

Reason, Science, and the Return of the Divine

by Dan Asia

There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind, Anthony Flew, HarperOne, 2008, pp. 256, \$20.00 hardcover.

The Immortal Mind, A Neurosurgeon's Case for the Existence of the Soul, Michael Egnor, Denyse O'Leary, Worthy Books, 2025, pp. 272, \$16.00 hardcover.

There are numerous disciplines with which one can discuss the nature and existence of God. They include religion, of course, which has been man's primary medium for most of his existence. Western Philosophy has been in the game almost as long. Art and music, as ways of expressing man's relationship to the universe and therefore to the possibility of a Creator, are older than religion and philosophy and represent our earliest attempts at communication with the divine. The separation of science from philosophy began in earnest during the seventeenth century and so has only been with us a relatively short time, as another way to understand our world. Two notable volumes, one philosophical and the other more scientific in approach, make the case for the necessary existence of God.

Anthony Flew, an analytic philosopher who died in 2010, was among the world's most prominent atheists. He stated that throughout his career, he followed the facts wherever they led. This is to say, he asks philosophical questions and attempts to answer with rational thought, sifting through all arguments and facts. In his seminal book of 2008, *There Is a God*, he makes the case for a force behind the creation of the universe as we currently understand it. He also entertains the suggestion that this God created this universe with humanity in mind. Beyond this, he expresses a preference for the Christian conception of God—likely a vestige of his upbringing—though the book itself does not attempt to defend the truth of any particular religion.

This short and concise work is formed of two parts. Part I is titled "My Denial of the Divine." In three sections, he describes his road to atheism (his father was a minister), his desire to follow the evidence, and then why he "calmly considered" why he was an atheist before becoming a believer in the existence of God. He describes early experiences before, during, and after World War II that presented an "inescapable challenge to the existence of an all-powerful God of Love." As a youth, he found the existence of evil a problem, and thus by the time he was only fifteen, he had rejected the notion of an "all good, all-powerful God." By the age of twenty-three, he was an avowed atheist and a disbeliever in life after death. Flew attended Oxford and, during his first three years, also served as a part-time noncombatant in the military—the Oxford University Air Squadron. He graduated with a high honors degree in 1947 and decided to continue with advanced work in philosophy at the institution. Flew remarks that Wittgenstein's stint at Oxford and the ideas he promulgated while there had a significant influence on his own thinking, hence his interest in analytic philosophy). The Socrates Society was also a significant influence for Flew. The group held lively debates between Christians and atheists, and its primary Christian spokesman, C.S. Lewis, exhorted its members to follow Socrates dictum: "follow the argument wherever it leads." Flew met his soon-to-be wife, Anna, and undertook a position as a lecturer in moral philosophy at

the University of Aberdeen in Scotland in 1950.

Thereafter, he led a peripatetic academic career in the United Kingdom and Canada, and finally a return to England. His philosophical approach to his understanding of atheism was laid out in an early article "God and Philosophy" (originally written in 1966). However, by 2004, he considered it a "historical relic," as others had given him a fresher perspective on his investigations.

In tracking his intellectual development, Flew is forthright about having made errors that he would like to correct. This applies as much to his understanding of free will as it does to the existence of God. He does indeed follow the evidence, or the changes of his own understanding of the issue. The writing here is often dense and academic, but with some time, it becomes clear to the layperson of some sophistication.

Flew announced his "conversion" to a belief in God at a public debate at New York University in May 2004. He stated that this was because of DNA investigations: "What I think the DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together."

Flew's further change in mind is predicated on answering the following 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?" In answer to this, Flew says: "I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite intelligence. I believe that this universe's intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine source." In this, Flew draws not only on scientific facts but also on a philosophical understanding of them. "When you draw philosophical conclusions from scientific data, then you are thinking as a philosopher." His newfound belief in God is not by faith, but by reason based on evidence. The monotheistic God he believes exists is that of Aristotle, as well as of Judaism and Christianity, since they share the same attributes.

The laws of nature seem to be guided by intelligence, what scientists like Einstein and Heisenberg called "the Mind of God." Many other major scientists, from Newton and Maxwell to Hawking and Schrödinger, believed the same. Again, this belief is not based on faith, but on the evidence presented through their deep understanding of the laws of the universe they were discovering. And humanity and its relationship to the Divine must be a strong part of this equation. When Pauli asked Heisenberg if he believed in a personal God, Heisenberg responded: "Can you or anyone else reach the central order of things or events, whose existence seems beyond doubt, as directly as you can reach the soul of another human being? I am using the term 'soul' quite deliberately so

as not to be misunderstood.... I would say yes." On the relationship between religion and science, Max Planck stated "There can never be any real opposition between religion and science: for the one is the complement of the other." Similarly, Schrodinger stated:

I am very astonished that the scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all of our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously... Science cannot tell us a word about why music delights us, or why and how an old song can move us to tears.

