

That's a Good Argument



Module 6

Theism

Teacher's Notes

'Is anybody out there?' – Young Ellie in *Contact*

This module relies on having done modules 3 and 4 (*Logical Fallacies* and *Rhetoric*).

● Background Information

Theism^g (Greek *theoi* = god) literally means 'god-ism' and refers to a belief in one or more deities. Theism may or may not take a religious form. It is possible for someone to believe in God without belonging to any particular religious tradition by virtue of being agnostic about all claims concerning divine revelation. Theism is often used as a shortened form of 'Monotheism^g', belief in one God who takes an active interest in 'his' creation. Monotheism is distinguished from 'Deism^g' in that while the deist believes in a single creator God, the deist doesn't believe that God takes an active interest in, or plays any active role within, the cosmos. Of course, rather than forming an 'either/or' set, monotheism and deism stand at either end of a spectrum of belief in one God, and are both types of theism in the broader sense of the term.

The film *Contact* includes a fair amount of discussion on the question of whether or not God exists.

● Links to Conference

The *That's a Good Argument* conference ends with an assessment of learning in which students are asked to present arguments in defence of theism^g, atheism^g or either of two types of agnosticism^g (i.e. 'hard' or 'soft' agnosticism).

● Learning Objectives (from the National Framework for RE)

By the end of this module students will have:

- Investigated, studied and interpreted a significant religious and philosophical issue (theism^g) in light of their own commitments
- Used specialist vocabulary to evaluate religious language

Lesson Plan

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| • Introduce the module using the Opening Activity and share the learning objectives with the students | 15 mins |
| • Hand out the Stimulus Material and give students time to read it | 5 mins |
| • Have a class discussion using some or all of the Discussion Questions | 20 mins |
| • Use the Assessment of Learning activity and revisit the learning objectives | 20 mins |

See the general introductory notes for more information and ideas on how to run each part of the lesson. Remember that words marked like this^g are listed in the Glossary.

Please note: This material is only to be used in conjunction with *That's a Good Argument* in the same academic year as the school has had this conference.

● Opening Activity

Play “Him” by Lily Allen and give students printed copies of the lyrics (on the student worksheet) so they can follow along. If you don’t have access to the song, just read out the lyrics yourself.

*Would you please take me away from this place
I cannot bear to see the look upon your faces
And if there is some kind of god do you think he’s pleased
When he looks down on us I wonder what he sees
Do you think he’d think the things we do are a waste of time
Maybe he’d think we are getting on just fine
Do you think he’s skint or financially secure
And come election time I wonder who he’d vote for*

*Ever since he can remember people have died in his good name
Long before that September
Long before hijacking planes
He’s lost the will he can’t decide
He doesn’t know who’s right or wrong
But there’s one thing that he’s sure of this has been going on too long*

*Do you think he’d drive in his car without insurance
Now is he interesting or do you think he’d bore us
Do you think his favourite type of human is caucasian
Do you reckon he’s ever been done for tax evasion
Do you think he’s any good at remembering people’s names
Do you think he’s ever taken smack or cocaine
I don’t imagine he’s ever been suicidal
His favourite band is Creedence Clearwater Revival*

*Ever since he can remember people have died in his good name
Long before that September
Long before hijacking planes
He’s lost the will he can’t decide
He doesn’t know who’s right or wrong
But there’s one thing that he’s sure of this has been going on too long*

*Ever since he can remember people have died in his good name
Long before that September
Long before hijacking planes
He’s lost the will he can’t decide
He doesn’t know who’s right or wrong
But there’s one thing that he’s sure of this has been going on too long’*

[Lily Allen, “Him”, on the album *It’s Not Me, It’s You*, (EMI Records, 2009)]

These lyrics express the perspective of someone who isn’t sure whether there is a God, or if there is, what God is like. In groups discuss:

1. What is the song getting at?
2. What questions is it asking about God?
3. Are there any parts/ideas expressed in the song that you agree/disagree with?

● Stimulus Material

The following quotations all concern the noted British philosopher Antony Flew, who after many years as a prominent atheist became a non-religious theist [cf. Peter S. Williams, *A Change of Mind for Antony Flew*, available from: www.arn.org/docs/williams/pw_antonyflew.htm].

- these quotations are specifically referred to in the discussion questions

'[T]he evidential situation... has been transformed in the more than fifty years since Watson and Crick won the Nobel Prize for their discovery of the double helix structure of DNA. It has become inordinately difficult even to begin to think about constructing a naturalistic theory of the evolution of that first reproducing organism.'

Antony Flew, "Letter From Antony Flew on Darwinism and Theology", in Philosophy Now, Issue 47, available from www.philosophynow.org/issue47/47flew.htm

When reports of my change of mind were spread by the media... some commentators were quick to claim that my advanced age had something to do with my "conversion." It has been said that fear concentrates the mind powerfully, and these critics had concluded that expectations of an impending entrance into the afterlife had triggered a deathbed conversion. Clearly these people were familiar with neither my writings on the non-existence of an afterlife nor with my current views on the topic... I do not think of myself 'surviving' death. For the record, then, I want to lay to rest all those rumours that have me placing Pascalian bets.'

