Antony Flew’s Question and Its Answer: How to Perceive God?

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Antony Flew’s parable states that God is a hypothesis that cannot be verified scientifically. So what has theology to do with reality? Here I argue that religion ultimately originates from religious perceptions that require participation and are holistic, including embodied cognitions, integral sensations, emotions, and feelings. Such perceptions are nonscientific because they are not objective. However, they are essential in every human life and have changed it for many contemporaries. Prime examples from the Bible illustrate the argument. Science and theology start from different perspectives and experiences. Much of the current dialogue, taking place on a rational and objective plane, falls short in two ways: (1) it is implicitly physicalist, and (2) it ignores the roots of religion. A shift from ontology to epistemology is necessary. To make theology understandable in a modern worldview, the emphasis needs to change from discussing the nature of God to examining how humans experience God.

The highlight of my introductory physics course on special relativity some decades ago was the story of how Albert Einstein discarded the luminiferous aether, the postulated medium for the propagation of light. The aether hypothesis was introduced and became popular in the nineteenth century when new optical experiments suggested describing the propagation of light by a wave equation. Aether was thought to be the universal medium in which the light waves oscillate. However, no trace of this hypothetical substance was ever observed and the famous experiment by Albert A. Michelson and Edward W. Morley published in 1887 clearly showed that something was seriously wrong with the concept.

Hendrik A. Lorentz and Henri Poincaré, two eminent theoreticians of the time, tried to save the aether theory by introducing different times in the moving system and the stationary aether. Einstein then boldly formulated special relativity in which electromagnetic fields oscillate in vacuum, and where there is no special frame of reference needed given by some aether. Aether fell to Occam’s Razor, the maxim to assume the simplest explanation. We students were told to never forget that physics should deal with only observable entities.

Today this approach to reality is unchallenged in the frame of physics. Einstein’s exploit also affected other fields of science and influenced epistemology in general. It boosted philosophical positivism, claiming that (positive) facts are the only source of all human knowledge. Logical positivism into which it developed in the 1920s became one of the most influential movements in twentieth-century philosophy. Its central thesis is that the only statements that are meaningful are those based on objective observations that can be empirically verified. Metaphysical interpretations are not considered to be significant and are rejected.
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