

Deism and Dualism: Failed Attempts to
Integrate Naturalism and Theism

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Scott has just made a case that naturalism and theism are incompatible *philosophies*. I emphasize “philosophies” because they are not realms or realities, with naturalism associated with the natural and theism associated with the spiritual. They are, instead, competing systems of ideas, or even ideologies. Still, we are quite aware that the popularity of these intellectual systems in Western culture has led many to attempt their rapprochement. In other words, naturalism and theism have commonly been assumed to be combinable, despite their incompatibility. I just want to take a few minutes to review briefly the two main lines of attempted combination – deism and dualism.

Perhaps the most common approach to combining naturalism and theism is some form of deism – God created the naturalistic order of the world but this divinity is no longer involved in its ongoing operation (cf. Borg, 1997; Johnson, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Wacome, 2003). With this conception, no reference to God would seem warranted or needed in formulating or conducting psychology’s methods because the laws or principles of psychology are currently autonomous and working essentially independently of Him. The obvious problem, however, is that a deism is not a theism. That is to say, this kind of deism obviates those religions that believe in a *presently* active, rather than a passively deistic God.

Consequently, a variety of dualisms have been brought to bear in attempting to solve this problem. Rene Descartes (1641/1952) perhaps framed the prototypical dualism with his claim that the mind or soul permitted God’s actions and influences but that the

body was mechanistically autonomous. In this sense, God was only inactive for part of the world. Donald Wacome (2003), in the book Science and the Soul, illustrates a variation of this form of dualism when he holds that God is involved with some entities of the world but not with others, as in this passage:

Christians, unlike deists, believe that God miraculously intervenes in his creation, but our essential commitment is to God's intervening in human history; in human experience; and, above all, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—not to God's intervening in nature as such. We accept a great variety of explanations of things coming about by natural processes that are what they are in the world God has created without feeling the need to postulate divine interventions (emphasis added, p. 200).

Here, Wacome (2003) distinguishes his position from deism because he believes God is *currently* active in the events of humans (e.g., their history, experience). However, he then postulates a deism of nature where God created the processes of nature but they now “come about by natural processes.” This conception is a great example of the modern attempt to integrate theism and naturalism, because God is active in human experience but inactive in nature, where the laws of nature and naturalistic philosophy take over.

Of course, any such dualism begs the usual interactional questions: How do the two realms – soul and body, human experience and nature – interact? What if, for example, there is good reason to believe that our minds are our brains? Where does the soul and our experience leave off and our biology and nature begin? If the mind agentically or spiritually controls the body, then the “natural processes” discussed by Wacome do not control the body. If, on the other hand, the laws of our biological nature

control our brains, as many neuroscientists seem to contend, then these laws, not God or our human agency, govern our human experience. We cannot have it both ways because the two are incompatible.

Some will undoubtedly say here that God is not only the creator of these laws but also their sustainer. However, this is little more than a technical variation on dualism. As Griffin (2000) and other scholars have long shown, the notion that God upholds the laws does not allow God to be “active” in any meaningful theistic sense because God’s upholding of the laws means that He cannot act otherwise than the laws. Because this ability to “act otherwise” is the basis of any freedom of action, God enjoys no such freedom. Moreover, God cannot minister to His children uniquely or modify his actions in the light of changing circumstances because the laws of nature are themselves the same for everyone, regardless of their situations.

Now I realize that we won’t solve the mind/body problem today. I also know that there are hundreds of variations on these combination themes, with each variation attempting to bring together two seemingly commonsensical ideas for many in our Western culture – naturalism and theism. The problem with all these variations on dualism and deism is that do not, in principle, resolve the incompatibility of these two philosophies; they, in fact, interface the two by *recognizing* their incompatibility. In other words, the extent to which they work is the extent to which they assign these two philosophies to separate realms, separate corners of the universe – Descartes separating the soul from the body, and Wacome separating human experience from nature.

Deism, in this sense, is merely dualism across time, with God having been active at one point in time (as creator) but now, at another point in time, being essentially

passive – two separate realms of time. Indeed, this separation of the naturalistic (no divine intervention) from the theistic (active and current divine intervention) in both deism and dualism is a tacit admission of their incompatibility. Whether separated in time or in space, the fundamental premise of deism and dualism is that the two philosophies apparently cannot co-exist in the same time and place. No dualism or deism would be necessary if they were really compatible. The important point, for our present purposes, is that natural science methods of psychology have been formulated to investigate one side of this dualism – the godless side (Hedges, in press; Slife & Hopkins, in press), making their conceptual foundations incompatible with the God-filled side of theism.