A response to Flew on religion and falsifiability

Andrew Steane

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This essay is a response to an essay by the philosopher Antony Flew which was published in *Reason and Responsibility* (1968). I have included it here (on this science website) because I understand that the paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould posted Flew's essay on his website, implying either that he endorsed it or that he thought it valuable. When he wrote the essay, Flew was atheist. He later came to the view that one can infer some kind of intelligent origin to the natural world, but that does not change whatever arguments he was making in his 1968 essay.

Flew's essay is all about the fact that claims we make only have content if they are falsifiable in the scientific, Popperian sense. Suppose I assert "A, not B" but then it turns out that A is something meaningless such as "burgles are molfluous". It that case I would be asserting nothing at all and you do not need to bother about my claim. But a claim might have a surface appearance of meaning, such as "All roses are red" but then when we encounter a white rose it is claimed "oh the redness of roses is of a special sort, which can look white" then it may eventually emerge that the original claim about roses had no content: no matter what colour we find, either that colour is claimed to be a 'special' version of red when it is encountered in roses, or else it is denied that the flower in question was a rose. Flew wanted to point out that religious claims must not be like that if they are to command the attention of reasonable people.

In the following I first quote Flew's essay in full; then I react to it.

1 The essay

Quoted from A. Flew, writing in *Reason and Responsibility* (1968):

> Let us begin with a parable. It is a parable developed from a tale told by John Wisdom in his haunting and revolutionary article "Gods."[1] Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There

is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well's The Invisible Man could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"

In this parable we can see how what starts as an assertion, that something exists or that there is some analogy between certain complexes of phenomena, may be reduced step by step to an altogether different status, to an expression perhaps of a "picture preference" [2]. The Sceptic says there is no gardener. The Believer says there is a gardener (but invisible, etc.). One man talks about sexual behavior. Another man prefers to talk of Aphrodite (but knows that there is not really a superhuman person additional to, and somehow responsible for, all sexual phenomena).[3] The process of qualification may be checked at any point before the original assertion is completely withdrawn and something of that first assertion will remain (Tautology). Mr. Wells' invisible man could not, admittedly, be seen, but in all other respects he was a man like the rest of us. But though the process of qualification may be and of course usually is, checked in time, it is not always judicially so halted. Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.

And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger, the endemic evil, of theological utterance. Take such utterances as "God has a plan," "God created the world," "God loves us as a father loves his children." They look at first sight very much like assertions, vast cosmological assertions. Of course, this is no sure sign that they either are, or are intended to be, assertions. But let us confine ourselves to the cases where those who utter such sentences intended them to express assertions. (Merely remarking parenthetically that those who intend or interpret such utterances as crypto-commands, expressions of wishes, disguised ejaculations, concealed ethics, or as anything else but assertions, are unlikely to succeed in making them either properly orthodox or practically effective).

Now to assert that such and such is the case is necessarily equivalent to denying that such and such is not the case [4]. Suppose then that we are in doubt as to what someone who gives vent to an utterance is asserting, or suppose that, more radically, we are sceptical as to whether he is really asserting anything at all, one way of trying to understand

(or perhaps to expose) his utterance is to attempt to find what he would regard as counting against, or as being incompatible with, its truth. For if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of the assertion. And anything which would count against the assertion, or which would induce the speaker to withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken, must be part of (or the whole of) the meaning of the negation of that assertion. And to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion [5]. And if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion. When the Sceptic in the parable asked the Believer, "Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" he was suggesting that the Believer's earlier statement had been so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all.

Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding "there wasn't a God after all" or "God does not really love us then." Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made; — God's love is "not merely human love" or it is "an inscrutable love," perhaps and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that "God loves us as a father (but of course . . .)." We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say "God does not love us" or even "God does not exist"? I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?"

Notes

1. P.A.S., 1944-5, reprinted as Ch. X of Logic and Language, Vol. I (Blackwell, 1951), and in his Philosophy and Psychoanalysis (Blackwell, 1953).

2. Cf. J. Wisdom, "Other Minds," Mind, 1940; reprinted in his Other Minds (Blackwell, 1952).

3. Cf. Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, II, 655-60.

4. For those who prefer symbolism: $p = \neg\neg p$.

5. For by simply negating $\neg p$ we get $p := \neg\neg p = p$.

Antony Flew, *Theology and Falsification*, University 1950-51; from Joel Feinberg, ed., *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic*

Problems of Philosophy, (Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1968, pp. 48-49.)

2 Response

My response is in three parts. First I give some comments on the style and unstated assumptions lurking in Flew's text. Then, under 'Evidence' I give a list of evidences for the validity of Christian commitment (and I mean by that, approximately, a willingness to affirm the mainstream historic Christian creed combined with genuine efforts to live accordingly). Then, under 'Falsification' I give a list of things which, if they were otherwise, would suffice to make me abandon the kind of Christian religious commitment which I hold.

