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IS “THE PRESUMPTION OF ATHEISM”  
IN FACT A NEUTRAL PROCEDURE?  
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION  
OF ANTHONY FLEW’S POSITION

In his article “The Presumption of Atheism”<sup>1</sup> Antony Flew argues that in a debate on God’s existence, the burden of proving one’s position should lie on representatives of theism. The author emphasizes, however, that his proposal does not prejudge the outcome of the discussion but only sets the appropriate procedural framework. The purpose of this article is to analyze Flew’s standpoint with particular attention to the question whether this proposal is indeed neutral in relation to the result of the debate. My concern is to examine whether this is a universal proposal which should be adopted by both theists and atheists.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Anthony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1) (1972): 29–46 (all references to Flew hereafter refer to this publication). This article was reprinted (with slight modifications) in: Anthony Flew, *God, Freedom and Immortality: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), 13–30. See also another article of Flew on the issue: Anthony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), 410–416.

<sup>2</sup> This research project was founded by The National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) according to the decision no. DEC-2012/05/N/HS1/02864. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference “Epistemology of Atheism” which took place on the 26–28th of June 2013 at the Université de Lorraine (Nancy, France). I am grateful to Agnieszka Ziętek and Sylwia Wilczewska for their help in editing this paper.

### 1. ANTONY FLEW'S CONCEPT OF THE PRESUMPTION OF ATHEISM

According to Flew, when discussing the existence of God, one should adopt as a starting point the position of atheism and “the onus of proof must lie on the theist.” Flew proposes a procedure called a presumption of atheism that demands from a theist to begin the discussion by presenting evidence for his position in two stages:

It is up to the theist: first, to introduce and to defend his proposed concept of God; and, second, to provide sufficient reason for believing that this concept of his does in fact have an application.<sup>3</sup>

The aforesaid term ‘atheism’ shall be interpreted as follows. Flew distinguishes between positive atheism, defined as a standpoint which declares that God does not exist (corresponding to our common usage of the term ‘atheism’), and negative atheism, according to which one merely does not assert God’s existence. The presumption of atheism shall refer exclusively to the latter concept. From now on I am going to employ this distinction. To emphasize the proper sense of the term atheism in reference to the presumption of atheism I will use the wording ‘a-theism’. Flew himself does not do this; however, he refers to the original meaning of the prefix ‘a-’ as a negation (occurring in expressions such as ‘amoral’, ‘atypical’). According to Flew, negative atheism in the above meaning should not be identified with agnosticism, since an agnostic, despite suspension of judgment regarding the actual existence of God, accepts however the existence of a coherent concept of God—a concept which at least theoretically may have an application. A negative atheist, to whom the presumption of a-theism refers, cannot assume even that.<sup>4</sup>

When elucidating the concept of the presumption of a-theism, Flew compares it to a presumption of innocence applied in legal proceedings. That is, in court proceedings, the defendant is considered to be innocent until his or her guilt is

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<sup>3</sup> Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” 31.

<sup>4</sup> In his proposal, Flew puts on the theists the requirement of introducing a coherent concept of God in order to demonstrate that this concept may have an application. This raises a question on what ground we should evaluate the incoherency of the concept. In the case of God it is a fundamental problem, since by definition He is a being that “exceeds” our world. If we base evaluation of His concept exclusively on our knowledge of the world, we rule out a possibility of His existence in advance. This issue needs a separate, detailed analysis; however, my article is only devoted to the problem of the second requirement that Flew puts on the theists.

proven. In Flew's view, according to the comparison, the presumption of a-theism implies that one shall not assume the existence of God unless it is proven. Flew stresses four parallels between these two principles which serve to illustrate the essence of his proposal. Firstly, in both cases, the word 'proof' bears its common meaning as being every variety of sufficient reason and not just a demonstratively valid argument in which the conclusion necessarily results from the assumptions. Secondly, the two principles are defeasible presumptions, not categorical assumptions. The presumption of innocence of the accused is only the starting point of court procedure subject to the prosecutor's argument for invalidation. This presumption does not predetermine the judgment of the court. This is one of the contexts in which Flew strongly emphasizes that his proposal only sets a procedural framework for discussion on the issue of God's existence without prejudging the outcome of this discussion, either in favor of theism or positive atheism.