Until the discovery of the cosmic microwave background predicted by the Big Bang theory, the prevailing view among many scientists was that the universe had always existed. This discovery confirmed the opposite: that the universe, as postulated in the Book of Genesis, did indeed have a beginning. The question that must be asked then is: by whom or what, or how did it start? And, was the universe created somehow, with us, sentient human beings, in mind? It is unlikely that science will ever be able to answer these questions. As Flew argued, "If the value of even one of the fundamental con-

stants—such as the speed of light or the mass of the electron—had differed even slightly, no planet capable of supporting the evolution of human life could have formed.” Other questions of this sort include, “How did life go live?” as he puts it. “How can the universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and ‘coded chemistry?’” He wonders how it is that we are beings with a “teleological organization” unlike anything that came before? Flew concludes: “The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of such end-directed, self-replicating life as we see on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind.” Still, this transformation from atheist to believer, though from reason rather than faith, is not complete.

At the book’s conclusion, Flew states that he remains open to divine revelation: “Some claim to have made contact with this Mind. I have not—yet. But who knows what could happen next.” One is tempted to suggest that, had he engaged more deeply with those traditions that claim precisely such contact—whether the Bible or even Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*—he might have encountered further dimensions of the truth he was seeking. Perhaps his minister father, wherever he may be, would have taken quiet satisfaction in that possibility.

Yet Flew’s journey is noteworthy precisely because it proceeds not from revelation but from reason. His path leads to a divine intelligence inferred from the structure of the cosmos. The

next book under review begins at a different but equally formidable frontier—not the origin of the universe, but the mystery of consciousness itself. If Flew reasoned his way from matter to Mind, Dr. Michael Egnor approaches the question from within the operating room, asking whether the human mind can truly be reduced to the brain. In doing so, he extends the inquiry from the existence of God to the possible immortality of the soul.

An old and close friend of mine recently said, “Just give science a chance. Remember, it is only a few hundred years old. It will solve all our problems and the mysteries of the universe.” Which is to say that he is a materialist, that all of existence is related to the matter found in the world and the universe. For at least a hundred years, quantum physicists, from Einstein, Bohr, and Heisenberg, to Schrodinger, Feynman, and Hawking, have been telling us something quite different. How is it that an electron on one side of the universe can affect one on the other side? Why is the universe expanding at the perfect rate to keep it from imploding back on itself? How did the universe develop such that inorganic life could eventually develop organic life? Why does time exist, and what is it? And since science was always contained within philosophy, until these last few hundred years, “why is there something rather than nothing; and why are we here?” And the zinger: What “was” before the beginning?

Science was instrumental in revealing the existence of the beginning. Before the discovery of background radiation that proved the Big Bang theory, the other competing theory of the universe was called “steady state,” and promulgated by Fred Hoyle, Hermann Bondi, and Thomas Gold. This theory postulates that the universe has always been, and is currently, in a steady state of creation. We now know, as much as we can know anything, that the universe began about 13 billion years ago, give or take a few billion. Now, most things that start usually have someone or something that initiates them. Human beings have generally called that “God.” But let’s not go into the realm of the religious again quite so fast—certainly my friend, an atheist, would not prefer that. Let’s go to the problem of consciousness and the mind. Are they part of our materialist understanding of the human, or are they aspects of ourselves that cannot be explained in this manner? And is there now scientific data that suggests that consciousness and the mind, are separate from the body? My friend, and many others, will only accept arguments of this that come in scientific garb.

This is why the new book, *The Immortal Mind, A Neurosurgeon’s Case for the Existence of the Soul*, written by that surgeon Dr Michael Egnor, and co-authored by Denyse O’Leary, is so helpful, if not profound. Egnor has done thousands of brain surgeries and explored the relationship between the brain and mind/consciousness. As a result, he is

convinced that mind and consciousness are separate and apart from the material brain itself. He makes a strong case for this based on scientific evidence established by himself and his colleagues. Most of them, like my friend, have been trained to be highly rational, if not exclusively so. High emotion doesn’t serve one well in the operating room or in the ascertainment of disease. What, then, persuaded this rigorously trained surgeon that mind and consciousness are not reducible to the physical brain? What evidence led him to conclude that our inner life may exist independently of the neural machinery that appears to generate it—and perhaps even endure beyond it?