2.1 Background

Flew's discussion of pain and love is telling, but he is a little unfair at the end in implying that a 'believer' would offer passive sophistry in a situation of acute human need. Of course no sympathetic person would respond that way. Religious commitment of the type I endorse is not well described by the word 'believer'; it is all about being a *follower*. Philosophers tend to bang on about belief as if religion were a form of philosophising. But religion is not that. It is a way of life.

The answer to the human father's questions in the story does not consist in any theological statements at all. It consists in practical support and empathy. Mere theory can wait. The faithful response consists in acknowledging his situation without holding him at arm's length or treating him as a case; it consists in helping him to navigate deeply painful waters without despair.

Situations like this are, in many respects, unspeakable—not capable of being adequately framed in passive speech. The specific cancerous tumour is owing to the randomness inherent in an incompletely controlled world. How unspeakable. The anguish of the people involved is owing to their deep love for one another. How inexpressible. The absence of a cure is owing to all the complex strands that have led to this place. How useless. The whole developing situation is supported in being by whatever supports the patterns of the universe. The creative possibilities, the lives that can be lived even in such circumstances, are owing to people and God finding a way forward together. The sign of God's concern is there, and it is clear enough if you take a look in the right place. It is written on the fabric of the human heart. *God* is the name for that reality which is expressed,

through the actions of all concerned, when those actions are wise, loving and constructive: a reality, furthermore, offering resources of wisdom and love which are otherwise beyond our capacities.

Flew speaks for many when he says "His heavenly father reveals no obvious sign of concern". The Christian response consists largely in volunteering for the job of showing signs of concern. More can be said about pain and suffering, but here I am focussing on the purely philosophical points so I will move on.

Flew's parable of the invisible gardener is valid, but one should not misconstrue it. It implies strictly what he says and no more. It is a device to show that statements can sometimes be shown to be erroneous not by direct contradiction, but by demonstrating that they can be whittled away until they have no content—the death by a thousand qualifications. It does not follow that statements about God necessarily have that character and it does not follow that God is like an invisible gardener. The word, 'God', for theists, corresponds closely to what the word 'truth' means for atheists. It corresponds to that which is absolutely present and at work, but not as a third party alongside the others. Truth is embodied and enacted. That is how it is with God. The difference between theist and atheist is that we think truth has opinions about us, not just that we have opinions about truth.

Here are some examples of religious assertions that need almost no qualifications, and they are illustrative of thousands that one could make: "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: ... this Jesus, God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (Peter speaking in *Acts* chapter 2); "if we admit to him our failings, he [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our failings and purify our motives" (the first letter of John, loose translation); "after I prayed and had the help of these fellow-followers, I have managed to escape my drug addiction and turn my life around; I think I have had God's help and I am going to stick with God". "We buried the body and expressed to Truth our thanks mixed with sorrow. Truth said nothing audible, gave no special sign, but this simple act of ours helped. Afterwards there was a kind of largeness of space and a quiet. A place to be. We don't want miraculous voices and signs here anyway—we prefer the respect that receives our gesture without either endorsing it or improving on it. But we find, with hindsight, that the deliberate act of opening ourselves towards Truth in honesty and humility has enlarged our spirits, and this is the kind of support that we really value. We have said Truth, but we mean also Wisdom/Love/Beauty, and That One Whom Moses called *I am*, and Whom Jesus called Father."

The parable of the explorers and their plot of ground is a classic example of the muddled way philosophers go about approaching religious questions. They think we are like passive explorers forming opinions and pontificating. But that is not what human life is like. The parable is missing a central

ingredient. It is missing a pair of people, busily working the plot, one of them saying "I am tired of this work, but I'll keep going because the invisible gardener has shown us enough to tell that it's part of something beautiful, and I think he is doing it with us by helping us to do it better" and the other saying "no, we're on our own, best admit it." We do not stand like passive investigators in respect to life and all its questions; we are participants who cannot postpone deciding what to live by, and we each have *direct* access to things like conscience and aesthetics, without the need for scientific analysis.

2.2 Evidence

Antony Flew makes two main points: first, if there were no empirical evidence for God then there would be no sense in believing that there is a God. Secondly, if anyone wants to present a claim, and recommend it, then they should be ready to explain what would suffice to convince them they are wrong.

Regarding the first point, on empirical evidence, the apostle Peter wrote to the followers in northern Turkey in these terms: "Be ready at any time to give to any one who asks a reason for the hope that you have within you, but do it with gentleness and reverence." The evidence is like a tapestry, not a tower. It involves many strands which weave together into something not unavoidably obvious, but weighty enough to command further commitment. It is a combination of themes which I shall list here.