As stated by Flew, the fact that a standpoint adopted at the starting point was defeated by argumentation of the prosecutor or the theist does not mean that the assumed procedure was flawed. On the contrary, the choice of such a starting point is very important since it reveals a presumed "policy" (these are the third and the fourth analogies<sup>5</sup>). Flew notes that adoption of the presumption of innocence—and not a presumption of guilt—results from an assumed purpose of legal procedure. Namely, the prevention of condemning an innocent person is deemed more important than acquitting a guilty one. However, if the second objective was found as more important than the first, then the presumption of guilt should be taken as binding by court.

According to Flew, knowledge as a properly grounded true belief is a purpose of a discussion that justifies adoption of the presumption of a-theism. Flew does not agree with the approach that religious beliefs are to be excluded from the obligation of having a basis in the form of sufficient evidence. On the contrary, in his opinion, possession of such evidence regarding issues of crucial significance is particularly important. In the case of its absence, in the relation to the question of God's existence, the only legitimate attitude is agnosticism or positive atheism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the reprint of the discussed article placed in the book *God, Freedom and Immortality* Flew combines the third and fourth analogies into one.

<sup>6</sup> For a later development of Flew's position on God's existence see his last book: Anthony Flew (with Roy Abraham Varghese), *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) [Polish translation: Anthony Flew, *Bóg istnieje. Wyznanie ateisty*, trans. Robert Pucek (Warszawa: Wyd. Fronda, 2010)].

## 2. THE THEIST'S OBLIGATION IN LIGHT OF THE PRESUMPTION OF ATHEISM

Flew's adoption of (negative) a-theism as a starting point for a debate on God's existence could be seen as an application of the "principle of neutrality" in the discussion. This step remains consistent with the common sense conception of the purpose of a discussion. For it seems that in a debate—understood as rational discourse—it is only the argumentation given by the involved interlocutors which may lead to recognizing the validity of a particular standpoint. Thus, none of these positions can be assumed at the beginning of the debate categorically. Hence, this element of a concept of "the presumption of a-theism" does not raise particular objections. Flew's standpoint remains consistent with common sense intuitions also in respect to a request for arguments for the claims discussed. Namely, we commonly define as reasonable only those beliefs which are properly grounded, which most often means to us that one has appropriate reasons for them. This intuition found its theoretical formulation in the form of evidentialism—a view according to which one should accept only beliefs for which one has sufficient evidence.<sup>7</sup> Flew's concept of "the presumption of a-theism" assumes a principle of evidentialism.<sup>8</sup>

However, "the presumption of a-theism" is not limited solely to preservation of the "principle of neutrality" and to the adoption of a thesis of evidentialism. It is worth recalling that Flew boils down his proposed concept exactly to two requirements to be met by the theist: (1) the demonstration of coherency of the theist's concept of God; and (2) the providing of reasons for believing that this concept of God does in fact have an application. Flew does not mention anything more when describing his proposal. It is worth noting, however, that if the theist does not indicate sufficient reasons for his or her position, consequently we should confine ourselves only to the position of negative atheism—i.e. we should not adopt the assertion that God exists. Positive atheism, similarly to theism, is an

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that an approach of Alvin Plantinga (and other representatives of Reformed Epistemology) is very popular in contemporary epistemology of religion. According to him, religious beliefs do not necessarily have to meet the requirement formulated by evidentialism to be considered as reasonably held. So it is not the case that the standpoint of evidentialism assumed by Flew is not subjected to discussion. My article, however, is focused on other issues. Plantinga presented his approach e.g. in: "Reason and belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983), 16–93, and in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). On a general standpoint of evidentialism see e.g. Richard Feldman and Earl Conee "Evidentialism", *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 15–34.

<sup>8</sup> See Plantinga, "Reason and belief in God", 25–27. Plantinga mentions Flew among representatives of evidentialism—a standpoint which Plantinga rejects on philosophical grounds.

affirmative position—it makes an assertion, just as theism does. Therefore, the positive atheist is burdened with the onus of argumentation as much as the theist—if we are to accept that there is no God, he or she must provide adequate reasons for this view. The initial position of negative atheism proposed by Flew negates both theism and atheism. Flew's awareness of the fact is shown in how he justifies his procedure. He adduces in this context the legal axiom "Ei incumbit probatio qui dicit, non qui negat," which he translates into "The onus of proof lies on the man who affirms, not on the man who denies" or else "The onus of proof lies on the proposition, not on the opposition."<sup>9</sup> Flew goes on to say that this sentence itself does not define the way in which a debate on the existence of God should be conducted, because—as mentioned above—both the position of theism and (positive) atheism can be considered as affirmative positions. Nevertheless, while "defining" the concept of "the presumption of a-theism," Flew mentions only the obligation that lies on the theist and does not heed the same obligation that rests on the (positive) atheist. Why this asymmetry between the theist's and the (positive) atheist's obligation in Flew's deliberations? Why would the burden of proof particularly lie on the theist and not on the (positive) atheist?