After decades of studying the brain in the operating room, Egnor argues that the data point in precisely this direction. He notes that even when the brain’s two hemispheres are surgically separated, many essential aspects of the patient’s mental life remain unified. Thought, intention, and personal identity do not fragment in the way a purely material account would predict. “Even when the brain is split in half,” he observes, “many vital aspects of the mind remain unified. Thus, the mind is something that the brain isn’t.” The brain may be divided; the mind, remarkably, is not.

The neurosurgeon Wilder Graves Penfield (1891–1976) couldn’t locate a place in the brain where abstract and conceptual thought can be found. While he started life as a materialist, at the end of it he concluded that, “Abstract

thought is a function of something other than or beyond the physical brain.... Mind, meaning by that thoughts, memory, feelings, reasoning, and so on, is difficult to bring into a class of physical things." At the end of his life, Penfield cautiously concluded: "The mind must be viewed as a basic element in itself... That is to say, it has a *continuing existence*." (my italics) The matter of just how much, or what brain matter is needed, for consciousness to be present is discussed. The result is that, "Although the cerebral cortex is considered by researchers to be the thinking part of the brain, some basic thinking occurs with no cortex at all." "(T)here is no evidence that consciousness resides in any specific area of the brain." The same applies to those in a comatose state. While there can be severe brain damage that is just short of death, the brain can still function at a very high level.

What about the cases of near-death experiences? These NDEs, as they are called in the literature, have been well documented. They include those who have been medically dead, which is to say all body functions have stopped (heart, blood circulation, etc.), and who have then been revived. Those who have near-death experiences have a cluster of similar experiences: Out-of-body experience, movement through a tunnel or transitional space, encounter with a presence or light, life review, and reluctant return to the body. Science has tried to explain these occurrences, but these arguments leave something to

be desired. The materialist/dualist argument continues.

However, the case of Pamela Reynolds leaves materialists a bit on their heels. A tumor was found deep in her brain. The only solution was a radical surgery. During the procedure, her heart was stopped and her body temperature was brought down to 25 degrees °F. With wires and catheters, her heartbeat, blood pressure, blood oxygen saturation, and body temperature were monitored. Molded earplugs were placed in her ears, emitting a loud, repetitive clicking that indicated when all brain activity had ceased, making it impossible for her to hear. Her eyes were taped shut. For the entirety of the operation, she was brain dead. Yet, after the operation, she could recall many of its attributes in near-perfect detail, as if she had had a view from just above the surgeon's shoulder. Reynold's "brain death" was deliberately planned and carried out under meticulously documented circumstances. Her recounting entailed knowledge, verified later, that she could only have had if her soul—the immortal part of the mind—functioned while her brain was dead. It is clear evidence that the mind can function quite independently of the brain."

Egnor is thus convinced that NDEs are very good science, that they are real occurrences, and are excellent evidence for the existence of the mind/spirit/soul as separate and apart from the physical body.

This book supports the conclusion of the rationalist journalist Sebastian Junger, in his *In my Time of Dying*.

What, in the sense that we understand that word, if the living, we're not entirely bound by time and space? What if the great mysteries of the world—the spirits and ghosts and coincidences and telepathy and predictive dreams, and everything else that humans have always noticed but couldn't quite make sense of—actually had a rational explanation? How would that possibly work?

Egnor and O'Leary offer what they regard as the most coherent and rational explanation available: that human consciousness and mind—what we might cautiously call the soul—are not reducible to the physical body. Rather, they suggest that consciousness may be distinct from the brain and not wholly dependent upon it for its existence. If so, it raises the possibility that the mind is more enduring than material processes alone would allow.

From a rational and scientific perspective, certain conclusions at least press themselves upon us. It may be that the evidence points toward the existence of a guiding intelligence behind the universe, and toward a dimension of human personhood that cannot be confined to matter. Whether one is prepared to call this God, or to speak confidently of an immortal soul, remains open to debate. These questions are hardly “settled science.” Yet, as with the Big Bang before its widespread acceptance, we may find ourselves increasingly compelled to take such possibilities seriously—even if cautiously.

Daniel Asia is an American composer whose work ranges from solo pieces to large scale multimedial works for orchestra, including six symphonies. From 1988–2024 Asia was Professor of Composition and head of the composition department at the University of Arizona in Tucson. He is President of Polyhymnia, a cultural think tank. 19danielasia53@gmail.com. Asia wrote “American Jews Need to Change Allies,” a review of Benjamin Ginsburg’s *The New American Anti-Semitism* for our spring 2025 issue.
