
UNIT 2 DEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Deism – Its Origin and Definition
- 2.3 Deism – Various Facets
- 2.4 Agnosticism – Its origin and Definition
- 2.5 Agnosticism – Various Dimensions
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Key Words
- 2.8 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to introduce, Deism and Agnosticism, two key concepts from the world of philosophy of Religion. Since it is not possible to give a complete and exhaustive account of these two concepts within such a limited space, the chapter aims at laying a foundation of the concepts which can be built up later by further reading. The chapter looks not only at the Historical aspect of the two concepts but also examines their meaning and significance in the realm of Religion and further dives deep into the Philosophical implications of the same. Apart from looking into the two concepts separately there will be an attempt to see them in the light of each other. Deism and Agnosticism fall into many of the theories which have tried to explain the relation of the Creator and His creation. Agnosticism is concerned with the possibility of the knowledge of the Creator if any such exists at all. Therefore an examination of these concepts in the light of the other theories, in the larger philosophical canvas, is another objective of the study. The chapter ends with a reflection on the relevance of the concepts in the present context and their implications in the other domains of Philosophy of Religion.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to have basic understandings of Deism;
- to differentiate Deism from other forms of theism;
- to relate it with the development of modern science ;
- to understand the basic idea of Agnosticism and its varieties;
- to differentiate and relate Agnosticism and Atheism .

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Deism is one of those theories which tries to explain the relation of God as a creator with His creation. For this purpose they resort to the observation of nature and natural phenomena in stead of taking refuge in any canonical literature of any Religion. This is a view which maintains that though God has created this

Universe, He does not exercise incessant control over it. As a matter of fact, He does not intervene in any affair of this world. He configured some laws into nature while constructing this multiple world of objects and has left this world in the supervision of those natural laws. Pierre Viret, a French thinker, probably used the term *deist* for the first time in 1564. Deism flourished primarily in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century due to advent of modern science. Science challenged the theories of religion and new interpretations of religious facts were in demand. The ideas of supernatural revelations were rejected as science started identifying certain laws of nature. Later it spread to France, Ireland, North America etc. and as a whole exercised deep influence in shaping modern world. Agnosticism, on the other hand, has its genesis in scepticism. Sceptics maintain that apart from mathematical propositions and certain tautologies all other knowledge claims are loaded with doubt. They are certain only up to a degree. Nothing is absolutely certain. Extending this logic to the matters of religion and faith, Agnostics maintain that nothing in that realm can be said with certainty. They do not claim to be theists as they think that they can't prove the existence of God and also desist from claiming themselves to be atheists since they opine that they can't disprove it either. Though this line of thought can be traced both in ancient Indian and Western traditions, the term Agnosticism was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley in the year 1869.

2.2 DEISM – ITS ORIGIN AND DEFINITION

Deism has its etymological origin in the word 'Deus', a word, which stands for God in Latin. In the realm of Philosophy of Religion, Deism is mainly concerned with the relationship between the Creator and his Creation. Chronologically this stream of thought can be traced to have its genesis in the Seventeenth century's Europe. Being a part of the scientific revolution, it seems to have left its mark even in the eighteenth century's enlightenment period. And therefore we can read definite contribution of this theory in shaping the thoughts of modern times. Deism is neither atheism nor any kind of scepticism. It attempted to find a way between religious dogmatism and extreme scepticism. But Deism is not found as a uniform philosophy throughout seventeenth and eighteenth century as it included a range of people from anti-Christian to un-Christian theists.

Deism primarily maintains that though God has created the world but He does not interfere in the activities of the same. The world functions according to certain laws which of course He structured when He brought all these into being. God is thus wholly transcendent and not at all immanent. Deists advocate observation of natural phenomena and their rational analysis as a means to know God. There is no scope of revelation or mysticism in Deism. Due to the absence of controlling powers in God, though the aboriginal allotment of powers is assigned to Him, Deism comes very close to Naturalism. Because in Naturalistic Philosophy, it is the Nature which practically bears the supreme power and governs everything. But Deism is neither synonymous with Atheism in the sense that they do not deny in the presence of a Supreme power nor is it synonymous with theism as they don't accept the participation of that power, as theists do, in controlling the activities of this Universe. God endowed the world at creation with self-sustaining and self-acting powers and then abandoned it to the operation of these powers acting as second causes.

