

Antony Flew on Religious Language

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Abstract

Here's an overview of one of the more ingenious attempts to criticize religious belief. Antony Flew argues that if the religious won't allow anything to count as evidence against what they believe, then they don't actually believe anything. The religious aren't making *false* claims; rather, they're *not making any claims at all*.

Flew and the Parable of the Gardener

Some criticisms of religious belief aim to show the belief is false. A more radical kind of criticism is that sentences like 'God exists' *fail to assert anything at all*. Religious utterances don't even get as far as claiming something capable of being true or false. One of the best-known criticisms of this sort is offered by the philosopher Antony Flew. Flew explains his position by borrowing and adapting a parable due to another philosopher – John Wisdom. Here's Flew's version of the parable.

Suppose two explorers discover a clearing in the jungle. They are struck by the many flowers and weeds growing there. The first explorer thinks that there must be a gardener who tends the clearing. But the second explorer is convinced there's no gardener. So, in order to see which of them is correct, they decide to set up camp in the clearing and keep close watch. They never see anyone else. 'You see? There's no gardener', says the second explorer. 'Not so fast', says the first explorer. 'Perhaps he's *invisible*.'

So the explorers put an electrified barbed wire fence round the clearing. They also patrol

its perimeter day and night with bloodhounds. Yet there's still no sign of a horticultural visitor. They never hear anyone cry out because they've been shocked by the fence. The dogs never bark. Nor does the fence ever twitch in the slightest.

Still, the first explorer sticks with his belief: 'There is an invisible, intangible, gardener. A gardener unaffected by electric shocks. A gardener who makes no sound, who leaves no tracks, and who has no scent for our dogs to pick up. The gardener comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.'

Finally, the second explorer becomes exasperated: 'But what remains of your original assertion?' he says. 'Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'

Flew suggests that if someone endlessly whittles away at what might count as evidence against their belief, so that, eventually, nothing is ever allowed to falsify it, then there's no belief left.

Of course, our first explorer might still *think* he is committed to the truth of a claim, but he's just mistaken about that. As Flew puts it, 'Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so.'



Flew thought a similar objection can be raised against those who say they believe in a benevolent God, but then won't allow anything ever to falsify their belief. Of course they may say 'God created the world', 'God has a plan', and 'God loves us'. But according to Flew, if these believers aren't prepared ever to let anything count against what they say, then in truth they make no claim at all.

Actually, Flew is cautious. He doesn't commit himself to the view that religious people never let anything count against what they believe. Rather, he says it often *seems* to non-believers like himself that there's no conceivable event or events that would lead a believer to conclude that there is no God or that God doesn't love us. *If* that's the case, concludes Flew, then they really don't believe anything at all.

How might a religious believer defend their belief come what may? If it's claimed that the immense suffering we observe in the world is evidence against a loving god, believers may insist that God's love surpasses our human understanding. In which case, the suffering we observe isn't good evidence against a loving God after all. If, each time evidence against the existence of their God is presented to them, they dodge it by

explaining the evidence away, or appealing to God's mysterious ways, then their belief ends up dying 'the death of a thousand qualifications', as Flew puts it.

Flew concludes by asking the believer: 'I therefore put 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?" If the answer is "Nothing could disprove the existence of God" then "God exists" has ceased to assert anything at all.'

Flew presents this argument in a symposium involving himself and two others, the philosopher R. M. Hare and the theologian Basil Mitchell. The debate was published as 'Theology and Falsification: A Symposium'. Let's now look at how Hare and Mitchell respond to Flew.

R. M. Hare

Hare begins by conceding that Flew is correct: religious utterances such as 'God exists' and 'God has a plan' may be rendered unfalsifiable by the religious, and as a result fail to assert anything at all. But that doesn't mean that they're unimportant.

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According to Hare, such religious commitments are ‘bliks’. A ‘blik’ is a belief someone maintains come what may, allowing nothing ever to falsify it. Hare illustrates with a story of his own involving an insane university student. This student is convinced that all the dons (the college academics) want to kill him. The student’s friends try to convince him that he is mistaken, introducing him to the mildest and most respectable don. ‘See,’ they say, ‘this don is a lovely, friendly person. Surely you can see now that they don’t want to kill you?’ But the student replies ‘That’s just his diabolical cunning! He is secretly out to get me. I know it!’

This student has a belief that he won’t allow to be falsified. Any evidence that might seem to count against it is explained away or dismissed. Yet his blik is not unimportant. In fact, it profoundly affects the student’s life.

Hare suggests that religious bliks are similar – yes, they may be unfalsifiable, and so fail to assert anything. Still, they are of the deepest concern to us and they can affect our lives in the most profound ways.