Continuing his considerations on justification for proposed procedure, Flew notes a need to refer to something else—adoption of an appropriate "policy"—to define a way of which the discussion is to be conducted. He rightly notes that this "policy" is determined by an aim taken as overriding. In case of the presumption of a-theism, according to Flew, the superior goal would be a requirement of a sufficient ground for beliefs—a ground which ensures dealing with knowledge and not with a merely true belief. Why would this goal make the burden of proof to be concentrated in a particular way on the theist and not on a (positive) atheist? Flew asserts strongly that:

It is, therefore, not only incongruous but also scandalous in matters of life and death, and even of eternal life and death, to maintain that you know either on no grounds at all, or on grounds of a kind which on other and comparatively minor issues you yourself would insist to be inadequate.<sup>10</sup>

As Donald Evans<sup>11</sup> rightly points out in his response to Flew's article, the above assertion affects to the same extent the theist and the (positive) atheist. Holding a belief without sufficient reasons for the conviction is equally outrageous in both cases.

<sup>9</sup> Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," 35–36.

<sup>10</sup> Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," 37–38.

<sup>11</sup> D. Evans, "A Reply to Flew's *The Presumption of Atheism*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1) (1972): 47–50.

Thus, Flew's justification for the presumption of a-theism does not justify this procedure to a sufficient extent. In my opinion, Flew assumes a "policy" which he does not formulate explicitly but which nevertheless is responsible for the particular emphasis on obligations laid on the theists. This interpretation is consistent with the analogy adduced by him of judicial procedure. Flew notes that the procedure of presumption of innocence is chosen when prevention of the prosecution of innocents is considered as more important than acquitting the guilty. It seems to me that a corresponding choice of "policy" in case of the presumption of a-theism is Flew's (at least implicit) assumption that prevention of adopting a belief about God's existence when in fact He does not exist is of greater importance than prevention of adopting a belief about God's non-existence when in fact He does exist. In other words, according to Flew a mistaken conviction of theism is much more serious (in some way) than a mistaken conviction of positive atheism. Therefore, he burdens in a particular way representatives of theism with a requirement to present evidence for their standpoint. The following sections of my article shall be devoted to presenting my interpretation of Flew's view, as well as to placing this analysis in a broader epistemological context.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. THE PROBLEM OF THE DEGREE OF CERTAINTY OF BELIEFS

Richard Swinburne defines having a belief as follows:

So my claim that S believes that p if and only if S believes that p is more probable than any alternative amounts to the claim that S believes that p if and only if S believes that the total evidence available to him makes p more probable than any alternative; that, on the total evidence available to him, p is more probable than any alternative.<sup>13</sup>

This definition makes holding a belief dependent on available evidence and thus corresponds to Flew's assumed principle of evidentialism. However, two matters

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<sup>12</sup> See also another critiques of Flew's standpoint e.g. Peter van Inwagen, "Is God an Unnecessary Hypothesis?," in *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 131–149. For other debates in contemporary epistemology of religion see e.g. John L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.

ought to be mentioned. Firstly, in this context, by 'probability' Swinburne understands an inductive probability that is:

The inductive probability of one proposition (normally some hypothesis) on another proposition (normally evidence relevant to the hypothesis) is a measure of the extent to which the latter proposition (the evidence) makes the former (the hypothesis) likely to be true. Inductive probability is relative to evidence.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, the normal alternative to  $p$  is, according to Swinburne  $\sim p$  (though other alternatives are also possible).

In my analysis, I would like to focus solely on one aspect of the aforesaid approach of holding a belief, namely how much  $p$  must seem to  $S$  more probable than  $\sim p$  to be able to conclude that  $S$  believes that  $p$ . Here, I assume that holding a belief that  $p$  can be assigned to  $S$  if and only if  $S$  himself or herself admits (e.g. when asked) that he or she believes that  $p$ .<sup>15</sup> Swinburne does not want to carry out a detailed analysis of this issue (which is understandable since it is not substantial for the topic undertaken by him) and for the clarity of his deliberation, he assumes that the probability is to be only greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ :

The only difficulty arises when I believe that  $p$  is marginally more probable than not. Here we might be hesitant about whether to say that I believe that  $p$ . The hesitation arises, not from ignorance about any unobserved matters, but because the rules for the application of the concept of belief are not sufficiently precise. Maybe some people do use 'believe' so that (given that  $S$  has some belief about the probability of  $p$ )  $S$  has to believe that  $p$  is significantly more probable than not if  $S$  is to believe that  $p$ . But certainly others are prepared to allow that  $S$  believes that  $p$  if  $S$  believes merely that  $p$  is marginally more probable than not. It seems tidier to follow this latter usage. For, if we do not follow this usage, there would have to be some value of probability  $\Theta$  between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and 1, such that only if  $S$  (having a belief about  $p$ 's probability) had the belief that  $p$  had a probability greater than  $\Theta$  would he believe that  $p$ . But any value chosen for  $\Theta$  would be extremely arbitrary.<sup>16</sup>

Swinburne explains a difficulty with specifying a degree of  $p$ 's probability sufficient to believe that  $p$  only by an imprecise concept of belief. However, it is worth noting that if we consider a belief that would merit to be called knowledge—i.e. a properly grounded belief—then another important issue appears. Namely,

<sup>14</sup> Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> The possible debatable situations that could undermine this assumption are not relevant from my article's point of view, as its theme is a dispute on the existence of God in which discussed standpoints are stated and defended in a conscious and an open way.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 35.



depending on various circumstances, a person expects various degree of inductive probability of  $p$  in the light of evidence available to him or her to accept a belief that  $p$ . In other words, circumstances affect the degree of certainty which the person expects from a potential belief to be able to accept it, which means that circumstances affect his or her expectations towards the strength of evidence for that belief. (Later in my article, to abbreviate, I shall use the expression ‘the degree of certainty of a belief’, meaning the degree of inductive probability of that belief in the light of evidence available to a particular subject).

A person may expect stronger evidence—compared to his or her other beliefs—for a potential belief because of, I presume, the occurrence of one or more of these four types of circumstances:

1. Epistemic circumstances—considering the awareness of cognitive difficulties that may occur.
2. Prudential circumstances—considering the influence of a potential belief on action and on attaining desirable objectives.
3. Moral circumstances—considering the correlation between a potential belief and a situation that the person treats as morally binding.
4. Psychological circumstances—considering the person’s own psychological conditions, such as fear or resentment, that are somehow related to a potential belief.

With regard to the first three groups, an increase of expected degree of certainty is associated primarily with the carefulness of a person who wants to avoid a mistake because of (a) his or her supposition that he or she is exposed to errors (epistemic circumstances); or because of (b) his or her supposition that an adoption of incorrect belief would have significant practical consequences (prudential and moral circumstances). In case of psychological circumstances, the increase of expected degree of certainty is related to the person’s avoiding adoption of a particular belief (or against something that is its consequence).

Due to the occurrence of the above circumstances a person may also adopt a belief confining himself or herself to its limited (less than 100%) degree of probability warranted by the evidence which is currently available to the person:

1. Epistemic circumstances—a particular person may suppose that obtaining a significantly greater certainty is impossible for him or her, for example, because he or she does not have the skills needed or because subsequent obtainable evidence may only slightly change the degree of probability of a belief.
2. Prudential and moral circumstances—a particular person may suppose that in his or her situation attainment of new evidence is particularly difficult (time-consuming, expensive, etc.), and (a) the adoption of a mistaken belief



has no significant moral or practical consequences that would make it is worth dealing with the difficulties; or (b) the holding of the belief lets him or her achieve some desired goals, important from a practical or moral point of view, which would be impossible (or very difficult) if he or she strove to attain subsequent evidence.

3. Psychological circumstances—a particular person may settle for the evidence currently available to him or her due to his or her own psychological conditions, for instance, because holding such a belief increases his or her self-esteem.

With regard to the first three types of circumstances, confining oneself to the available evidence means that a person is not focused on avoidance of a mistake, because it seems to him or her that: (a) a greater than present "protection" against a mistake is impossible for him or her (epistemic circumstances); (b) the mistake is not particularly menacing; or (c) focus on protection from a mistake would be too "expensive" (prudential and moral circumstances). However, as for psychological circumstances, a person confines himself or herself to the evidence available to him or her because holding a belief which that evidence makes probable (or consequences of that fact) in some way satisfies him or her.

