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Theistic Evolution: The Fallacy of the Middle Ground

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The great fear of many leading creationists and the misunderstanding of many creationist students is that accepting MN [methodological naturalism] rules for doing science will necessarily lead to a supernaturalless/Godless worldview.
[Brian Alters \(2005\).p. 77](#)

Science is not committed to the nonexistence of God, as it would be if it

Science is not just a collection of facts and theories. It's a way of knowing. We may not be able to describe an exact scientific method that everyone can agree on but there are some fundamental principles that all scientists adhere to when they are doing science. One of these principles is called methodological naturalism or methodological materialism.

Here's the basic idea behind methodological materialism as described by Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education.

Science is a way of knowing about the natural world. As practiced in the 20th and likely in the 21st centuries, science restricts itself to explaining the natural world using natural causes. This restriction of evolution to explanation through natural cause is referred to as "methodological materialism", materialism in this context referring to matter, energy, and their interaction. Methodological materialism is one of the main differences between science and religion. Religion may use natural explanations for worldly phenomena, but reserves the right to explain through divine intervention; science has no such option. Whether or not miracles occur, they cannot be part of a scientific explanation.

Eugenie C. Scott (1999) [Science, Religion, and Evolution](#)

There is widespread agreement among philosophers of science that adherence to methodological naturalism is one of the features that distinguishes science from non-science. If your explanation of the natural world allows miracles or supernatural beings, then it may or may not be correct but it isn't science. This naturalistic view of science is strongly opposed by some Christians, notably the Berkeley Law Professor Phillip Johnson. He argues that the world needs to develop a Christian approach to science that isn't restricted by methodological naturalism. Johnson's viewpoint is shared by a few religious philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga.

There are many religious scientists, philosophers, and lay people who disagree with the likes of Johnson and Plantinga. They do not advocate a change in definition of science; instead, they seek ways to minimize the conflict between science and religion without rejecting the materialistic basis of science.

In order to understand the point of view of these "compatibilists," it's important to distinguish

were based on metaphysical naturalism. Science is committed to naturalistic explanations. Science does not count any explanation that appeals to God or to supernatural phenomena as a scientific explanation (thus it is committed to methodological naturalism).

[Lynn Rudder Baker \(2000\)](#)

Operational science takes no position about the existence or non-existence of the supernatural; it only requires that this factor is not to be invoked in scientific explanations. Calling down special-purpose miracles as explanations constitutes a form of intellectual "cheating."

[Richard E. Dickerson \(1992\), p.119](#)

The Astonishing Hypothesis is that "You," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

[Francis Crick \(1994\)](#)

Although I am fully convinced of the truth of the views given in this volume, I by no means expect to convince experienced naturalists whose minds are stocked with a multitude of facts all viewed, during a long course of years, from a point of view directly opposite to mine. It is so easy to hide our ignorance under such expressions as "plan of creation," "unity of design," etc., and to think that we give an explanation when we only restate a fact. Any one whose disposition leads him to attach more weight to unexplained difficulties than to the explanation of a certain number of facts will certainly reject the theory.

[Charles Darwin \(1859\)](#)

Science reveals where

between methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism. Methodological naturalism is what scientists have to practice in order to do good science. The practice of methodological naturalism does not necessarily lead to the total rejection of supernatural beings—that's metaphysical naturalism and it's not the same thing.

Here's how Michael Ruse describes it,

The methodological naturalist is the person who assumes that the world runs according to unbroken law; that humans can understand the world in terms of this law; and that science involves just such understanding without any reference to extra or supernatural forces like God. Whether there are such forces or beings is another matter entirely and simply not addressed by methodological naturalism. Hence, although indeed evolution as we understand it is a natural consequence of methodological naturalism, given the facts of the world as they can be discovered, in no sense is the methodological naturalist thereby committed to the denial of God's existence. It is simply that the methodological naturalist insists that, inasmuch as one is doing science, one avoid all theological or other religious references. In particular, one denies God a role in creation.