Hare considers the student’s blik about murderous dons is insane. However, not all bliks are insane. Hare insists that we all have bliks. That the dons are *not* out to murder the student is also a blik, according to Hare. It’s a sane blik, in contrast to the student’s insane one. According to Hare, other bliks include his own sane belief that the steering on his car will continue to work reliably, or the belief of a deranged person that the steering mechanisms in cars can’t be trusted and that the steel components will bend and break. Again, these bliks can have a significant impact on our lives (for, example, if the deranged person refuses ever to get into a car, they may be hugely inconvenienced).

So, in short, Hare’s response to Flew is to *concede* that if the religious person won’t allow anything to falsify ‘God exists’, then, for them, ‘God exists’ is a blik: it claims nothing at all. Still, insists Hare, their commitment to a blik can still be of immense, life changing importance.

Hick’s response to Hare

The theologian John Hick raises an interesting objection to Hare’s suggestion that religious faith involves bliks: *Hare provides no grounds for distinguishing sane from insane bliks*. Of course, if we could provide good grounds for thinking the dons are harmless and thus that the student’s belief that the dons are out to murder him is false, then we could show that the student’s belief is absurd. But on Hare’s view, we can’t do that. For Hare accepts that the student’s belief is unfalsifiable. So, given that we *are* in a position to say the student’s belief is absurd, it seems Hare must be mistaken: the insane student’s belief is not unfalsifiable. But then it’s not a blik.

Basil Mitchell

Let’s now turn to the third contributor to the symposium: theologian Basil Mitchell. Mitchell rejects Flew’s criticism of religious belief. To make his point, he also tells a story. A resistance fighter meets a stranger one evening. The two spend a long time in conversation. The stranger explains that he is actually the secret leader of

the resistance, and asks the partisan to have faith in him, despite the fact that the stranger might seem sometimes to act as if he is actually on the side of the enemy. The partisan is deeply impressed by the stranger and comes to have a profound trust in him.

Sometimes the stranger is seen helping the resistance, and the partisan says to his comrades ‘See, he is on our side’. Sometimes they ask the stranger for help and receive it. But at other times they ask for help yet receive none. In fact, the stranger is even seen in enemy uniform handing over resistance members to the occupying power.

Still, our partisan continues to place his trust in the stranger. His comrades ask him, in exasperation, ‘What would this stranger need to do to convince you his is *not* on our side?’ The partisan refuses to answer.

The partisan won’t say what he would take to falsify his belief that the stranger is on his side. But, points out Mitchell, that doesn’t mean the partisan isn’t committed to the truth of a claim. And in fact, given his initial meeting with the stranger, which left him convinced of the stranger’s sincerity, it could be reasonable for the partisan to continue to trust the stranger despite the apparent betrayals.

The moral Mitchell draws from this story is that, similarly, just because a religious person continues believe in a good God despite evidence to the contrary, and refuses to say what would convince them otherwise, doesn’t mean they’re not committed to the truth of a claim. Nor need their belief in God’s goodness be unreasonable.

For many religious believers, belief is a ‘significant article of faith’ – something in which they have a great deal invested. They will not *easily* give it up. But, says Mitchell, that’s not to say they would *never* give it up, irrespective of how much evidence might pile up against it. Mitchell contrasts such an article of faith with, on the one hand, a mere ‘provisional hypothesis’ that we might quickly abandon if evidence is found against it, and, on the other hand, what Mitchell calls a ‘vacuous formula’ that asserts nothing because nothing will ever be allowed to count against it.

Why I believe Flew is Mistaken

I’ll finish by explaining why I think Flew is mistaken. He signs up to something like this principle:

If someone would never abandon their belief, no matter how overwhelming the evidence against it, then their belief is entirely vacuous.

What’s the *argument* for this principle? Flew’s reasoning seems to be that if an assertion is unfalsifiable, that’s because it fails to *rule anything out* so far as reality is concerned. It’s compatible with however the world might turn out to be. But if an utterance *fails to rule anything out* about reality, then it *fails to assert anything either*.

We can see what Flew is driving at here by considering tautologies. Tautologies are true in virtue of their logical form. Here’s an example:

It’s not the case that: Paris is in France and Paris is not in France.

This proposition is logically guaranteed to be true, as is any proposition of the form: Not [P and not: P] (where P is a claim, e.g. Paris is in France).

Tautologies are unfalsifiable because they are consistent with however reality might happen to be. Whether Paris is in France or not, our tautology will still be true. It demands nothing of the world for its truth. Or, to put it another way, it asserts nothing about reality.