It should be stressed that awareness of the impact of the aforesaid circumstances on the degree of certainty of a potential belief expected by a particular person is gradable. A person can openly make judgments about the occurrence of these circumstances and on their influence on his or her adoption of beliefs. It may also be that a person is guided by certain assumptions, related to the occurrence of these circumstances while not clearly realizing this fact. However, he or she may be able to formulate these assumptions for example in a discussion. We may also be dealing with an impact which is particularly difficult or impossible to realize, as in the case of many psychological conditions. In a particular situation, of course, several types of circumstances may have an impact concurrently. In such a case the person is to make an accord or a selection of those by which he or she will be guided or not.

It seems to me that particular attention shall be paid to the relation of the issue analysed to the above-mentioned principle of evidentialism. According to evidentialism, beliefs should be based on the total evidence available to one. However, we are well aware that it is not possible to be absolutely certain of the vast majority of our beliefs (Descartes expressed this fact clearly). We cannot exclude the possibility that there is a fact which is unknown to us at the moment but which calls into question what we consider to be the truth. Yet we are not able to obtain all possible evidence for our beliefs. Expecting our beliefs to be absolutely

beyond doubt would “paralyze” our mental life and our actions. Thus, we are aware of the fact that evidence makes our beliefs plausible to a limited extent, i.e. the inductive probability of the vast majority of our beliefs is less than 100%. Therefore, one needs to delimit a degree of probability sufficient to adopt a belief. However, the principle of evidentialism does not define this.

In my opinion, defining a sufficient degree of certainty of a potential belief is always determined by the circumstances set out above. There are a number of rules of rationality, shared by society, which specify, for instance: (a) manners of reliable acquisition of beliefs, (b) the relation between acquiring beliefs and moral obligations, or (c) the relation of acquiring beliefs and effective acting. These rules determine, among other things, the required degree of certainty of the potential beliefs. It is worth noting that the above rules remain in connection with the adoption by a person and by a society of a particular worldview, including, especially, a view on human nature which makes certain assumptions about, among other things, human cognitive condition, the hierarchy of values, moral obligations, etc. Each application of the rules is dependent on the specific situation of a person and on this person’s individual decisions, such as his or her adopted objectives of action. However, the above-mentioned psychological circumstances are of another kind. They are not related to the general rules of rationality, but rather show how a person, depending on his or her own preferences, is able to influence what he or she believes. Namely, if the adoption of a particular belief is somehow not comfortable for an agent, he or she may constantly “distrust evidence” by expecting increasingly higher inductive probability for that belief. But if a person wishes to adopt a belief, he or she can quickly become satisfied with the evidence currently available to him or her, which confirms it to some extent even if not in 100%.

#### 4. THE DEGREE OF CERTAINTY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

With respect to religious beliefs we might deal with the influence of all of these types of circumstances. This influence may result in an increase of the required degree of certainty or in confining oneself to currently available evidence. I shall present some examples that are relevant—I believe—to contemporary Western culture:

1. Someone may think that if there is an object of religious beliefs—God—then acquiring knowledge of such an object radically exceeds our cognitive abilities or becomes extremely difficult for us. The person’s beliefs about

his or her epistemic situation influence his or her expectation of extremely strong evidence (definitely stronger than in case of most of his or her other beliefs) for both the assertion that God exists and for the assertion that God does not exist.

2. Someone else may think that adoption of theistic beliefs seriously limits his or her life, for example, as a result of the necessity to comply with the laws imposed by religion. Such a profit and loss statement can prompt the person to expect very strong evidence in favour of theism, since in his or her opinion, there it too much to lose—some aspects of life—to indulge in a reckless adoption of the belief that God exists.
3. A similar type of “reasoning” can lead a person to believe that eternal life promised by religion would be so beneficial that he or she should be particularly careful towards an atheistic belief. In opinion of the said person there is too much to lose by hastily adopting a belief that God does not exist. In addition, if the person—to the contrary of the person in example B—does not perceive religious life as particularly inconvenient, he or she may not see reasons to expect equally strong evidence for a theistic belief.
4. Another person may have a strong feeling that not giving honour to God, if He exists, would be extremely wrong from a moral point of view. Therefore, the person may be particularly cautious in believing that God does not exist and would expect very strong evidence in favour of this assertion.
5. Someone may hold a special fear of God imagined as an severe Judge. Therefore, such a person can “escape” from the conviction that God exists by expecting stronger and stronger evidence in its favour.
6. Whereas someone else may feel a great desire for God to exist—for example, if he or she imagines God as a caring Father. For this reason, he or she may be very sceptical towards arguments presented by atheists but very eager to accept the ones presented by theists. It will make his or her expect a very high degree of certainty from the belief that God does not exist but a far lower degree from the belief that He exists.

