a paper on the importance of friendship with nonbelievers. "It's important that Christians have such friends, regardless of whether they're prepared to change their mind," Habermas said.

— Douglas LeBlanc