Flew’s Flawed Science

The late-in-life “conversion” of philosopher Antony Flew from atheism to belief in God has been widely reported in the media. In a recent interview with Gary Habermas, misleadingly titled “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism,” Flew explains his new position, which he identifies as deism rather than theism. Richard Carrier has also conducted a correspondence with Flew, which clarifies some of the issues.

Flew has not changed his mind on the inadequacy of the various philosophical arguments for God, which he very ably covered in his classic work, God and Philosophy. For example, he still does not buy into the moral argument, and remains unimpressed by the kalâm cosmological argument. However, he says he is impressed by recent claims that science has discovered evidence for God, although he admits to Carrier that he has not kept up with the scientific critiques of those arguments.

Flew has not completely reject the theistic revelation of scientific facts. As he tells Habermas, “I am open to it, but not enthusiastic about potential revelation from God. On the positive side, for example, I am very much impressed with physicist Gerald Schroeder’s comments on Genesis 1. That this biblical account might be scientifically accurate raises the possibility that it is revelation.”

Flew has also warmed to contemporary design arguments: “I think that the most impressive arguments for God’s existence are those that are supported by recent scientific discoveries. However, I think the argument to Intelligent Design is enormously stronger than it was when I first met it.”

Is Genesis “Scientifically Accurate”?

In his 1998 book, The Science of God, and other works, Gerald Schroeder attempts to reconcile the Bible with modern science. I will only address the particular claim that Flew finds impressive, that our current cosmological understanding of the history of the universe was revealed in Genesis.

Schroeder asserts that the six days of creation in the Bible really span 15.75 billion years of “cosmic time.” This he regards as a successful biblical prophecy, since it is a mere two billion years greater than the current best estimate of the age of the universe.

Let us see how Schroeder extracts this remarkable prophecy from Genesis. He obtains the cosmic time for creation by multiplying the six days of biblical time by the redshift of light at a moment in the early universe called “quark confinement.” The redshift tells us how much the frequency of a particular atomic spectral line decreases because of the expansion of the universe. That frequency, Schroeder argues, is the only proper clock for measuring cosmic time. At quark confinement, when atomic nuclei first form, the redshift is about a factor of a trillion.

Actually, Schroeder assumes a redshift factor of 9.5x10^17. A more precise value, by current estimates, is 4.4x10^18, which would have the six biblical days of creation last 72 billion years. So the biblical prophecy, by Schroeder’s own method of calculation, is over four times too high.

In any case, according to Schroeder’s choice of numbers, the first biblical day of creation is eight billion cosmic years long. Each succeeding day is half as long as the previous one in cosmic time, so, by the magic of the exponential function, we arrive at the time of Adam and Eve (plus or minus two billion years), at which moment conventional human time takes over. The 6,000 or so years from then to now, in human time, is insignificant on this scale, the last day of creation being 250 million cosmic years long.

As usual, prophecy is easy after the fact. Clearly, Schroeder played around with the numbers until he found that quark confinement gave him roughly the answer he wanted—and even then, he used the wrong number. But in any case, our universe did not begin at quark confinement. It actually began about a millionth of a second earlier, at the so-called Planck time. At this time, the redshift was 1.6x10^26. If Schroeder had used this redshift for his calculation, the six days of creation would have lasted over 10^12 cosmic years!

Schroeder claims he chose quark confinement since, in day one of Genesis, “light is separated from darkness.” But there was no light at quark confinement. It took about another 400,000 years for light to appear, when radiation finally “decoupled” from matter. If Schroeder had used the redshift at radiation decoupling for his calculation, the six days of creation would have lasted only 6,000 years (not to be confused with the 6,000 years since Adam and Eve).

When I first read The Science of God, I thought it was a clever spoof on religious apologetics. Come on, Gerald, admit you are pulling Antony’s leg!

In fact, the creation story in Genesis looks nothing like Big Bang cosmology—no matter how you spin it. In the Bible, the universe is a firmament and Earth is fixed and immovable (not to mention flat). In reality, the universe is expanding and Earth rotates about the sun. In the Bible, Earth is created in the first “day,” before the sun, moon, and stars. In reality, Earth did not form until nine billion years after the Big Bang and after the sun and many other stars.

Fine-Tuning and Intelligent Design

Next, let me turn to the two other
to life; life is fine-tuned to the universe. It is not surprising that we live in a universe suited for us—Earth rather than Mars—since some form of life might have developed naturally. So, he concluded, it had to be designed by God. Now we understand how eyes evolved several times by natural selection.

Today, Antony Flew cannot understand how the universe, so fine-tuned for the manufacture of the materials needed for living organisms, could have happened naturally. So, he concludes, it most likely had to be designed by at least some kind of minimal deity.

Apparently, Flew is unaware that physicists and cosmologists are not as totally stumped by fine-tuning as he seems to be. While slight changes in the constants of physics could make life as we know it impossible, what about life as we do not know it? We have no reason to believe that our kind of carbon-based life is the only form that is possible under every possible variation in constants and the laws of physics. I have shown that long-lived stars, which are regarded as necessary for the building of the universe, since some form of life might have developed in whatever way that lonely universe happened to come about. At least we do not currently have the knowledge to say otherwise.

Finally, Flew says, “the argument to Intelligent Design is enormously stronger than it was when I first met it.” I am surprised that such a noted philosopher cannot see the fatal flaws in the Intelligent Design argument, as exemplified by Michael Behe’s “irreducible complexity” and William Dembski’s “design inference.” They assert that a complex system can only arise out of something with high intelligence. Although complexity is difficult to define, we can reasonably expect a highly intelligent entity to be highly complex. Thus, it can only have arisen out of something even more intelligent and complex, in infinite regress. It’s Intelligent Designers all the way down, not Aristotle’s first cause, as Flew seems to think.

Fortunately, we can avoid an infinite regress. We can just stop at the world. There is no reason why the physical universe cannot be its own first cause. As we know from both everyday experience and sophisticated scientific observations, complex systems develop from simpler systems all the time in nature—with not even low intelligence required. A mist of water vapor can freeze into a snowflake. Winds can carve out great cathedrals in rock. Brontosaurs can evolve from bacteria.

And our relatively complex universe could have arisen out of the entity that is the simplest and most mindless of all—the void.

Contemporary scientific claims that Flew finds impressive—fine-tuning and Intelligent Design. These are no more than modernized variations on the ancient argument from design, which can be simply stated: I cannot understand how the universe and the enormous complexity of living things we see around us can have come about naturally. Therefore, they must have been created supernaturally.

In 1802, William Paley could not understand how the human eye, so fine-tuned for the collection of light and formation of images, could have developed naturally. So, he concluded, it had to be designed by God. Now we understand how eyes evolved several times by natural selection.

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Vic Stenger is Emeritus Professor of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Hawaii and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado.

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