First there is the origin of physicality, both in the past and in whatever is needed for there to exist stuff in the present. Let's call this Y. We don't embark on theist claims about this Y at the outset. We just acknowledge that physical existence is not to be taken for granted. The same goes for values (such as the preference for justice over injustice, mercy over revenge, and so on). Next there is the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics, and beautiful mathematics at that, in describing the natural world (appeals to an anthropic principle seem a bit lame here). Our rational sense suggests that we inhabit a reality of which reason is a part; one in which the mathematical landscape, for example, is not arbitrary. Our moral sense, the apparent validity of notions such as 'ought' again points to realities beyond physicality and cause and effect, that call upon us.[1] This is not the claim that moral principles are inaccessible to atheist philosophy; it is rather the claim that those principles, however accessed, are not simply physical processes. They are part of a larger scheme of things, whatever that scheme is. This is enough to get us comfortably beyond naturalism, but it doesn't introduce us to the personal nature of Y. It tells us Y's title but not Y's Name.

But this Y is also connected to beauty, and beauty is not a human invention. Our most profound experiences stretch us towards something we

[1]See A. .Steane, *Faithful to Science*, OUP, also my *Liberating Science* which unpacks the relation to evolutionary biology more fully.

glimpse but do not attain, something that calls us out of ourselves, and that is a greater not a lesser than us. But if this glimpsed reality is truly greater than ourselves, then it cannot be an 'it', a thing—it must attain or exceed personhood. It must be not It but Thou. And that is precisely what we find. That is, it is a very wide experience, in the contemplative tradition in all parts of the world, that solitude, silence and wonder can lead to an experience which is like being in the presence of one who could know. Such experiences may come unexpectedly in a most powerful form, or else they may be found more gently by those willing to seek and to learn how. We sit or kneel, we allow ourselves to be, just to be, and we learn, tentatively, with a tiny bit of willingness aided and clarified by the determination to avoid superstition, that our whole life is a knot of light held by living Light. The very structure of our body is a weaving, and the very structure of our thinking is not completely owned by us, but rather given and respected; *regarded*. And then we recall that there is a widespread human witness, among very many sane and good people, that God may be correctly thought of in personal, or at least not in impersonal, terms. For example, there is the experience of people like Ruth, David, Jeremiah, Mary Magdelene and John, St Antony, Julian of Norwich, John Wesley, William and Catherine Gladstone, Elizabeth Fry, Óscar Romero, to name a few.

Next there is the degree to which the ancient Hebrews exceeded their neighbours in the development of notions of universal justice, and the remarkable cohesion of the Jewish community ever since ancient times. This community, though small and vulnerable, has outlasted all the ancient empires which repeatedly overran its tiny homeland, and survives to the present day despite the most appalling acts of savagery against it.[2]

Next there is the remarkable energy of the Christian movement. A tiny sect of a backwater of the Roman empire, persecuted and executed on all sides, has been not just unkillable but uncontainable. Often obstreperous but repeatedly renewing itself, it has become the largest movement of any kind in the world. This is not to say that mere numbers are a signal of truth, but rather that the restless energy and renewal, while staying true to the vision of Jesus, are signs of something truly creative that, to use Jonathan's Sacks' comment on Abrahamic monotheism more generally, "bodies forth a vision of a more gracious world".

More generally, religious practice of all kinds (whether in primitive or modern cultures) has always been an attempt by humans to relate themselves to the ultimate conditions of their existence, and the idea that those

[2]Some of those acts were perpetrated by Christians, and some by people paying lip-service to Christianity, but it is absolutely obvious to me that antisemitism is no part of any true discipleship of the Jewish rabbi we call Jesus. Indeed, it is my experience that following Jesus has promoted a growing respect and welcome in myself towards Jews and all things Jewish. I hope this doesn't sound patronizing; I am fully aware that Christians must look like young upstarts to the community of Abraham.

ultimate conditions are all about goodness and beauty and loving relationships between people has been tremendously creative in practice. Obviously one might resist the idea that 'God' is needed, but in fact humans are at their happiest when they are allowed to embrace God—allowed to be unashamed at placing all their highest values and happiest experiences in a personal setting, as offered to God or shared with God. And people find courage when they are allowed to place all their bitterest grief in a personal setting, offered to God or shared with God. And people are liberated to do better when they are allowed to be forgiven. But if the injured party is no longer available, the universe cannot forgive you. Only God can.

