

**FEATURE: Who Is Standing on His Head? – Antony Flew  
(First in SERIES of 4)**

VOICE: Professor, what's wrong with that book on your desk? The picture of the man on the cover is upside down!

PROF.: It's printed that way intentionally. The man's critics say he was right before and he has recently begun standing on his head. But he said his worldview *was* upside down before and he has corrected it.

VOICE: Either way, the man has made a 180-degree change in his opinion on an important issue. Let's talk about it.

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

PROF.: Besides the upside-down picture, the cover has another unusual feature. Some of its printing is scratched out, and a pen adds a hand-written correction. The words "There Is No God" are changed to "There Is A God." The book is sub-titled "How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind."

VOICE: I see that its author is British philosopher Prof. Antony Flew. In 2005 he reevaluated the evidence for and against atheism, and became convinced that God exists. He died in April of 2010, at age 87.

PROF.: Yes. But Prof. Flew had a co-author. So a book review in the *New York Times* claimed that the co-author "put words into Flew's mouth" – misquoting him to make it sound as if he was more firmly convinced of God's existence than he really is.

VOICE: Who was the reviewer?

PROF.: Mark Oppenheimer [OP-uh-hy-mer], a journalist who claims he had interviewed Flew previously, when Flew was an atheist. He had difficulty believing Flew would have changed his mind and said the things in the book. Oppenheimer writes, "With his powers in decline, Antony Flew, a man who devoted his life to rational argument, has become a mere symbol, a trophy in a battle fought by people whose agenda he does not fully understand."

VOICE: Is that criticism accurate?

- PROF.: No. An article in the November 14, 2007, edition of *Publishers Weekly* says Flew's co-author **did not** distort Prof. Flew's interpretations and opinions.  
The article begins, "In the piece, Oppenheimer characterizes Flew as a senile old man being manipulated and exploited by evangelical Christians for their own ends."  
Flew's publisher said, "It's one thing to review, question and debate the arguments of the book. But Oppenheimer didn't do that – he went after the integrity of our author and our integrity. It seems like he just saw this as an opportunity to make a name for himself, and it was 'out of line'."
- VOICE: So the reviewer was insulting the co-author and calling him dishonest, in order to get publicity for himself?
- PROF.: It seems that way. Oppenheimer apparently was upset that one of the most famous defenders of atheistic philosophy was now saying that he had matured out of his atheism. The reviewer sounded desperate to defend the atheism that Dr. Flew had discarded.
- VOICE: Were there some facts that could give the impression that the thoughts in the book were not from Dr. Flew but from his co-author?
- PROF.: Not if you see the facts in context. When he and his co-author wrote the book, Flew was 84 years old and had a condition called "nominal aphasia" [ah-FAY-zee-uh]. That's a condition that affects a person's ability to remember **names**, but does not affect his **overall memory**.
- VOICE: I've met people like that. Their reasoning power and most of their memory are as good as ever. The only part that has deteriorated is the ability to remember names.
- PROF.: But Oppenheimer misinterpreted this "nominal aphasia" to be senility. And he used this misinterpretation to imply that Flew didn't write the book.
- VOICE: The book cover does say, "Antony Flew **with Roy Abraham Varghese** [var-GHEE-zee]." Doesn't that kind of double by-line usually indicate that a famous person and a less famous person worked together, with the lesser-known person doing most of the actual writing?

PROF.: Yes, and some co-authors either misunderstand or deliberately distort what the other person really says.

But Professor Flew said his co-author had faithfully presented his thoughts. He affirmed, “My name is on the book and it represents exactly my opinions. I would not have a book issued in my name that I do not 100 percent agree with. I needed someone to do the actual writing because I'm 84, and that was Roy Varghese's role. The idea that someone manipulated me because I'm old is exactly wrong. ...*This is my book and it represents my thinking.*”

VOICE: So Prof. Flew didn't physically key the words into the computer. But they are his thoughts.