Pierre Viret, a French thinker, probably used the term *deist* for the first time in 1564, in *Instruction Chrétienne en la doctrine de la foi et de l'Évangile* (*Christian teaching on the doctrine of faith and the Gospel*). He opines

that Deism denotes a line of thought which does accept the existence God even as a creator of heaven and earth, but they reject all that is described in the Theology and Mythology of Christianity as tales and parables.

In England, the term *deist* first appeared in the year 1621 in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Lord Herbert of Cherbury, generally considered the 'father of English Deism', enumerated the first articulated form of Deism in his book *De Veritate* in 1624. It proposes a theory of knowledge based upon the recognition of the innate universal characteristics of the perceived objects and completely rejects any epistemology pertaining to anything supernatural in its origin and determinable in only by strife and conflict. Matthew Tindal, an eminent English Deist, wrote *Christianity as Old as the Creation or the gospel a republication of the Religion of Nature* in 1730, which is the first standard text – book of the Deism, later came to be known as 'The Bible' of the school. It became popular because almost every argument, quotations and issues raised for decades can be found here. Later Deism spread to France, notably through the work of Voltaire, to Germany, and to America.

2.3 DEISM – VARIOUS FACETS

The roots of Deism can be traced to the Heraclitan conception of Logos. Logos is the supreme principle for him and he was "both willing and unwilling to call it Zeus (God)". Demiurge, the terminology used by Plato for God, comes very close to Deist's depiction of the Supreme as a Craftsman. However, the word 'deism', as it is understood today, is generally used to refer to the movement toward Natural Theology or freethinking that occurred in Seventeenth – century Europe, and specifically in England. One needs to study this shift to Natural Theology in order to understand the foundations of Deism.

There was a radical change in the outlook of seventeenth common minds in whole western world due to the advent of Science. The whole geo – centric biblical theory was challenged with the Copernicun revolution. The works of Kepler and Galileo added to the paradigm shift. This reduced Bible to a text on faith and morality and took its authority away from the world of nature and Natural Laws. Issac Newton explained natural movements with the help of his laws motions and the principle of gravitation. The idea of certain natural laws governing the universe dominated the knowledge domain. This, in turn suggested a theory in Theology that though God created the world, He left it in the hand of nature which governs its movements with its own set of laws. The explanations of various natural phenomena challenged the idea of miracle which was highly glorified by religion. In addition, the study of classical literature led to the conclusion that some of the documents didn't have the required veracity to be relied for even the issues of faith. These gave birth to a series of biblical criticisms by rational thinkers.

Thus the whole of Deism can be put as an acceptance of God but rejection of His incessant control over his own creation. Now though there are general agreements among the Deists regarding the basics of Deist Philosophy, there are differences as well. For example a class of Deists resort to the classical Christian view that God will punish or reward us for our activities after our death whereas some maintain that we face the consequence of our actions in this life during our existence in this world only. All deists did not come out of the ambit of Christianity though they were all critical of it. Classical Deists like Matthew Tindal continued regard Jesus as a great moral teacher though he was

opposed to the ascription of Divinity to him. They regarded themselves as the representatives of the classical and pure form of Christianity which had existed before getting corrupt in the hands of certain dogmatists by the addition of mysterious concepts.

All Deists had both critical but constructive approaches in their Philosophies. All wanted to build a solid philosophical base for the guidance of human activities through elimination of irrational elements of religious dogmatism. Some targeted the priestly class in their writings, some focussed on re – reading of the religious scriptures and some subscribed to the study of nature. This is the reason why Deism, like atheism and freethinking, was one of the unpalatable terms for a large section of the English society. Deism was equated with Atheism, though most of the Deists agreed, in many basic propositions, with the orthodox school. Thus Deism was a judicious mixture of both critical and constructive thinking. They allowed the wind of freethinking to blow openly, but resisted it from blowing strong enough to extinguish their faith in a Creator and His primordial power to create this Universe.