All the above is rather tentative and ill-defined but it becomes more grounded and tangible when we see it at work in lives that impress us, especially that of Jesus of Nazareth. Although, for most of us, when one first reads of his life and teaching they do not immediately bowl you over, yet when you begin to get the radical idea of what he is talking about, and then go back to listen again, you find more and more of what seemed enigmatic or objectionable becomes part of a coherent whole, as long as it is seen in a larger not a smaller light, and this whole is unsettling and challenging, yet stunning and irresistible. Add to this the physical evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—small evidence, you may say, but it is there nonetheless in the records of witnesses and what happened to them subsequently—and add to that the evidence of transformation of human life for the better when people follow Christ truly. This last is important but I acknowledge it needs to be argued; I will return to it below.

There is something inhuman about the idea of any human individual being the ultimate centre of their own meaning. Atheism, at its best, avoids that by appealing to notions of reason and beauty and to standards of moral behaviour, and to a communal effort to share ideas and agree the way forward. Jesus does not speak against this, but shows us the idea of *partnership with God*—he shows us that this communal effort goes better when we 'make room' for God, when we think of ourselves as a family whose parents (God and the universe) are teachers not dictators. And furthermore, human dictators and totalitarian systems (including the dictator in all of us) are readily opposed by the simple but powerful observation that they cannot usurp the place of God.

This is a liberating idea, because we feel that individual people are more important than abstract examples of beauty and than power-structures, so that only a reality that could know people by name ought to command our allegiance—anything else would be either oppressive or beneath us.

In this Section I am referring to God in a positive sense, but that word is widely misused, especially in religious abuse. This is when people mistreat others and make their actions worse still by claiming some sort of religious endorsement, or by hiding under a system of religious authority. Since this is one of the most ugly things in the world it is liable to suffice, on its own,

to make people run a mile from whatever that authority claims to represent. Any Christian presentation ought to grapple with this issue, because oppressive religion is the aspect of human injustice which Jesus himself most frequently and forcefully opposed. The problem is that although Jesus succeeded in greatly suppressing it in the community immediately around him, religious abuse has reasserted itself with added force in subsequent centuries whenever it has been practised in his name. The important point, for present purposes, is to recognise this and take appropriate action. And that appropriate action is not the unjust, untruthful one of simply opposing all religion. As long as one is not suffering under the kind of cultish manipulation which bad religion adopts, it is not hard to tell apart good religion from bad religion. It is not just unjust but also untruthful to lump them together. Bad science does not compromise the goodness of good science. It is the same with religion.

The next evidence is what scientific efforts have discovered about the nature of the physical world. The subtlety of quantum entanglement opens our minds to the possibility of subtlety and richness in our own physical nature; the combination of openness and stability in physical process makes possible our own free agency, and also God's, while respecting the patterns called laws of nature. The cosmos itself seems to speak of majestic beauty at a grand scale, combined with abundant life without micro-management at a local scale. Darwinian evolution seems to be about improvising creative solutions using humble material, which is exactly what we think God is about.

Next there is the way in which forgiveness and mercy seems to mesh so deeply with human life and with artistic expression. Forgiveness is very often the underlying theme of great works of literature; mercy is very often the mood of the most moving popular songs and the message of the greatest works of orchestral music.

Next there is the role of God in human relationships. A paragraph from the book of *Ecclesiastes* has been adopted in many a sermon for a wedding ceremony:

> "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

The final phrase comes almost as an after-thought, but it is a telling one. It has been immediately appropriated by countless couples as a metaphor for God's role, strengthening their marriage by interweaving with their comradeship. And so it has proved: marriages lived this way have been the

better for it—the happier and more secure. This has had untold benefits, especially to children.

More generally, we find that when both parties share a sense that God is the convener of human interactions, then business and commerce become more trusting and fluid, and friendship deepens into brotherhood and sisterhood. The serious objection of intra- and inter-religious conflict must also be squarely faced, of course, but bad religion does not negate the goodness and reality of the peaceful community life that can be found in a framework that acknowledges God and has a high regard for the integrity of other people. It is both/and, not either/or of the ancient Greek and ancient Hebrew genius. The Hebrews represent Fellowship under God; the Greeks represent Delighting in Humanity. These are not mutually exclusive but mutually supportive. Fellowship under God is enriched by Delighting in Humanity—by full engagement with human need and human creativity; Delighting in Humanity is made possible by Fellowship under God—that is what gets the moral vision clear and generates the grass-roots energy.