PROF.: Definitely! Co-author Varghese conducted numerous interviews and correspondence with him, and he supplemented it with material that Flew had previously written.

VOICE: Now that we've established that the book accurately expresses Prof. Flew's thinking, what did he say in the book? Why did he want his picture printed upside down, to symbolize a 180-degree reversal in his thinking?

PROF.: He presented so many interesting ideas, that it will take several programs to discuss them. Today, let's discuss the chapter entitled “A Pilgrimage of Reason.”

Dr. Flew began with an illustration: “Imagine that a satellite phone is washed ashore on a remote island inhabited by a tribe that has never had contact with modern civilization. The natives play with the numbers on the dial pad and hear...voices... They assume first that it's the *device* that makes these noises.”

VOICE: They think the phone is *originating* the sounds, not receiving them from another source.

PROF.: Right. In Dr. Flew's words, “Some of the cleverer natives, the scientists of the tribe, assemble an exact replica and hit the numbers again. They hear the voices again. The conclusion seems obvious to them. This particular combination of crystals and metals and chemicals produces what seems like human voices, and this means that the voices are simply properties of the device.”

VOICE: Do *all* the natives think the phone is the source of those voices?

PROF.: No. Prof. Flew continued, “But the tribal sage summons the scientists for a discussion. He has thought long and hard...and has reached the following conclusion: the voices coming through the instrument must be coming from *people* like themselves, *people who are living and conscious* although speaking in another language. Instead of assuming that the voices are simply properties of the handset, they should investigate the possibility that through some mysterious communication network they are ‘in touch’ with other humans. Perhaps further study along these lines could lead to a greater understanding of the world beyond their island.”

VOICE: That seems logical.

PROF.: “But the scientists simply laugh at the sage and say: ‘Look, when we damage the instrument, the voices stop coming. So they’re obviously nothing more than sounds produced by a unique combination of lithium and printed circuit boards and light-emitting diodes.’”

VOICE: What did Professor Flew illustrate by this story?

PROF.: In his words, “In this parable we see how easy it is to let preconceived theories shape the way we view evidence instead of letting the evidence shape our theories. ...And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger...of dogmatic atheism. Take such utterances as ‘We should not ask for an explanation of how it is that the world exists; it is here and that’s all’ or ‘Since we cannot accept a transcendent source of life, we choose to believe the impossible: that life arose spontaneously by chance from matter’ or ‘The laws of physics are “lawless laws” that arise from the void – end of discussion.’”

VOICE: Those are arguments that atheists often give. As a former atheist himself, how did Prof. Flew answer them?

PROF.: He said, “Now to make a rational argument that such and such is the case is necessarily to provide *reasons to support one’s case*. ...For if the utterance is indeed rational and an argument, it must indeed provide reasons in its favor from science or philosophy. And anything that would count *against* the utterance, or which would induce the speaker to *withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken*, must be laid out.”

But if there is no reason and no evidence offered in its support, then there is no reason or evidence that it is a rational argument.

VOICE: So a person must evaluate *all* the evidence – the facts that *support* this idea, and the facts that *contradict* it.

PROF.: Yes. In the story of the phone, the sage was suggesting that failing to investigate all sides of an issue kept the tribe from understanding the outside world and its technology.

Prof. Flew said some people are so dedicated to atheism, that even strong evidence would not make them admit 'There might be a God after all.' So he wrote, "I therefore put to my former fellow-atheists the simple central question: 'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a reason to at least consider the existence of a superior Mind?'"

VOICE: What facts would an atheist need to see, before he would at least think about the possibility that someone smarter than humans might exist?

PROF.: Prof. Flew said his change from atheism to believing that God exists, was a "migration" that took two decades of careful thought. In our next several episodes, we'll try to figure out: Which Prof. Antony Flew is really standing on his head, and which Prof. Flew is standing upright?

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

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