Now for the Deists, reason was the most pivotal instrument in understanding the laws of nature and their subsequent implications. Rational faculty refers to the ability of inferring, judging and apprehending. Reasoning is about agreement or disagreement of ideas. Affirmation or denial of agreement gives rise to the propositions. Knowledge occurs through this adventure of ideas. But Deists, apart from accepting reason and rationality also do entertain certain truths to be self evident. Though it does not indicate any sorts of divine revelation, it is accommodated by some terminologies like intuitive knowledge.

Deists accept something called the ‘the light of nature’ to support the self-evident nature of their positive religious claims. Deists derive the sets of their duties and practices by comparing the perfect nature of Divine and imperfect nature of themselves. The acceptance of the existence of a Divine being is based on what they call ‘the light of nature’. God is a Being who is Absolute perfection and Absolute bliss in himself. He is the genesis of this multiple objects of the universe.

But this concept of ‘Light of Nature’ did not stop them from critically engaging with the ideas in the realm of religion. No nonsense was entertained in the garb of intuition. Orthodox Christianity tried to depict itself as a product of a series of miracles. People were told to accept religious ideas with faith which they could not apprehend. Mysteries were treated as something beyond reason and not necessarily contradictory to it. But most of the Deists opposed this idea and relied on reason for certitude. The idea of ‘Self evident Truth’ did not support the concept of Revelation. They wanted to get the religion rid of the mysteries.

The reason and rationality must be incessantly at work and question things as far as possible. In case of conflict between reason and faith, it is reason that has to exercise to the farthest extent. Though it is taught that one needs to accept that which is not intellectually comprehensible with faith, Deists maintain that we can’t make ourselves a subject of any cock and bull story for the sake of this so called faith. They are not ready to accept evident contradictions like yellow and blue colours of the same object at the same time without questioning it. The veracity of any religious dictum is always subject of revision and appraisal. So the older understanding that children dying before baptism do not go to heaven but are headed for some other world has no significance in Deist

thinking. Deists opine that a lot of things, which are asserted to be essential for salvation, can't be entertained by a rational mind. They are just absurd or appear to be simply laughing stocks. These apparent contradictions of holiness on one side and absurdity on the other lead a rational thinking mind to a zone of utter confusion. Apart from that, even understanding these expositions as symbolism is not easy in the sense that there has been a variety of interpretations to these stories. What do they really signify remains still shrouded in mystery.

Deists, due to their proximity to Naturalism, move towards cosmological argument. According to this argument, everything in nature is designed in such a way that it can survive in the world. Certain animals are full of feathers for the protection from heat and cold. Birds have been gifted with wings so as to fly high. Carnivorous animals have been equipped with sharp nails and specific design of teeth so as to be able to prey and get food. Innumerable such examples can be sighted from the observation of nature. The presence of design in every part of it indicates the presence of designer as well. This designer is none but God. There is substantial ground to infer the presence of a super creative power from the flawless natural system that makes life possible on this earth.

Deism was not untouched by the age old problem of freedom and determinism. Does the emphasis on design argument and conception of natural laws lead us necessarily to some kind of determinism was a pivotal question of the time. The influence of modern science and specially that of Newtonian mechanics, describing the whole cosmos more or less like a machine led to the tendencies of determinism.

Deists had different opinion on soul and life after death. Some like Lord Herbert of Cherbury and William Wollaston opined that soul exists after death and, as per Classical Christianity is rewarded or punished by God. Some like Benjamin Franklin believed in the theory of rebirth and some like Thomas Paine were agnostic in this regard. Yet people like Anthony Collins, *Thomas Chubb* and *Peter Annet* were perfect materialists and denied any such possibility of afterlife.

Deists treated the prevailing form of the religion as a perverted form of a simple and rational religion. They ascribed the whole deformation to something called 'priestcraft' or manipulation of the religion by the priests. Common man was misled by the story of heaven and hell and the religion was mystified with unnecessary elements. This deviation required some kind of reformation and Deism was a product of the necessity.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do Deists relate God and His Creation in their Philosophy?