Much of the evidence for God is of this kind. It is not a truth that falls out to mere academic appraisal, because it is too big for that. The challenge of the highest truth is not to the intellect only, but to the whole person. You have to obey it, live by it. When we learn to acknowledge God in the right way, we learn how everything else can fall into place, in a way that allows the human community to flourish. For example, modern democratic politics is not based on the ancient Greek version, as people often assume, but on a much more truly democratic and liberating model worked out in seventeenth century Europe, and it was developed very largely by religious people drawing on Biblical ideas. The case is presented by Eric Nelson in *The Hebrew Republic* and summarized by Jonathan Sacks in *The Great Partnership*. The idea of secular politics was not conceived by secularists against religious reluctance, but by religious people as a way of respecting liberty of conscience and as the right way to avoid abuse of power (the fact that kings are not holy is stated loud and clear in the Hebrew Bible). The decision to let politics be secular was advocated by theists in the name of God, as well as by atheists, because we should separate political power from the arena where we work out our ultimate meaning and values. By this separation we avoid the danger of politicians reigning supreme, which is just as dangerous as kings and popes reigning supreme (as the terror of the French and the Russian revolutions showed).

The next evidence for theism is the feeling of *roundedness* and of having *come home*, combined with a sense of purpose, of mission, but not an anguished sense: one has a part to play but it does not all depend on oneself.

Finally, there is the witness of people one may meet in the contemporary world, the practical wisdom on offer through witnessing communities, and the present experience of hope, reconciliation and a fresh start. For example, I am pretty sure I would have made a complete mess of major parts of my

own life if I had not had the benefit of (and the willingness to receive) wise Christian council and the general moral support which comes from being part of a decent community which values wisdom and commitment. I also, in all frankness and honesty, consider that I would have been less generous with money throughout my adult life had I not turned to Christ (I'm not claiming to be generous, only less miserly than I might have been. I mention it because this sort of thing matters to me, and someone asked.) What encourages me is partly the attraction of the way of life to which I think all this calls me—a way which calls for both a sense of gratitude, of gift and reverence in every aspect of life and nature, and also an insistence on intellectual thoroughness and accuracy, and moral courage, as well as just plodding along doing whatever you ought to be doing.

The assertion I have read, sometimes made by people who are intelligent enough to know better, to the effect that Christian faith is not based in evidence, is utterly untrue and displays great ignorance.

If these evidences are leading in the right direction, then the further possibility emerges that God is not elusive at all, but completely unavoidable. The voice in us that keeps calling us towards integrity and fair-mindedness and cheerfulness and empathy and all our other highest values is none other than God's voice. The insights we get when we are at our most inspired are from G. Such urges are not mere by-products of the model-making survival-machine that is our brain, but rather, the capacity to receive them is the primary function of our brain.

You see, I have moved from Y to G, from the impersonal to the personal, not because the personal character to ultimate Truth is just like human personhood—it is not—but because personal categories are more adequate to express what is going on.

When artists, musicians, scientists, diplomats, engineers and all the rest have experienced inspiration, it is because they have, in their own field, managed to 'walk alongside God' for a moment and have their eyes opened to some striking possibility. This never-ending fountain is not to be anthropomorphised, but human inspiration does amount to our reaching up to a larger space, in somewhat the same way that trees lift their heads to the sun and air, and it is not an empty space, nor an imaginary one nor an invented one. And furthermore, the exquisite experience of coming upon a new vista in thought-space does, as a matter of fact, often take the form of an intensely personal experience, in which one is not alone, and a view is shared.

In the following I will adopt the personal pronoun "Hm" for God, which is a way to be brief while also seeking to avoid gendering God.

Someone conceived of the wheel, and the fishing rod, and the bowl and the spoon because they were for a moment inspired with a bright idea. We learned to make houses and combine harvesters and, yes, weapons too, because God taught us how to shape the world. G is the inspirer behind all

our art and science, and the convener of all relationships of persons. When we conceived of using a weapon to protect someone from a hungry animal which didn't know any better, we sensed G's approval; when we conceived of using a weapon to control someone, we sensed G's resistance. Once we begin to recognize Hm we find Hm more and more, by sensing something in common between what we experience in prayer and in the appreciation of beauty, and what we experience when meeting people whose lives G has moulded, and by slowly grasping what Jesus was talking about all along. (I have picked out Jesus of Nazareth quite deliberately; he does not represent outright denial of other teachers but rather is the standard by which they can be appraised). But of course this recognition is a faith-venture. It is like deciding that other human beings are *persons* whom we can meet, not just robots that we can use. You can't prove that another entity is a person who deserves trust and respect, you can only decide to treat them as one. You can't prove that the source to which you owe your life has personal attributes such as character beauty, you can only be willing to admit it.

In his essay, Anthony Flew wonders whether each strand of such evidence withstands scrutiny. They all do; not unambiguously or easily, but none dissipates altogether. But it is important, crucial, that they knit together to form a picture of what it is to be human, and of what people should try to do, that is worthy of acceptance. If *the way things are* informed us of a Higher Power that demanded we be cruel to each other, then the proper response would be to resist and rebel. If *the way things are* involved a Higher Power that promoted love, but that could not command respect, then we should (logically and rightly) rise above it—or indeed, help it die, as happens to the Authority in Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy. But God earns all respect, not by being powerful, but by emptying Hmself and not asking anyone to go where G would not go.

