

Wildman's Kantian Skepticism: A Rubicon for the Divine Action Debate

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Considering that he rejects many of the core premises of the Divine Action Project, Wesley Wildman has devoted a surprising amount of time to summarizing its arguments. His apparent neutrality, his willingness to help theists overcome Nicholas Saunders' potent criticisms of divine action, appear as remarkably altruistic acts of intellectual assistance on behalf of a theistic program that, as he notes, is not his own.

But if we know anything in this postmodern age, we know that there is no such thing as a neutral account. The article, filled with compliments and words of praise for the organizers and participants, in fact also contains a critique that, if correct, represents the single most damaging criticism of the Divine Action Project yet voiced. The way in which Wildman "saves" the project from Saunders' clutches actually has the potential to undercut it much more decisively than anything Saunders' book could ever accomplish; "out of the frying pan and into the fire" would be an apt description. The situation reminds one of that terrible scene aboard the WWII bomber in *Catch 22*: the gunner has been hit by flack, and the "hero" spends a lot of time carefully dressing a small wound on his leg. Having finished his work, he unzips the gunner's flack jacket, only to watch his guts drip out onto the floor.

The source of the potentially deadly shot is clear by the time one reaches the list of "key words." Wildman's thesis is that Immanuel Kant has posed the most fundamental, and potentially most devastating, objection to the entire Divine Action Project. If Kant is right, any project like DAP *must* fail — and Wildman believes that Kant is right. Until one has refuted the Kantian objection, all the intricacies of debates about how God might be active at the quantum physical level ("QSDA") are just so much sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The actual argument of Wildman's piece is surprisingly understated; much of it comes out in passing comments. I prefer to think that the indirectness reflects his belief that theological argumentation is merely a matter of "art" or "taste" (44) and not any disingenuity on his part. For example, when Wildman writes that "theological theories of SDA are as strong as they have been at any time since Hume and Kant ... largely because of the contributions of the DAP" (63), he means that such theories are *as badly off* as ever — not that DAP has helped them to succeed.

My own taste is for directness. Hence in what follows I offer a blunt restatement of

Wildman's thesis and argument. We can only evaluate a series of claims if we first give them clear expression.

One of the major goals of the Divine Action Project was to establish "traction" with the sciences. All of the proposals made in DAP, Wildman believes, failed to achieve that goal. In fact, the goal (of thinking theology and science together within a single framework) "is illusory anyway" (59). Virtually all the theories in DAP pursue a mediating standpoint that doesn't exist; hence all fail, and must fail.

Only a few of the project's fifty-some authors propose theories that could, even in principle, have traction; in fact, it turns out, only Russell, Murphy, Ellis, and Tracy are really of interest from the standpoint of traction. In the end, though, according to Wildman, all these four thinkers give up traction at one point or another by making changes to their theories of QSDA that immunize them from critique. Indeed, that they do so is no surprise to Wildman: the project they pursue is nothing more than an "intellectually suicidal dive" (59) that one knows in advance is doomed to failure. For all mediating positions are in the end "a mirage in the desert" that "vanishes when we approach it" (59).

There are only two consistent positions, i.e. only two that eschew the project of mediation: "miracle theism" (65; or "miraculous interventionism," 38) on the one hand, which "affirms miraculous abrogation or suspension of natural laws" (73n60), and positions like Wildman's own on the other, that is, views of Ultimate Reality that are either non-personal or, if personal, do not hold that God acts intentionally. Yet miracle theism abandons all serious connection with science and, much more cripplingly, raises a problem of evil that it can never answer, since it has no way to protect God from the charge of direct personal responsibility for the egregious evil that exists in the world. Miracle theism thus falls to the dual charge of "incoherence" and "moral repugnance" (32). Obviously, if there are only two consistent (families of) positions and one is fatally flawed, only one is left. Of the fifty-plus authors involved in DAP, the only ones who hold a rationally credible position are Davies, Wildman, and Drees (the left-hand-most authors on p. 65).

So much for the position; why should we believe it? Wildman's main argument for the series of conclusions just sketched *seems* to be his "tetralemma" argument. A theory of SDA could succeed (could have traction) only if it offered an account of God's special action in the world that (1) made that action objective, (2) was incompatible with a determinist scientific explanation of the data, (3) did not involve God "intervening" into the natural order (e.g., setting aside natural law), and (4) construed the laws of nature as ontological (not merely descriptive),

and indeed ontological in the “strong” sense (57). Presumably, Wildman gains indirect evidence for his position every time a new attempt to meet these criteria fails.

One could dispute whether all four are actually necessary conditions for traction. The weakest is (4); it’s not obvious that a theory of divine action with an ontological but not “strong” ontological understanding of natural law couldn’t meet the traction requirement. But I skip over that discussion here, since, as it turns out, Wildman’s deeper argument does not really turn on the failure of all DAP proposals to meet the criteria. (This is a good thing, actually, since it’s a fallacy to argue from the failure of some set of proposals to the impossibility of any proposal succeeding). Instead, Wildman believes one can know in advance that no theory of SDA *could* satisfy the four criteria. For, on his view, Kant was just right in affirming an ultimate dualism between accounts of the world based on science and those based on the notion of free agency (whether human or divine). Because Kant was right, one knows in advance that “we can never demonstrate its [sc. freedom’s] consistency with a causal, scientific account of nature” (58).