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2) Did modern science make any impact in the development of Deism?

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3) What do you mean by 'Light of Nature' in Deism?

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2.4 AGNOSTICISM – ITS ORIGIN AND DEFINITION

Agnosticism comes from agnostic which has its roots in Greek a () meaning without and gnôsis (γνῶσις) meaning knowledge. This term was first used by Thomas Henry Huxley. Initially it was used for the rejection of any kind of transcendental knowledge but later it acquired a broader shape and came to be treated as a method of philosophizing and examining the veracity of knowledge claims. Though agnosticism has been often identified with atheism, it actually is not so. There are people who claim themselves both as theists and agnostic whereas there is another group who call themselves both atheist and agnostic. Therefore Thomas Henry Huxley defines it as rejection of conclusions that are not 'demonstrated and demonstrable'.

Sceptic Philosophers believed that apart from some mathematical propositions like 'The sum of all the three angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles' and certain propositions like 'All bachelors are unmarried', which are necessarily true by their definitions themselves, all other propositions regarding the world is associated, as far as it's truth – value is concerned, with a degree of probability. They have raised serious doubts about the necessity of Universal propositions like 'All men are mortal'. Therefore there is no basis for a perfect knowledge claim. All knowledge that we claim to have is actually not knowledge but belief. Everything is attached to uncertainty and therefore, while making knowledge claims, we should be very careful. Thus Agnosticism is scepticism but it is special in the sense that it talks mainly about those propositions which are concerned with the existence and nature of God or Absolute reality. Though this is how Agnosticism is defined in the broadest terms, there are various kinds of Agnosticisms which we will see in the due course of the chapter.

2.5 AGNOSTICISM – VARIOUS DIMENSIONS

Though Thomas Henry Huxley used the term agnosticism for the first time, he is not the first and foremost to think in this line. In various cultures and philosophies we find traces of agnosticism in various forms and ways. In Indian tradition, for example, its presence can be traced to the hymns of the Zg Vedas, which is supposed to be the oldest canonical work available in any religion in this world. The Nasadîya Sûkta reads that there was neither 'being

nor not being' in the beginning of this creation. And further goes to ask who the creator, is then, of this creation? It reads as –

At first there was neither being nor non – being

There was not air nor yet sky beyond

What was its wrapping? Where? In whose protection?

Was water there unfathomable and deep?

This indicates a kind of unknowability of the Ultimate principle and an antifoundationalistic approach at least in the realm of reason. The same kind of indications can be found in the writings of Pyrrho in ancient Greek Philosophy. Protagoras also took the sceptical position by declaring 'Man is the measure of all things'.

In modern times, Kant becomes a champion of the limitations of human reason. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant maintains that the world of objects is given to us in a specific space – time background. All that we know about objects is only one face of it. Kant calls it phenomena and the whole of the object or 'the thing – in – itself' is called noumena. This noumena is called unknown and unknowable by Kant. He opines that when reason tries get into the domain of noumena it gets bogged up in its internal contradictions what Kant terms as 'antinomies'. This sceptical approach indicated by the phrase 'unknown and unknowable' perhaps puts Kant also in the zone of agnostics. Apart from that, Kant criticized all the classical arguments for the existence of God, suggesting that intellectual adventures do not work in the region of God. Kant leaves room for faith in the matters of God. This is perfect intellectual agnosticism. Again while reading modern existentialists like Soren Kirkegard, we can listen to the echoes of agnosticism. He maintains that God, if by very definition is unknown, leads us to lot of confusion. If He does not exist, it is impossible to prove His existence and if He does, it is folly to attempt it.

Coming to some classical agnostics, Thomas Henry Huxley, who coined the term agnosticism, very simply puts it as he can neither affirm nor deny the immortality of man. He sees no reason for believing it but on the other hand has no means of disproving it. Like an open thinker, he opines that he has no *a priori* objection to the belief in the after – life but he is not ready to accept them unless they are evidentially proved. In the same tune, Bertrand Russell goes to express his agnosticism. He says that, in the strict philosophical language, he would like to call himself an agnostic rather than an atheist because as he can't prove the existence of God, he can't disprove it either.