Michael Ruse (2002) "Methodological Naturalism Under Attack" p. 365

What Ruse is saying is that the practice of methodological naturalism doesn't necessarily lead to atheism. It's a distinction that is unlikely to convince Johnson or Plantinga. They realize instinctively that materialistic explanations conforming to methodological naturalism leave no room for an interventionist designer God. However, in order to stake out a middle ground between science, which does not permit appeals to the supernatural, and theistic science, which mandates a role for God, one must first establish that "true" science does not eliminate God. This is what Ruse and others are doing when they restrict science to its proper domain. Their goal is to avoid the complete rejection of modern science advocated by Johnson and Plantinga while retaining the option of theism.

As a general rule, seekers of the middle ground seem to be mostly concerned with restricting science and less concerned with the limits of religion. That's a mistake because it's just as important to make sure that religion doesn't intrude on the turf of science by offering up explanations of the natural world. The natural world is the domain of science. Stephen Jay Gould refers to these domains as "magisteria" and he advocated the principle of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA).

One strategy of the compatibilists is to focus on demonstrating that science can't disprove the existence of God. Having made that point, it seems to follow that God can exist and God can guide or direct evolution. When scientists object to a religious explanation of evolution, their objections are ruled out-of-bounds because they invoke metaphysical naturalism. Thus, according to compatibilists, the elimination of the supernatural from science requires "faith" and this makes it no better than religion. Religion is also a valid way of knowing but it doesn't conflict with true science—or so the argument goes.

Scientists, on the other hand, argue that an interventionist God who guides evolution violates the rules of science. These rules do not rely on faith. Instead, they are the expression of a tried and tested methodology that has been remarkably successful. In addition to being empirically validated, the methodology makes science universal, or open to scientists of any religion (or lack of religion). Supernatural explanations of the natural world are not scientific.

Where scientists and philosophers do agree is that extreme religious views are anti-science because they deny certain scientific facts. This means that Young Earth Creationism is not science because it postulates that the world was created in seven days according to the Book of Genesis. It also means that some other forms of scientific creationism aren't science because they all deny that humans evolved from other apes. In fact, scientific Creationism—

religion conceals. Where religion purports to explain, it actually resorts to tautology. To assert that "God did it" is no more than an admission of ignorance dressed deceitfully as an explanation..
[Peter Atkins](#)

The first commandment for all versions of NOMA might be summarized by stating: "Thou shalt not mix the magisteria by claiming that God directly ordains important events in the history of nature by special interference knowable only through revelation and not accessible to science." In common parlance, we refer to such special interference as "miracle"—operationally defined as a unique and temporary suspension of natural law to reorder the facts of nature by divine fiat.
[Stephen Jay Gould \(1999\) p. 84](#)

Johnson finds the commitment of scientists to totally naturalistic explanations dogmatic and close-minded, but scientists have no choice. Once they allow reference to God or miraculous forces to explain the first origin of life or the evolution of the human species, they have no way of limiting this sort of explanation.
[David I. Hull \(1991\) p. 486](#)

My practise as a scientist is atheistic. That is to say, when I set up an experiment I assume that no god, angel, or devil is going to interfere with its course; and this assumption has been justified by such success as I have achieved in my professional career. I should therefore be intellectually dishonest if I were not also atheistic in the affairs of the world. And I should be a coward if I did not state my theoretical views in public.
[J.B.S. Haldane](#)

If God is intervening into our world, he must be doing so in some measurable way. That's

with an upper-case "C"—is an oxymoron since the very word "Creationism" describes an anti-science point of view.

A different reasoning allows us to reject Intelligent Design Creationism as legitimate science. At the very least, intelligent design requires an intelligent designer who plays a direct role in evolution and such a role conflicts with a scientific explanation. As explained earlier, the scientific description of evolution does not rely on, or permit, the intervention of supernatural beings. This is why the original description of evolution adopted in 1995 by the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) said,

The diversity of life on earth is the outcome of evolution: an unsupervised, impersonal, unpredictable and natural process of temporal descent with genetic modification that is affected by natural selection, chance, historical contingencies and changing environments.