Where does Wildman’s Kantian skepticism lead him? In face of the embarrassing “specter of theologians vainly fumbling after stable theological terminology,” Wildman comes to side with the “mystical theologians” (36). By this he means that no formulation of the nature of Ultimate Reality is adequate; Ultimate Reality exceeds the grasp of all our concepts, as the infinite infinitely exceeds all finite formulations. Nor can the difference be smoothed over by any of the standard techniques such as theories of analogy or metaphorical reference — and least of all by metaphysics, which, in seeking to construct theories of God, falls into the greatest illusion of all.

In one sense, and I think in one sense alone, Wildman finds the DAP helpful: the more one observes the failure of theological theories, the more likely one is to embrace his mystical theology. Recall that there are two ways to fail (as he thinks one must) in academic, non-mystical theology: to hold out for traction and fall into inconsistency, or to abandon traction and embrace mysticism (sometimes called “the appeal to faith”). The DAP series title, “scientific perspectives on divine action,” is an oxymoron: if one pursues it as an intellectual enterprise, one can only fall into absurdity, incoherence, or worse. Of course, if one interprets it as a koan, like “the sound of one hand clapping,” perhaps enlightenment is possible — but that’s another story.

What to say about Wildman’s central claim? Perhaps it’s true — perhaps Kant is right, and no theory *could* ever encompass both cause and freedom. I have argued in some detail that he is not¹; indeed, a large literature seeks to refute Kant’s proclamation of the death of all

metaphysics and “constitutive” theology. Consider these five responses.

(1) Kant’s position is certainly undercut by the fact that he was wrong about science: Euclidean geometry, Newtonian physics, and even determinism are limit cases of a more complex world than Kant imagined.

(2) Kant didn’t anticipate the sociology and anthropology of knowledge. There is not just one categorial framework; cultural and other factors greatly influence one’s conceptual scheme. Relativists conclude that the pursuit of truth is futile, while Peirceans strive for eventual convergence of expert opinion.

(3) But (2) challenges Kant’s original dichotomy between sensory inputs and the frameworks by which we organize them (space, time, and the categories). Put differently, inputs and theories influence one another; humans seek a “reflective equilibrium” between them.

(4) The argument is technical, but one can then show that, given (3), Kant’s distinction between constitutive knowledge and regulative principles is undercut.

(5) This outcome challenges Kant’s absolute dichotomy between the “kingdom of ends” and the “kingdom of causes,” hence between cause-based and freedom-based explanations. The absolute separation of physical causes from human agency now looks suspect. Indeed, it looks suspect for another reason: neuroscience and cognitive psychology together teach us to conceive of persons as causally integrated organisms that also think.

Of course, maybe all these responses are mistaken and Wildman is right; and *if* he is, the Divine Action Project, and all future quests for traction like it, face certain failure. But Wildman’s article, though it states his Kantian assumptions, does nothing to convince us that they are correct or to answer the objections to Kant. In the article he just assumes the Kantian standpoint and then constructs a typology and a narrative that provide a rhetorical tug (as all well-designed typologies and narratives do) in the direction of his own conclusions. Perhaps the next issue of *Theology and Science* will offer a different typology and narrative, one that construes DAP as advancing step by step toward a panentheistic theology and a theory of divine action based on emergent levels in evolution and a top-down causal lure by God. One can only hope that the Editors will choose to publish such a companion piece, so that readers may examine the two side by side and judge which is in the end more compelling. Until then, one can only say: well, it’s interesting to see how a “mystical theologian” views DAP. But nothing in the article need compel one to *become* a mystical theologian.

One point, however, Wildman *has* brought home decisively for the DAP participants and for the theology-science debate as a whole: *You can’t play the traction game half way.* If you

seek to develop a theology that is consistent with natural science, you cannot suddenly in the middle of your work make an appeal to faith to solve an argumentative problem or avoid a potential criticism. Here Wildman is right: anyone who appeals to faith to solve difficulties or get over a hurdle makes the same move that the “mystical theologian” does. It doesn’t matter if you lift God (or Ultimate Reality) beyond rationality in the first sentence, as Wildman would, or at the very last instant, as (in Wildman’s somewhat uncharitable reconstruction²) Tracy and Ellis do: fideism is fideism no matter where the appeal to faith *as an argumentative move* comes.³ Those who substitute faith for traction are Wildman’s brothers and sisters, whether they realize it or not.

Until Wildman brought this point home so forcefully, many of the DAP participants did not get it; henceforth it will be impossible to ignore. Hence my claim that Wildman’s piece represents a sort of Rubicon for the divine action debate. Each participant in the debate must now put her cards on the table. If at any point she plans to rest her argument on faith, then she joins the Wildman camp on the shore, along with a great host of mystics, pastors and rabbis, and theologians. If she is committed to maintaining traction with science all the way, following the force of the better argument to the bitter end (sink or swim, as it were), then she sets out with a small company on a voyage fraught with peril. I hope that I will not be alone in accepting the call to journey onward.

Endnotes

1. Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
2. I am not convinced that Wildman’s tetralemma offers the most accurate reconstruction of how Tracy and Ellis are arguing. For a more plausible reading of their position, see the response by Tom Tracy elsewhere in this issue.
3. Ironically, then, Wildman would agree with the famous claim made by Wolfhart Pannenberg in his argument for the historicity of the resurrection: “If ... historical study declares itself unable to establish what ‘really’ happened on Easter, then all the more, faith is not able to do so; for faith cannot ascertain anything certain about events of the past that would perhaps be inaccessible to the historian” (Pannenberg, *Jesus — God and Man*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis Wilkins and Duane Priebe [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968], 109). Of course, Pannenberg and Wildman hold opposite views on whether historical study *can* establish this fact.