As shown clearly by the above examples, a person does not necessarily expect the same degree of certainty with respect to theistic and atheistic beliefs. He or she, with respect to both beliefs, can be influenced by various reasons related to his or her circumstances. This fact is particularly important from the perspective of the issue taken up in this article since—in my opinion—this is a similar type of situation to the one that appears in the case of Flew’s concept of the presumption of a-theism. For some reasons—belonging, I believe, to one or more of the above groups of circumstances—Flew is far more demanding with respect to a theistic

belief, than with respect to an atheistic one. In my opinion, he expects a much higher inductive probability with respect to making acceptable the assertion “God exists” than with respect to the assertion “God does not exist.” For this reason, in the debate on the existence of God, Flew places the burden of proof on the theist and does not pay particular attention to the same requirement incumbent on the (positive) atheist. This conforms with what was indicated by Flew in the analogy of the choice of “policy” in court. Since prevention of acceptance of the mistaken belief of a defendant’s guilt is deemed more important, the procedure adopted is the presumption of innocence. Similarly, I believe, it is deemed by Flew more important to prevent the acceptance of a mistaken theistic belief, hence—in his opinion—the procedure of presumption of a-theism should be adopted and the debate should be focused on the analysis of evidence in favour of theism.

I believe that by means of the considerations presented in the previous section we may interpret William James’s concept presented in his article “The Will to Believe.” This article is a response to the text of William K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,”<sup>17</sup> whose basic message remains very close to Flew’s thought. Clifford criticizes religious people for establishing their theistic beliefs on insufficient evidence, which is, according to him, morally reprehensible. James formulates his main thought in opposition to Clifford’s approach:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.<sup>18</sup>

I think that James’s considerations will not be perverted if the aforesaid ‘passion’ shall be taken to mean the fourfold type of circumstances described above, and everything that influences them (a person’s world view, fears and hopes, moral beliefs, etc.). According to James, all the statements which can be in doubt, that is—as scepticism shows—practically the whole of what we consider as our knowledge, are ultimately undecidable on intellectual grounds. Putting it into the language of my analysis: All assertions of which inductive probability is necessarily less than 100% are ultimately undecidable on intellectual grounds. James points out that in such cases we must decide which of our “epistemic rights” we

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<sup>17</sup> William Kingdom Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), 177–211.

<sup>18</sup> William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Portland: The Floating Press, 2010), 24.

are to follow. As James stresses, these two separate rights are the following: "we must know the truth" and "we must avoid error." James's crucial statement, I believe, is the following:

We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life.<sup>19</sup>

As stated by James in the case of statements that are ultimately undecidable on intellectual grounds, adopting the statement or refraining from doing so in order to avoid a mistake is equally a result of following our "passions." Returning to the analysis carried out above—the decision to raise a degree of certainty required from a statement is the result of the impact of epistemic, prudential, moral, or psychological circumstances to the same extent as confining oneself to a lower probability of the claim. Subsequently, James presents an example of "reasoning" which can be followed by the theist who, unlike Clifford or Flew, adopts the belief that God exists. This "reasoning" can be considered as a type of influence of the above-mentioned prudential circumstances in which a person decides to adopt a belief because he or she sets the importance of achieving his or her goals above the risk of making a mistake. Namely, James notes that the theist's choice between a theistic belief and an atheistic one may be a "genuine option", which is momentous—applies to gain or loss of a valuable good—and forced, i.e. the non-adoption of a theistic belief may seem to the theist to result in the same potential loss of the good as the adoption of an atheistic belief. In view of this, James presents a "policy" which is the opposite of the one adopted by Flew—from the perspective of this theist, the prevention of adopting a wrong atheistic belief is more important; therefore, one should approach it particularly carefully, expecting very strong evidence in its favour.

It is worth noting that an adoption of Flew's "policy" by the theist presented by James would be unreasonable or even irrational. We do not know what exactly guides Flew when choosing his "policy" with respect to a theistic belief, but trying to favourably interpret his position, we can assume that he has good reasons for this. Perhaps—for instance—to attain his personal goals, in the light of the hierarchy of values which he follows, the most reasonable "policy" is burdening an assertion "God exists" with extremely challenging requirements. In his situation, adopting the attitude of a theist described by James would probably be unreasonable. This example clearly shows that the impact of the circumstances being discussed on the process of acquiring beliefs is not only inevitable, but also right. James writes:

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<sup>19</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," 31.