(see Eugenie C. Scott, [NABT Statement on Evolution Evolves](#))

The key words in that statement are "unsupervised" and "impersonal" because they emphasize the true nature of the scientific meaning of evolution. Unfortunately, these are the very words that upset believers and, after much debate, NABT eliminated those words from its description of scientific evolution. [[NABT](#)]. While this may have been politically correct, it doesn't alter the fact that true scientific explanations, by definition, must not include appeals to the supernatural.

The incident reveals that theists are very uncomfortable with pure naturalistic explanations like the original description published by NABT. One of the original critics of the NABT statement was Alvin Plantinga, a well-known proponent of "theistic science." (See Eugenie Scott's article on "[NABT Statement on Evolution Evolves](#)" for a reference to Plantinga's involvement.) Back in the early 1990's, Plantinga wrote,

Returning to methodological naturalism, if indeed natural science is essentially restricted in this way, if such a restriction is part of the very essence of science, then what we need here, of course, is not natural science, but a broader inquiry that can include all that we know, including the truths that God has created life on earth and could have done it in many different ways. "Unnatural science," "Creation Science," "Theistic Science"—call it what you will: what we need when we want to know how to think about the origin and development of contemporary life is what is most plausible from a Christian point of view. What we need is a scientific account of life that isn't restricted by methodological naturalism.

Alvin Plantinga (1991)

With hindsight, we see that the biology teachers backed down, in part, due to pressure from Christians who are opposed to science. This is one more example of the watering down of science under pressure from intolerant religious extremists.

So, is there a middle ground where an interventionist, personal God is compatible with modern science? Perhaps not. The conflict between religion and science certainly isn't avoided by postulating a passive God who doesn't play an active role in guiding evolution. If science really does have to be strictly naturalistic, then even the softest version of intelligent design—that promoted by Michael Denton—is ruled out because God creates the laws of physics and chemistry. This point is worth emphasizing. If one's explanation of the natural world posits a God who created the laws of physics and chemistry then one is not behaving like a scientist. Of course, there's even more of a conflict if one's God is supposed to have set up the universe in order to produce humans.

On the surface it seems that all forms of religion conflict with science in one way or another. It seems as though there's no room at all for religious explanations of the natural world as long

*what we do with science.
We measure.*

[Michael Shermer \(2006\)](#)

The universe doesn't seem to me to be like the kind of entity that could have a higher purpose. I literally don't know what it would mean to say that the universe has a higher purpose. But I also have to say just simply as far as my own personal experience is concerned I have not found it a depressing doctrine. I do not find myself in the least depressed by feeling that if there is a purpose it's a purpose in my friends in my people I love and myself and human beings. It's a product of human beings it's not something that's sort of you know comes out the physical universe because the universe was created.

[John Maynard Smith \(1998\)](#)

Persons in this faction [of theists] basically accept evolutionary theory with the proviso that the God of the Bible, not chance, decided the human outcome by directly guiding the process. Such theists are most commonly referred to as theistic evolutionists.

[Brian Alters \(2005\) p. 62](#)

Theologians, if they want to remain honest, should make a choice. You can claim your own magisterium, separate from science's but still deserving of respect. But in that case you have to renounce miracles. Or, you can keep your Lourdes and your miracles ... But then you must kiss goodbye to separate magisteria and your high-minded aspiration to converge on science. The desire to have it both ways is not surprising in a good propagandist. What is surprising is the readiness of liberal agnostics to go along with it; and their readiness to write off, as simplistic, insensitive extremists, those of us with the temerity to blow the whistle.