Belief in God is natural—why fight it?

We fight it because we suspect that we are not quite good enough for God, or else we sense that the notion we and others have of 'god' is contemptible—'god' is not good enough for us. Both attitudes miss the point. The contemptible notions of 'god'—the Inscrutible Punisher and Rewarder, the Big Brother in the sky, the Unconscious Life-Force, the Enveloping Mother, the Supreme Technologist, etc.—are tempting to sophisticated minds precisely because they can be dismissed so easily. Having dismissed them, what remains is what we must respond to. Then we fall down on the other side, suspecting that God's main business with us is to condemn us. It is not—but it is to create new life in us, a painful process. When we suspect we are not good enough we are quite right, but to dwell on that is again to miss the point—the point is, are we willing to receive a new kind of life, one for which we have the basic physical apparatus already, but of which the first movement is one of asking and freely receiving? Are we willing to be loved?

2.3 Falsification, or what the disproof could be like

Anthony Flew quite fairly asks people in any position to say what would suffice to convince them they were wrong. Here are some things which might do the job for me.

1. If it turned out the experiences described by Ernest Gordon in "Miracle on the River Kwai"[3] (1963, new edition Fount 1995) and the those described by Jackie Pullinger in "Chasing the dragon" (Hodder and Stoughton 1980) were largely misrepresented.

2. If convincing historical records emerged that the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth was never placed in the tomb visited by the two Marys, Salome, Simon Peter and another disciple, or else that the corpse was identified elsewhere after they found the tomb empty, this would be deeply unsettling. One still has the evidence of the resurrection appearances, and the history of the early Christian movement, especially Pentecost, but one would begin to wonder whether it is after all a strictly human affair. If it could be shown that Jewish people in the first century had a tendency to invent resurrection stories, and the ability to present them in a realistic style of writing, this would be equally troubling.[4] I would probably carry on submitting myself to the challenge of Jesus and believing in the power of forgiveness in a forlorn sort of way.

3. Onlookers have repeatedly (indeed with almost monotonous regularity) tried to argue that the main ideas championed by the apostle Paul in his surviving letters (on which much Christian thought has been based) are at odds with the message coming over from Jesus of Nazareth as he is portrayed in the four *gospels*. This supposed divergence has been unconvincing, but I am here indicating what sort of thing could in principle convince me I had backed the wrong horse. It would be an argument which showed that my position was just a 'belief system' based on a hotch-potch of clever but ultimately misleading religious invention.

4. If it could be shown that all talk of God is so shot through with incoherence as to be simply incredible, as some philosophers maintain, this would also suffice to convince me I was wrong. I would like to say that I take this point about philosophical coherence very seriously. It has given me a considerable background of painful anxiety over a long

[3] Not to be confused with the 1957 film called "Bridge on the River Kwai".

[4] The example of Philostratus' biography of Apollonius of Tyana can be used to illustrate what religious invention in the second century Roman world looked like; the profound contrasts with the New Testament material are much more telling than the shallow similarities.

period—the anxiety that I may be either deluded or dishonest with myself. It helps to realise that we are all somewhat deluded, one way or another, and obviously to turn to atheism simply in hopes of avoiding this type of anxiety would itself be a form of dishonesty. However, again and again as I have read philosophical treatises that recommend atheism I have found the arguments veering away from the uncaused active reality that we all face and that Jesus knew better than I do, towards various human constructions. Those human constructions—those attempts to define God—are all failed attempts and are largely incredible, but my experience of science helps here. It is true that all talk of God is imperfect and to some extent misleading, but this is true of all human discourse. For example, Newton's Laws of Motion are to some extent misleading, but that does not make them useless nor does it render them completely untrue. So philosophy (in the sense of the analysis of language and logic) would have to do more than show that existing language about God is incoherent—it would have to show that religious discourse does not look like an increasingly articulate approximation to a coherent language that attempts to engage not just with God but with all of human life (because you cannot do the first without doing the second—for example you cannot describe God's rejection of racism and misogyny unless you also reject racism and misogyny in human affairs).

5. If it could be shown that the arguments about science and Christian faith which I have presented elsewhere were of little substance, this would strongly undermine my position. Those arguments were intended to show not just a lack of contradiction between science and faithful discipleship of Jesus, but the positive truth of a common spirit of discovery, in which the science is part of, and strongly motivated by, the discipleship.