I have said, and now repeat it, that not only as a matter of fact do we find our passionate nature influencing us in our opinions, but that there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned above, in our epistemic situation, with respect to the majority of our beliefs, it is necessary to adopt the required degree of inductive probability at a level lower than 100%. Whereas the degree is not specified by the principle of evidentialism, but each time a person's circumstances. It is important, I believe, to emphasize explicitly that the fact of an influence of circumstances on defining the required strength of evidence is not in contradiction with the principle of grounding beliefs on the evidence. On the contrary: our epistemic situation demands it—we are not able to apply the principle of evidentialism without taking into account this context (unless for the price of suspension of any judgment on virtually every topic). Therefore the “policy” presented by James is not in contradiction with the principle of grounding beliefs on the whole of the available evidence. Adoption of a belief that is less than 100% probable does not mean not grounding it on evidence! Obviously, the imperative of evidentialism is not violated as long as a person considers available evidence to be reliable and to make a particular belief plausible to a sufficient—although not 100%—degree (at least more than 50%, so it is more likely than not that the belief is true). However, there is no basis for assuming that in the situation of the theist presented by James this is not the case.<sup>21</sup> This does not mean, however, that the impact of the above-mentioned circumstances on the process of acquiring beliefs never interferes with the thesis of evidentialism. That may happen, of course. Perhaps a gullible adoption of beliefs for one's own pleasure is such a case. However, the question of what exactly makes the principle of evidentialism violated or not needs separate, in-depth research. At this point, I would only like to emphasize that thinkers such as Flew or Clifford have no ground for accusing the theist, e.g. the one presented by James, of violating the principle of evidentialism and, therefore, of being irrational. A motive which the theist follows may be of the same nature—e.g. a profit and loss statement—as a motive which is followed by atheist thinkers who believe that theistic beliefs are not sufficiently justified.

<sup>20</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” 32.

<sup>21</sup> For similar interpretation of James's position see: Michael Pace, “The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations: Justification, Moral Encroachment, and James's ‘Will To Believe,’ ” *Noûs* 45 (2011): 239–268.

## 5. NEUTRALITY OF THE DEBATE ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

As mentioned above, a person may expect varying degrees of certainty of theistic and atheistic beliefs. It is worth noting that if there is a significant difference between the two, it will considerably influence which belief becomes accepted. If, for example, the required inductive probability of the assertion "God exists" is higher than the required inductive probability of the assertion "God does not exist," the first is obviously less likely to be achievable. To illustrate this phenomenon I shall use a certain idealization by assigning numerical values in three of the above examples:

1. Expected degree of certainty of theistic beliefs—95%; of atheistic beliefs—95%. Consequently, there is a great probability (not amounting to necessity though!) that the person will adopt—in the terminology proposed by Flew—the a-theistic position (the person will not adopt the belief that God exists nor the belief that He does not exist), because evidence for both of these beliefs will appear not sufficiently strong.
2. Expected degree of certainty of theistic beliefs—90%; of atheistic beliefs—51%. Such a disproportion makes it much easier to reach the required strength of the evidence for atheism and therefore, probably (though not necessarily) a person would adopt this position.
3. Expected degree of certainty of theistic beliefs—51%; of atheistic beliefs—90%. Analogically to example B, the person is likely to adopt the theistic belief.

I believe that in the procedure of a debate on the existence of God proposed by Flew we deal with a situation similar to example B. Although Flew realizes that both the standpoints of theism and atheism require reasons, he focuses exclusively on the need to provide evidence in favour of the former standpoint. This results, I believe, from the significant disproportion in the evidential requirements with which Flew burdens both of these standpoints. Therefore—contrary to his assurances—the presumption of a-theism cannot be considered as a neutral procedure for the debate, a procedure that would not determine the debate's outcome. The debate would be neutral if the initial expectations of the competitive standpoints were equal. In the previous paragraph I mentioned that we cannot exclude the possibility that the "policy" adopted by Flew is in his case the right one. Nevertheless, this fact provides no indication that his "policy" is right in other cases as the "policy" is determined by a person's overall context. Therefore, the procedure of the presumption of a-theism is not only not neutral, it is also not universal—for



another person it may even be irrational as shown by James's considerations. That is why we do not have reasons to accept Flew's proposal.