[Richard Dawkins \(2003\) p.150](#)

as we agree that scientists have to stick to naturalism. Do scientists really insist on this restriction? Yes, they do. A few years ago a group of American Scientific Societies prepared a document on evolution. The document was created by a committee of scientists chaired by evolutionary biologist Douglas Futuyma. The committee addressed the issue in the following way,

Whether the science be physics or evolutionary biology, it teaches us only what the observable world is like and how it works. Such sciences as physics, chemistry, geology, physiology, and neurobiology, exactly like evolutionary biology, admit no supernatural causes for the actions of atoms, the sun's energy, the health or ills of the human body, or the powers of the human brain. These sciences recognize only natural, material causes, and we rely on their naturalistic theories when we build airplanes, synthesize new plastics, listen to weather reports, or consult our doctors. We would no more apply religious principles to these activities than we would seek moral guidance from medical doctors, engineers, or chemists. So it is with evolutionary science: no more nor less materialistic than any other science, it offers no moral guidance, only dispassionate analysis of how biological systems function and came to be. What use we make of such information is for individuals and society to decide.

[Douglas Futuyma et al. \(2001\)](#)

As I pointed out earlier, this conclusion is not acceptable to a great many religious scientists. They claim there's a middle ground between the complete rejection of all religious explanations (naturalistic science, materialistic science) and the anti-science position of the Creationists. The middle ground is occupied by believers in theistic evolution. They practice something that Plantinga might have called "Unnatural Science."

What is theistic evolution? The simplest definition is the one offered by Alvin Plantinga. He says that theistic evolution is a version of evolution that is not restricted by methodological naturalism (see above). Eugenie Scott explains it better in her book "Evolution vs. Creationism,"

Theistic Evolution (TE) is the theological view in which God creates through the laws of nature. TEs accept all the result of modern science, in anthropology and biology as well as in astronomy, physics, and geology. In particular, it is acceptable to TEs that one species can give rise to another; they accept descent with modification. TEs vary in whether and how much God is allowed to intervene—some believe God created the laws of nature and is allowing events to occur with no further intervention. Other TEs see God as intervening at critical intervals during the history of life (especially in the origin of humans).

[Eugenie C. Scott \(2000\) p.64](#)

see also: [The Creation/Evolution Continuum](#)

Eugenie Scott's description is not unique. Many theologians describe theistic evolution as a variant of evolution that involves direct or indirect intervention by God. For example, The Rev. Ted Peters of the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary often gives lectures on the subject and one of his slides is reproduced below.

All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwearied, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its own contingency."

[Jacques Monod \(1971\) p.44](#)

I'm not going to be one of these scientists who keep waffling and saying "oh well, science has it's role, religion has it's role... science has it's own kind of truth and religion has it's own kind of truth... somehow, as we work more and more they will somehow come together." I don't believe that for a minute. I don't think that Darwin would have believed it

[Edward O. Wilson](#)

... those evolutionists who see no conflict between evolution and their religious beliefs have been careful not to look as closely as we have been looking, or else hold a religious view that gives God what we might call a merely ceremonial role to play.

[Daniel C. Dennett \(1995\) p.310](#)

(referring to Tielhard de Chardin)