6. If cognitive behaviour therapy, which has a strong overlap with Christian ideas about training one's habits of thought, were shown to be ill-conceived, this would also be a big problem. If basic ideas of Viktor Frankl's *logotherapy* were overturned, this could falsify my position. For example, Frankl proposes the *will to meaning* as a surer guide than the *will to pleasure* in the promotion of human flourishing, and as a deeper principle than the *will to power* in human motivation. If this is wrong then I think my position would fall with it. And notice: if I am right then large swathes of social and economic theory have been wrong.

7. I am no friend to much, even most, of what passes for 'religion' in the world. Therefore I share a great deal of the attraction that an atheist must feel for the idea of a complete evaporation or demise of

all supernatural talk and thought. "Imagine there's no heaven," as the song goes, "...above us only sky". Compared to a great deal of religious expression, this sounds really refreshing and liberating. It sounds like it could work as a basis for happy human existence. This does not, strictly, constitute a logical proof or falsification. People correctly object that no-one should propose their religious idea on the basis that it is 'good for society' but only on the basis that it is true; the same goes for an anti-religious idea. However, if a seriously atheist society were developed, and proved to offer a good stab at achieving social justice, moral progress, and happy people, in such a way that a reappearance of Jesus' message would not help, then I would admit this would constitute strong evidence against my position.[5]

8. Two of the most telling criticisms that are widely made about the Christian movement are that it generated religious wars and imperialism, and that it delayed or obstructed the emancipation of women. I have looked into both of these, and the more I have done so the more I have come to feel that the truth is not as simple as these criticisms suggest. The Christian movement does have great failings but there are also great positive parts of the account. It has generated suspicion and violent conflict, and also helped groups and nations to resolve tensions peaceably. It has been slow to see women for who they are, and also pioneered the extending of rights and education to woman before other elements of society were ready to do so. The right way to handle this history is not to suggest that the positives outweigh the failings, but to ask whether the movement shows the ability to learn from mistakes and generate better models of human society while remaining true to its central principles. I think it passes this test, but if it did not then that would suffice to critically undermine its claims on our allegiance.

9. If the communal life centred on what Jesus showed us faltered in its ability to attract people of all kinds. If it were not multi-cultural, or did not appeal to people gifted in all different ways, and in all circumstances, such as tinkers, tailors, doctors, lawyers, rich people, poor people, beggars, thieves, academics. If it could not enable gay people to flourish alongside heterosexual people, in a common recognition of what really matters about human life. If it could be shown to be a property of one part of the world, which could not find equally valid expression in all parts of the world, without diminishing the richness of different cultural traditions.

[5]Note, however, that neither atheism nor any particular religious creed should ever be imposed as a political or socially-engineered programme (by criminalizing, ostracizing or otherwise de-humanizing people who object). When this has been attempted it has led to some of the most murderous episodes in human history.

10. If Christian commitment ceased generating great art and architecture. Not the mediocre or tame work which sometimes calls itself 'Christian', but the excellent and deep work which grapples with the fullness and the pain of what life is, and which offers uplifting and sustainable public and private spaces. (Think J. S. Bach; Jane Austin; T. S. Eliot and the like, as opposed to modern pop culture.)

11. If Christian commitment undermined or thwarted our ability to do great science. This happened in the late nineteenth century in the Roman church, and in the twentieth century in the U.S.A. in conservative protestant churches, which I consider to be a weighty criticism. Conservative congregations have mishandled biblical writings and discouraged their young adults from scientific careers. However there is a strong tradition of good science in the Christian movement more widely, over a long period and continuing at the highest levels today, so that it is reasonable to hold that the problem is not permanent and can be corrected. It is mostly owing to a cultural clash: a reaction to a different kind of mishandling of science perpetrated by other strands of contemporary culture (for example in radical behaviourism, or presentations of science as if it were poisonous to hard-won freedoms and principles of justice).

12. I have been struck by the fact that in the Second World War (1939-45) there was widespread good behaviour from American G.I.s and from English servicemen and women. This is in contrast to soldiers from Germany, Russia, Japan and various other countries. I won't attempt a complete survey. I think this is owing in large part to long-term Christian influence on the understanding of the role and responsibilities of armed forces. Obviously Germany and Russia had also experienced long-term Christian influence but this was a time when that influence had been actively opposed by the state apparatus for five years and twenty years, respectively. Meanwhile the U.S.A. had a largely Christian ethos in its armed services at that time, and the U.K. too. Another way to disprove the validity of Christian attitudes to life would be to show that they do not, overall, enhance the combination of courage, chivalry and sound judgement which makes a good soldier.