Agnosticism, though seen as something uniform, actually has got many varieties. One of them is agnostic atheism. This group of people do not believe in the existence of a God but at the same time do not claim to have evidences to demonstrate God's non – existence. The second group is called agnostic theists. This group believes in the existence of God but does not claim to know it. The third group believes in pragmatic agnosticism, according to which, there is no proof of either existence or non – existence of God. The question is only formal in the sense that the so called God seems to be totally indifferent to the activities of the world. There is another group called Ignostics, who question the definition of God itself before entering into the debate of His existence and non – existence. They opine that the whole debate is meaningless because the very existence of a deity is not empirically verifiable.

Then there is another division of agnosticism, pertaining to unknowability of God. One group thinks that it is absolutely impossible to know the existence of God another maintains that though it is unknowable today one day humanity might come to know about it through certain evidences. The first group is called strong agnostics and the second group is called weak agnostics.

Though Agnosticism seems to be appealing at times, this line of thought has been subject of a variety of criticisms. Many religious scholars are of the opinion that there is a spiritual aspect in human intelligence which makes it capable of conceiving the supra – sensuous reality. They are of the opinion that mere inability to grasp something does not prove its non – existence. The truth might not be revealed to larger section of humanity. But we can't decide the truth value of a proposition based on the number of people who are aware of it.

Agnostics are not ready to affirm the existence of God since there is no sufficient scientific evidence or empirical data to prove it. But religious scholars object that to make or even to expect God to come down and become a subject of laboratory experiment is not sensible. If the possibility of God's existence is not rejected by agnostics, they should also accept the fact that if any such Divine being exists, he can't be like a mixture of certain chemicals in the Chemistry laboratory. Thus the matter of God has to be treated in a different perspective altogether. By definition God transcends the limits of human reason and the world of sense – objects.

Again, Kant's position that the ultimate truth is 'unknown and unknowable' applies only to the realm of reason and rationality. Kant himself maintains that he has kept room for faith in order to deal with God. Therefore, it is a mistake to mix the truths of the sense – data world to mix with the truths of religion.

Another group of theistic scholars argue that it is practically not possible for any human being to go through his life without either being a theist or an atheist. One can't leave this pivotal question like this. A common man's values are dependent on his orientation towards the Ultimate reality, which religion identifies as God. To leave the matter undecided would again amount, they argue, more or less to atheism.

It is better to call oneself an atheist, atheists remark, rather than an agnostic if, like strong agnostics, one maintains that God, even if He exists, is unknown and unknowable. These two positions are practically synonymous. So, strong agnosticism boils down to atheism.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Differentiate between weak and strong agnosticism.

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2) Is agnosticism synonymous with atheism? Give at least a reason for your answer.

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3) Give one criticism of agnosticism as a philosophy.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to give an outline view of both Deism and Agnosticism. The concepts have been seen from both historical and Philosophical standpoints. Keeping in mind, the varieties which these two concepts encompass, we have tried to throw light on as many of them as possible. To be precise Deism is an evolute of the impact of science upon human mind. Though this theory also can't explain the phenomenal universe and its relation to its creator perfectly, it attempts to come out of the tendency to accept every religious dictum without questioning. That's probably the reason why they are not ready to accept revelation as an epistemological category and appeals to the court of reason and peeps into nature for certainty of knowledge. Similarly agnostic maintain a distinct position with respect to the religious matters like soul and God and very clearly accepts their limitations in knowing those things. Here we have also highlighted its difference with atheism.

2.7 KEY WORDS

- Theism and Atheism** : Two views, of which, the former affirms belief in God and the later denies it.
- Determinism and Indeterminism** : The former view holds that all the events are predetermined whereas the later contends that nothing is predestined
- A priori** : Existing in the mind, prior to and independent of experience

2.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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