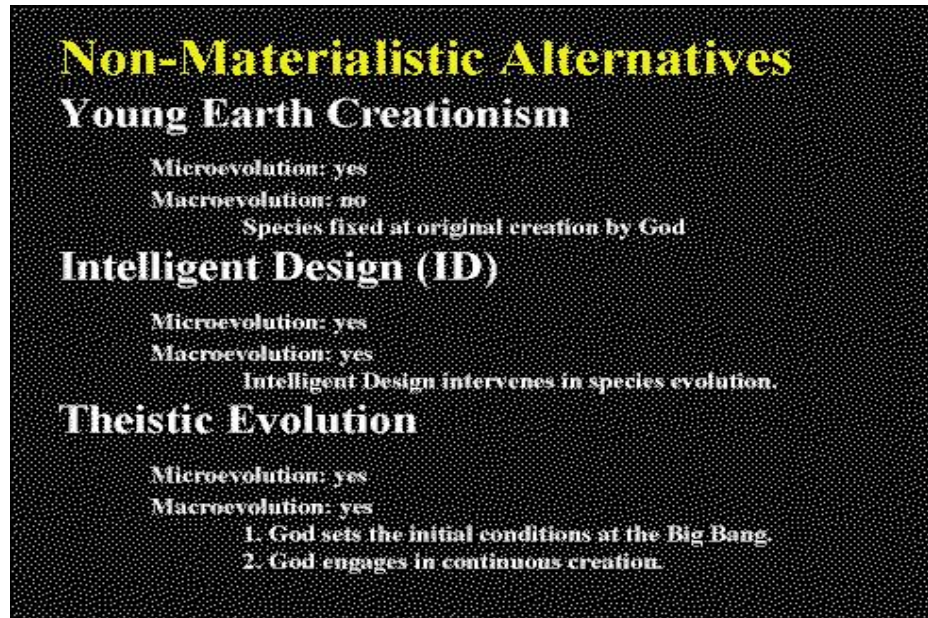
... it's author can be accused of dishonesty only on the grounds that before deceiving others he has taken great pains to deceive himself.

[Peter Medawar \(1961\) p.1](#)

If a sect does officially insist that its structure of belief demands that evolution be false, then no compromise is possible. An honest and competent biology teacher can only conclude that the sect's beliefs are wrong and that its religion is a false one.

[George Gaylord Simpson \(1964\)](#)

The defective design of organisms could be attributed to the gods of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, who fought with one another, made blunders, and were clumsy in their



Peters also recognizes two types of theistic evolutionist but both types believe in an interventionist God. The difference between theistic evolution and intelligent design is not obvious. According to Peters, intelligent design creationists believe in a God who intervenes at the species level while theistic evolutionists may not.

Plantinga, Scott, Peters, and even Phillip Johnson, agree that theistic evolutionists allow for a God who intervenes in natural processes. In my opinion, the term "theistic evolution" is another oxymoron. Evolution is science and theism is religion. You can't mix religion and science and still call it science because the practice of science must exclude theistic explanations. There is no middle ground. There are only two possibilities: either what you're doing is science or it isn't science. In the case of theistic evolution, the magisterium of religion is overlapping the magisterium of science.

Many of the most prominent opponents of Creationism are also strong supporters of theistic evolution. In order to justify their beliefs, they present the range of opinions on evolution as a smooth continuum. At one end are the Creationists who believe in an anti-science, interventionist God while the opposite end of the spectrum is occupied by atheists. The Creationists at one extreme are fiercely attacked for being anti-science. Some theistic evolutionists are just as much opposed to materialistic science at the opposite end of the continuum.

The next figure is a graphical representation of this so-called continuum taken from a presentation by Ted Peters. Note that theistic evolution is presented as the comfortable middle ground between the two unacceptable extremes of atheism and creationism. On the left are scientific creationism and intelligent design, two versions of evolution that are definitely not scientific. On the right is evolutionary biology, which represents true science unencumbered by religion..

endeavors. But, in my view, it is not compatible with special action by the omniscient and omnipotent God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

[Francisco J. Ayala \(2004\) p. 71](#)

In any discussion of the question of "Intelligent Design," it is absolutely essential to determine what is meant by the term itself. If, for example, the advocates of design wish to suggest that the intricacies of nature, life, and the universe reveal a world of meaning and purpose consistent with an overarching, possibly Divine, intelligence, then their point is philosophical, not scientific. It is a philosophical point of view, incidentally, that I share, along with many scientists.