Flew seems to think that, similarly, if ‘God exists’ and ‘God has a plan’ are unfalsifiable, that must be because they too demand nothing of the world for their truth. They too fail to assert something.

But is that true? I’m not convinced. Notice, first of all, that ‘God exists’ and ‘God has a plan’ are not tautologies. It’s not the *logical form* of what’s said that guarantees their truth. Rather, it’s *the way in which some religious people defend them* – they endlessly explain away etc. any evidence to the contrary.

Is it true that if someone won't let anything falsify their belief, then they're not really making a claim? I don't think so.

'according to Flew, if these believers aren't prepared ever to let anything count against what they say, then in truth they make no claim at all.'

It's certainly true that when people have a great deal invested in a claim, they may stick with it come what may, explaining away or ignoring evidence to the contrary.

Some beliefs are easy to abandon. I believe that the Big Bang occurred around 13 or 14 billion years ago, but if scientists tell me the new estimate is 16 billion years, I'll immediately switch beliefs. It costs me little to do so.

But what if I have a great deal invested in a belief? The investment might be, for example, personal, social, financial, and/or an investment of time and effort. An employee of a tobacco company, presented with evidence that tobacco is a major cause of cancer, may find all sorts of ways of explaining away or casting doubt on the credibility of that evidence. The wife of a man accused of being a murderer may be very dismissive of strong evidence of his guilt, insisting he's being framed. Someone with strong political beliefs may find it very difficult to abandon their beliefs in the face of evidence that they're mistaken, ingeniously explaining away anything that might seem to cast doubt on their views. A scientist who has invested her entire career in a theory may use her ingenuity to discount new discoveries that threaten that theory. Religions and cults often ask people to invest time and money in their belief, and abandoning belief might cost someone dearly in terms of social and even family relationships. They often also

find their beliefs deeply comforting. But then it's unsurprising that many religious people are unlikely to abandon their belief easily, even if they are presented with powerful arguments that they're mistaken.

What if someone's religious commitment is so deep that they will never allow anything ever to falsify their beliefs? Young Earth Creationists are Bible literalists who believe the entire universe was created exactly as described in Genesis, and so is only around 6,000 years old. Of course there is a mountain of evidence against Young Earth Creationism. For example, there's the fossil and geological record which reveals the Earth is billions of years old with life gradually evolving over vast periods of time. Then there is light from distant galaxies, such as Andromeda, which has taken around 2 million years to reach us. There are also Antarctic ice cores revealing a history of seasons running back over 100,000 years. How do Young Earth Creationists respond to this and other evidence?

Often, they develop ingenious explanations for it. For example, some creationists maintain that most of the fossil record was produced during the biblical Flood on which Noah floated his ark. Huge amounts of mud were produced, burying living things in layers. Simple marine life at the bottom of the sea was buried first. Different ecological zones were flooded at different times, resulting in the order we see in the layers. And of course man, being intelligent, avoided being drowned until last, which is why we only see signs of human life in the topmost layers.

Young Earth Creationists have also developed other ingenious explanations for the light from distant stars, and so on. And of course they can point out that *all* scientific theories face challenges and puzzles, so even if there are anomalies Young Earth Creationism can't explain, that's not a reason to abandon belief.

It's clear that for some Young Earth Creationists no amount of evidence against their belief would ever lead them to abandon it. One way or another, they'll stick with their belief. But then, on Flew's view, these creationists aren't committed to any claim at all. Their Young Earth Creationism isn't an absurd theory that

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contradicts mainstream science. Rather, it asserts *nothing at all*.

But this, it seems to me, is false. True, there is something deeply wrong with the way in which Young Earth Creationists maintain and defend their theory come what may. But what's deeply wrong is not that they're not committed to a theory.

One reason why it seems clear to me that such Young Earth Creationists are committed to a theory is that *they use their theory to explain things*. For example, they use it to explain the existence of the universe, the origin of life and the complexity of living things. In fact, they think these things provide evidence *for* their theory, as it explains

what, according to them, mainstream science can't. It does seem that these Young Earth Creationists really are offering explanations, explanations we can all understand even if we find them implausible. But if their Young Earth Creationism made no claims and offered no theory, then it would offer no explanations either.

As I say, Flew may be right that there's *something* deeply wrong with the way in which some religious people defend their belief. But his diagnosis of what has gone wrong appears to be incorrect. Even if those who say 'God exists' and 'God has a plan' won't let anything ever count as evidence to the contrary, it seems to me that they may still succeed in asserting something.

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Stephen Law is the editor of THINK.

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