Antony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese, There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind, (Harper One, 2007), p. 2.

'[T]he case for an Aristotelian God who has the characteristics of power and also intelligence, is now much stronger than it ever was before.'

Antony Flew, My Pilgrimage from Atheism^g to Theism^g: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew, available from: www.biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf

'For over fifty years the British philosopher Antony Flew was the English-speaking world's most intellectually serious public atheist. He first engaged Christian apologist C.S. Lewis at Oxford in 1950 and continued to pursue scholarly defences of atheism^g for over five decades. His basic argument was always the same: there just wasn't enough evidence to believe in God. Then, at age eighty-one, he changed his mind.'

Jay W. Richards, "The Contemporary Argument For Design: An Overview", in Paul Copan & William Lane Craig (ed.'s), Passionate Conviction, (B&H Academic, 2007), p. 69.

'I think that the most impressive arguments for God's existence are those that are supported by recent scientific discoveries. . . I think the argument to Intelligent Design^g is enormously stronger than it was when I first met it.'

Antony Flew, My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew, available from: www.biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf

'In both my antitheological books and various debates I have taken issue with many of the claims of divine revelation or intervention. My current position, however, is more open to at least certain of these claims. In point of fact, I think that the Christian religion is the one religion that most clearly deserves to be honoured and respected whether or not its claim to be a divine revelation is true. There is nothing like the combination of a charismatic figure like Jesus and a first-class intellectual like St. Paul... who had a brilliant philosophical mind... If you're wanting omnipotence^g to set up a religion, this is the one to beat.... I would say the claim concerning the resurrection is more impressive than any by the religious competition... Is it possible that there has been or can be divine revelation? As I said, you cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible. Everything else is open to omnipotence.'

Antony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese, There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind, (Harper One, 2007), p. 185-186.

'With every passing year, the more that was discovered about the richness and inherent intelligence of life, the less it seemed likely that a chemical soup could magically generate the genetic code. The difference between life and non-life, it became apparent to me, was ontological^g and not chemical. The best confirmation of this radical gulf is Richard Dawkins' comical effort to argue in *The God Delusion* that the origin of life can be attributed to a "lucky chance." If that's the best argument you have, then the game is over... Two noted philosophers, one an agnostic (Anthony Kenny) and the other an atheist ([Thomas] Nagel), recently pointed out that Dawkins has failed to address three major issues that ground the rational case for God. As it happens, these are the very same issues that had driven me to accept the existence of a God: the laws of nature, life with its teleological^g organization and the existence of the Universe.'

Antony Flew, interviewed by Benjamin Wiker, Exclusive Flew Interview, available from www.tothesource.org/10_30_2007/10_30_2007.htm

'With every passing year, the more that was discovered about the richness and inherent intelligence of life, the less it seemed likely that a chemical soup could magically generate the genetic code.'

● Discussion Questions & Hints

1 What sort of God does Flew believe in?

Teacher's hints:

Flew mentions Aristotle's God, and attributes certain qualities to this God. Think about what qualities he does not attribute to God (e.g. goodness).

2 What logical fallacy^g was committed by Flew's critics when they tried to explain away his change of mind?

Teacher's hints:

Their argument was ad hominem since it attacked his character rather than his arguments. For more information on the ad hominem fallacy, see notes in module 3 (Logical Fallacies).

3 What is a Pascalian bet?

Teacher's hints:

Blasé Pascal argued that it is pragmatically more sensible to believe in God than not to believe in God given a calculation of the potential gains and losses of both belief and disbelief.

4 How is the sort of God Flew believes in related to the arguments that convinced Flew to become a theist?

Teacher's hints:

Flew does not endorse any moral argument for God, and does not say anything about God's moral character. Flew's arguments relate to God's being and intelligence.

5 Is Flew a 'Deist'^g?

Teacher's hints:

While Flew doesn't believe in any revelation from God, he does think that God played a role within the cosmos – at the origin of life, so he is not a deist as deists believe that God never acts within the world.

6 Why does Flew think that the Christian revelation claim is 'the one to beat'? Why do you agree or disagree with him about this?

Teacher's hints:

For example, although Flew doesn't believe in Jesus' resurrection, he does think that this miracle is better supported by evidence than any other miracle claim.

7 On the one hand the hard agnostic claims that it is impossible to know if God exists or not, but on the other hand they affirm that an omnipotent God capable of doing anything 'except to produce the logically impossible' may exist. Is this a consistent position?

Teacher's hints:

Is it logically possible for God, if he were to exist, to give humans knowledge of his existence? If it is, then hard agnosticism^g (which says it is impossible to know if God exists) is self-contradictory.

● Assessment of Learning

Look at the questions in Lily Allen's song "Him" and answer them in the form of a song lyric or poem.

Feedback

We would really value your feedback on this set of supplementary material. When you have used a module, please send us your comments on how the lesson went and any suggestions of changes you would recommend. You can send these directly to us using the details below – or you might find it easier to have one teacher collate feedback from a series of lessons and send it to us all at once.

Details to send feedback to:

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