[Kenneth R. Miller \(2004\) p. 94](#)

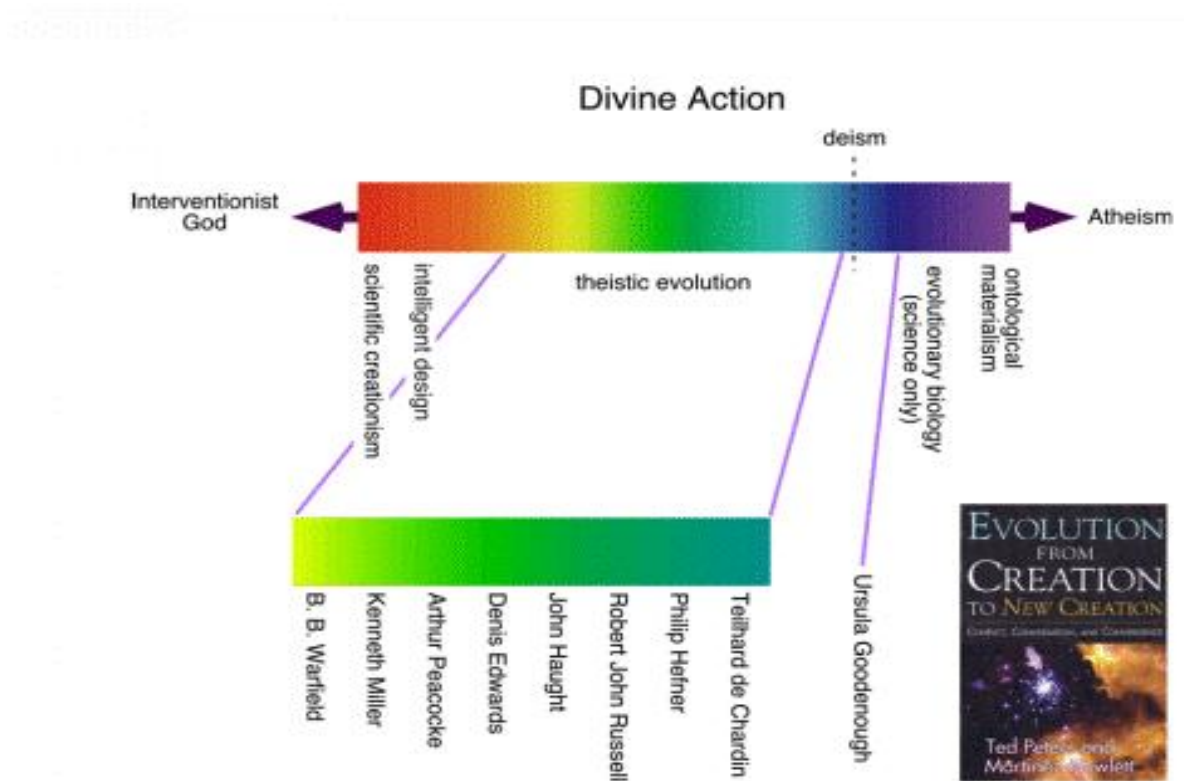
Since religion ... stands or falls with the question of cosmic purpose, the Darwinian debunking of design—and with it the apparent undoing of cosmic teleology as well—strikes right at the heart of the most prized religious intuition of humans, now and always.

[John F. Haught \(2004\) p. 230](#)

... evolution—now shown to be a major feature of the universe as we know it—must either itself be chosen by God for some reason, or lead to some state that is so chosen. In other words, evolution must in some sense be purposive—either good in itself, or good as leading to some state that is good in itself.

[Keith Ward \(2004\) p. 262](#)

Whatever the God implied by evolutionary theory may be like, He is not the Protestant God of waste not, want not. He is also not a loving God who cares about his productions. He is not even the awful God portrayed in the book of Job. The God of the Galapagos is careless,



The spectrum of theistic evolutionists in the middle is quite revealing. Peters does not include Ursula Goodenough. She believes is a spiritualistic version of pantheism where it's the awesomeness of nature itself that inspires a spiritual feeling. The well-known atheist, Richard Dawkins, has declared that if Goodenough is religious then so is he.