What then should a neutral procedure of a debate on the existence of God be? We should not expect agreement on expectations in regard to the strength of evidence since they are related, as I tried to demonstrate above, to individual choices, attitudes towards life, personal views, and often, with unconscious, psychological determinants, etc. I believe that this shows one of the difficulties connected with the debate on God's existence—its result rarely allows for reaching common conclusions, because of, among other factors, the role of the above-mentioned elements in determining the expectations of the interlocutors with respect to the evidence associated with the issue in question. It might seem that the debate on God's existence should be based on a comparison of the strength of evidence given by both parties in favor of their positions. However, such procedure cannot be conducted in practice as it is highly improbable that a common agreement can be reached on the value of the evidence. This is because credibility and strength of evidence are variously weighed up despite general agreement on the fundamental principles of reasonableness and a common set of empirical data. For example, Richard Swinburne discusses in his book "Faith and Reason" the different ways of applying very general criteria for induction by theists and atheists. A disagreement between them centres on—as Swinburne notes—e.g. whether the world can be fully explained without adopting the hypothesis of God's existence, even though both theists and atheists would agree to the principle that it is better not to postulate the existence of a being unless it is needed to explain the available data.<sup>22</sup>

Evans, in response to Flew's concept, suggests a procedure called "the presumption of epistemological innocence":

I propose that Flew and I each presume that the other has what are for him good grounds for his convictions, and that the onus is on each of us to show the other what grounds there are for changing those convictions.<sup>23</sup>

I think that such a concept of the procedure of a debate on the problem of God's existence is far more accurate than Flew's proposal. Firstly, this procedure is indeed universal and neutral since, contrary to the presumption of a-theism, it takes into account the differences between the persons debating, such as various requirements for the standpoints discussed or various ways of evaluating evidence.

<sup>22</sup> Swinburne, "Faith and Reason," 93–98.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, "A Reply to Flew's *The Presumption of Atheism*," 49.

Evans's proposal also requires that one respects these differences. Secondly, this procedure prompts one to revise the reasons for his or her standpoint. At the starting point of a debate a participant has to understand on what grounds the opponent takes his or her position, and then the first one has to consider whether his or her reasons are actually adequately strong to undermine those of the opponent. Even if the discussion does not end with reaching agreement, the benefit of a debate conducted along such lines is certainly the fact that both parties have the possibility of a better consolidation of their beliefs by challenging them factually with the arguments of their opponents.

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CZY „DOMNIEMANIE ATEIZMU”  
JEST FAKTYCZNIE NEUTRALNĄ PROCEDURĄ?  
KRYTYCZNA ANALIZA STANOWISKA ANTHONY’EGO FLEW

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem artykułu jest koncepcja „domniemania ateizmu” Antony’ego Flew. Flew twierdzi, że w punkcie wyjścia debaty na temat istnienia Boga powinniśmy przyjąć stanowisko ateizmu, a ciężar dowodu spoczywa na teiście. W artykule kwestionuję różne wymagania stawiane przez Flew reprezentantom teizmu i ateizmu. Odpowiadając na propozycję Flew, analizuję problem epistemologiczny, jak silne świadectwa na rzecz danego przekonania są potrzebne, by podmiot przyjął to przekonanie. Twierdzę, że zależne jest to od okoliczności, w jakich znajduje się dana osoba i jej indywidualnych uwarunkowań. Za pomocą tych analiz staram się wskazać, w jaki sposób różne osoby mogą racjonalnie wymagać od przekonania teistycznego innego stopnia prawdopodobieństwa niż od przekonania ateistycznego. Pokazuje to, jak sądzę, że propozycja Flew nie musi być racjonalna dla innych osób, choć może być taką dla samego Flew.

*Streściła Ewa Odoj*

IS “THE PRESUMPTION OF ATHEISM”  
IN FACT A NEUTRAL PROCEDURE?  
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ANTHONY FLEW’S POSITION

Summary

This article examines the concept of “The Presumption of Atheism” by Antony Flew. Flew claims that at the beginning of a debate on the existence of God we should adopt a standpoint of atheism and the opus of proof lies on the theists. I question different requirements that Flew puts on the representatives of theism and atheism. In responding, I raise an epistemological issue concerning how strong evidence for a particular belief should be in order for one to hold that belief. I claim that this depends on a subject’s circumstances and on his or her individual conditions. By means of these deliberations I try to reveal how various persons could reasonably demand from a theistic belief a different degree of probability than they do from an atheistic one. This shows, I think, that Flew’s procedure does not have to be rational for others, although it could be in his own case.

*Translated by Ewa Odoj*

**Słowa kluczowe:** Antony Flew, „Domniemanie ateizmu”, William James, przekonania religijne.

**Key words:** Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” William James, religious beliefs.

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