13. Various people known to me seem to me to have succeeded in allowing their faith in Jesus to mesh with and mould the way they live, and they have become deeply impressive. Some have sacrificed income and comfort in order to live among struggling communities, encouraging links between churches and overlooked groups, for example developing hostels for people with drug addiction problems. Others have focused their attention on developing AIDS vaccine and health care programmes in parts of Africa. Others have worked with great

patience and perseverance to manage community health care in the UK in the context of cuts and demoralization. Others have handled a combination of setbacks in both work and family which would have knocked the stuffing out of most people, but have called upon a well-spring of hope, determination and hard work to build up a business and support the community around them. If one of these were to announce that loyalty to Jesus simply did not 'cut it' any more in such situations, this would be a strong suggestion to me that I was wrong.

14. The generality of people who recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their 'Chief' may be compared to the patients in a large hospital. Our soul-problems are revealed through our faulty attitudes and behaviour, and every type of fault is present. In one wing there may be found people whose intellectual gifts are strong and whose abstract thinking is sound and of high quality, but many of these people suffer from trouble making connections to the rest of humanity, and may over-value ideas above practical action. In another wing you may find sadly misled people with bizarre ideas, but who nevertheless show much generosity and give practical help to others as best they can. A fair critic would try to assess all of this. An unfair one could point to the practical failures of the thinkers and the intellectual failures of the simpletons.[6] This parable of the hospital risks being sanctimonious, but I am making it in all seriousness, because it is the right comparison to make, and it points up the right way to falsify my position. The criticism which would hit home would be to show not that patients are ill, but that the hospital is not making them better, or that better treatments are available elsewhere. If it were shown that the process of developing faith in Jesus of Nazareth (as indicated by some reasonably fair measure of the genuine article freely chosen, rather than, for example, reliance on religion, or conformity in response to political or social pressure) showed no correlation with also developing creative and hopeful thinking and behaviour, healthy psychology, and outgoing actions, then I would have to conclude that such faith should not be encouraged.

15. If the response to suffering that is offered in the most thoughtful Christian responses (e.g. in science and medicine, as well as in humble acts of companionship and in literature such as Dostoyevsky) were found to be just not good enough, too cerebral or too artificial or just not working in practice, then I would listen hard to that and either shut up or try to discover something more helpful.

[6] A doctor *within* the hospital should behave like the unfair critic, and point up all the patients' faults, because they are the soul-sicknesses from which the patients want relief and ultimately freedom. This is different from the critic because such a doctor is already committed to the patients and to the hospital.

16. If someone could show convincingly that forgiveness is not the right way to overcome injury, this would certainly overturn my position. I should emphasize that this forgiveness is a matter of one soul deciding not to wish the harming of another soul, and it is a deciding not to define the other in terms of the hurt done—it is to give the relationship a fresh start. It does not necessarily mean that a crime should not be punished. A parent may forgive the one who murdered their child, and at the same time believe it right and proper that the murderer go to jail, but not to a cruel and unusual punishment. Law courts represent, in part, a communal effort to respect human dignity by holding people accountable. Forgiveness allows the one forgiven the chance to change, and the one forgiving the chance to cease being a victim. It does not mean that their pain will cease, but it will change it into a different type of pain, one which will do no harm to their soul.

    I mention forgiveness in this section because, although I have described it rather inadequately, I want to emphasize how central it is. If a combination of psychology, neuro-science, sociology, etc. eventually gave strong evidence that forgiveness, practiced with due care to the sensitivities it involves, tends to diminish people, or to thwart their flourishing, then I would be wrong. I say this aware that forgiveness sometimes gets close to a power-play, or can be abused as such. However it remains the right word to use to talk about the idea that we are all agents whose value and dignity partly consists in being allowed to be responsible. If someone could show me that some other attitude were better, such as somehow ignoring wrong, or calling it merely a behaviour-pattern to be treated in purely medical terms, or simply deciding to sever relations with those who hurt us, then this would suffice to falsify my position. I should emphasize that this kind of forgiveness does not involve turning oneself into a doormat, nor should it reduce anyone's determination to oppose evil. In a desperate case one may even be called upon to kill one person in order to defend others, such as in the case of the plot to kill Hitler, but one hopes that some spark of humanity may have remained in that husk, some residual forgivable fearful doubter buried inside the insane dictator.

2.4 And in return

I have answered the question asked by Anthony Flew. Or at least, I have given that part of an answer which can be given in a written document in about ten pages.

The question must also be offered back.

If you assert atheism, then what in principle could happen that would show you you were wrong about that? What would suffice to falsify your position?—What evidence would you take as sufficient, or at least suggestive,

that you might be wrong about the nature of that truth which exceeds what the physical world can express?

What sort of evidence, or coming together of evidence, would tend to make you suspect that the Eternal Thou can be encountered at the level of our personhood, and not just on other levels? Could anything, even in principle, imply that love is something other than a lucky by-product of primordial random jostling?

What sort of evidence would suffice to make you look further in the direction I am pointing?