Deism is also outside of the theistic evolution middle ground. This is significant since many versions of deism are compatible with science—they do not require an interventionist God. Some of the responses I received when the first version of this essay was published were from deists and pantheists who referred to themselves as theistic evolutionists. They fully accepted the scientific version of evolution but they wanted to proclaim that they were not atheists. For that group there is no conflict but, more importantly, there is also no middle ground. They completely accept the scientific version of evolutionary biology. These deists and pantheists are using the term "theistic evolution" in a way that's very different from the description of Peters and other theologians. It would be more accurate if they called themselves "deistic evolutionists"—or just plain "evolutionists" since they don't need to qualify their science in any way.

Teilhard de Chardin represents the softest version of theistic evolution, according to Peters. Teilhard's God is responsible for the direction of evolution but the intervention is subtle and his version of religion is close to deism. The hard version of theistic evolution is represented by Ken Miller (and others) and it is described in Miller's book "Finding Darwin's God." Miller's version of theistic evolution is close to intelligent design. So close, in fact, that I can hardly tell them apart.

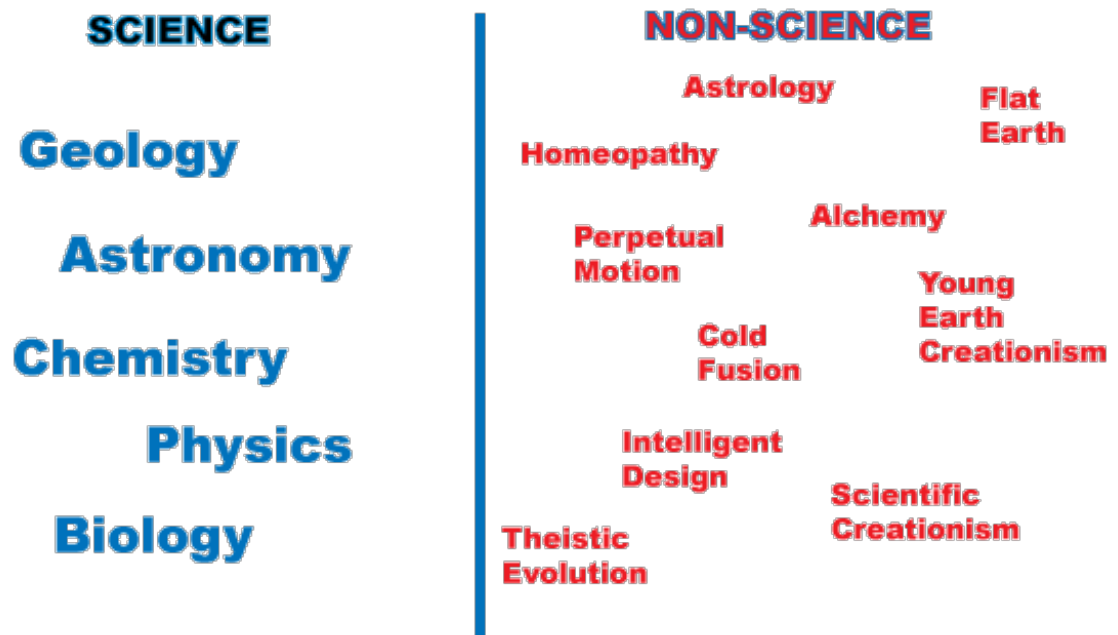
Theistic evolution is described as a legitimate alternative to scientific evolutionary biology. The idea is that one can accept a theistic version of science as long as you don't fall for Creationism. In other words, science and religion are compatible—perhaps even desirable—as long as you position yourself close to the true science end of the continuum.

To my mind, this is a totally false view of the range of options. There is no continuum between science and non-science. Either your explanations of the natural world are scientific or they

wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical. He is certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.

[David I. Hull \(1991\) p. 486](#)

are not. Here's my version of the range of ideas about science and non-science.



In my version, theistic evolution ain't science. Admittedly, it is closer to the dividing line than the explanations of Young Earth Creationists but "close" isn't good enough. Theistic evolution is still in the "Non-Science" half of the diagram. There is no middle ground.

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