

PRINTING ERROR?
C. S. LEWIS AND THE ARGUMENT FROM REASON

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INTRODUCTION

One of Lewis’s more interesting arguments is The Argument from Reason. It is part of his defense of the possibility of miracles in *Miracles*, an attempt to refute Naturalism so that the study of the miraculous could proceed. It occasioned perhaps the most famous debate Lewis was ever involved in, when the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe attempted to refute it at the Oxford Socratic Club on February 2, 1948. People are still arguing over whether or not she succeeded. Lewis took her critique seriously enough that he revised the relevant chapters of *Miracles* in a second edition to try to meet it.¹ People are still arguing about how successful *that* was. We will try to bring some clarity to the situation here.

THE ARGUMENT

The Argument from Reason rivals the Trilemma as Lewis’s argument that has provoked the most controversy. He lays it out in the opening chapters of *Miracles*. In simple form, he argues that if Naturalism is true, then everything that happens must have a physical cause. This includes our thoughts. Then your thought that naturalism is true is caused by chemical reactions in your brain, equally with my thought that it is false. Therefore, as one chemical reaction can hardly make a valid judgment about another one, Naturalism cannot be true. If it were, we would not be able to claim that it is true. Naturalism is self-refuting.

Lewis argued that naturalism undoes itself because it presents us with a view of the world in which thoughts are reduced to chemical reactions in our heads, which are happening there in obedience to the laws of physics and chemistry rather than the laws of logic and reason. But if this is true, we have no reason to trust the very rational processes by which we concluded that our thoughts are chemical reactions. If my thoughts are determined by the physical state of my brain, by the history of the atoms that randomly ended up in motion there—if there is no free rational agent who can see logical relationships between evidence and conclusions—then all thinking is undermined, including the thought that naturalism (or anything else) is true. How can one chemical reaction be right or wrong about another chemical reaction? If my thought and the thought of the person who disagrees with me are both just chemical reactions in our heads, who is to judge between them? The only answer is another entity whose thoughts are subject to the same difficulty as ours. This leads us nowhere. Therefore, reason must somehow be

¹ Compare C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1947) and C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1960; NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

transcendent, something that stands above deterministic cause and effect. To deny this conclusion is to deny your right to deny it. Therefore (to make a long story short), Christian theism can be affirmed without contradiction, but naturalism and materialism cannot.

It seems to me that Lewis was basically right: You cannot have a philosophy that undermines the transcendence of Reason and the ability of persons to access it and then give reasons for that philosophy or claim that it is in any meaningful sense true.

What some may not realize is that the argument from reason exemplifies a basic pattern in Lewis's thinking, in his way of seeing reality in general, not just its relation to reason. The world is a big and wonderful place, and only belief in God as He is revealed in Christianity can account for that largeness and that wonder. If God exists, there is room for all the facts the Atheist accepts. But if He does not, it is not just God and the spiritual that is excluded, but even the Atheist's world has to go also. There is room in the Christian's world for the Atheist, but the Atheist's universe is not even big enough to include the Atheist himself.

This pattern is evident whether we look at the world from the standpoint of knowing, of meaning, or of morals. In the area of knowing, Lewis noted that "When I accept Theology . . . I can get in, or allow for, science as a whole. . . . If, on the other hand, I swallow the [secular] scientific cosmology as a whole, then not only can I not fit in Christianity, but I cannot even fit in science."² What of meaning? It turns out that Atheism is just too simple to account for it. "If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning. . . . If there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning."³ In thinking about the world from the standpoint of its relation to morality we get the same result. Lewis wrote to Dom Bede Griffiths on 20 Dec. 1946 that he had to give up using evil as an argument against God when he asked how he knew that the universe was evil. "Whence came the light which discovered this darkness, the straight by which I discovered this crookedness?"⁴

In each of these areas the Christian has a view that explains the world as we experience it, in all its vastness, wonder, and mystery, while the skeptic must posit a world in which he himself (as a significant, meaningful, thinking person) does not exist. Taking the Atheist's world view seriously causes it to self-destruct. He is forced to saw off the very limb on which he is sitting. The Christian on the other hand can believe in the Atheist's limb and see it as attached to the tree. As Lewis summarized it, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."⁵

CRITIQUE

² "Is Theology Poetry," *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980): 138-9.

³ *Mere Christianity*, ip. Cit., 46.

⁴ *Collected Letters.*, op. cit., 2:747.

⁵ "Is Theology Poetry?" op. cit., 140.

Elizabeth Anscombe was Lewis's most famous critic, but not the only one. David Kyle Johnson, for example, is confident that Lewis's argument fails to refute Naturalism. He uses a rebuttal we have seen before and will see again. Like Beversluis as we will see in *The Moral Argument on Thursday* and Hinten as we saw in *The Trilemma* earlier this afternoon, he accuses Lewis in effect of a False Dilemma: Lewis allegedly leaves out of consideration more sophisticated versions of naturalism that supposedly are able to survive his attack. Johnson thinks there are forms of naturalism that do not reduce all mental acts to their physical causes. Property dualism, for example, holds that only matter exists, but that matter has two kinds of properties: physical properties and mental properties. Mind-brain identity theory holds that there is a one-to-one correspondence between brain events and mind events—they are simply the same thing. Johnson thinks that these views make it possible for “ground-consequent explanations” (i.e., reasons) to be ultimate explanations of thoughts so that naturalism survives Lewis's charge of being self-refuting.⁶ He therefore concludes that Lewis is wrong to claim that “reasoning cannot exist if naturalism is true.”⁷ As with the other arguments, the debate boils down to whether the alleged exceptions to Lewis's generalization are indeed legitimate exceptions. It is not self-evident that they are (More on that anon.)

When we think of the argument from reason, we think of the opening chapters of *Miracles* and of Lewis's debate over them with Elizabeth Anscombe at the Oxford Socratic Club. Anscombe basically challenged Lewis on a technicality: He had not sufficiently distinguished between non-rational and irrational causes of our thoughts, which he had said that we discount when they can be shown to have irrational causes. Brain chemistry is a non-rational cause, but the resulting thought does not *have* to be irrational. Lewis revised the relevant chapter of *Miracles* in subsequent editions to try to meet Anscombe's objections. Philosophers of religion continue to argue about how successfully.⁸

Elizabeth Anscombe's major philosophical work has been overshadowed for many by that one event: her debate with C. S. Lewis at the Oxford Socratic Club in 1948 over his *Argument from Reason* for the self-refuting character of naturalism in the first edition of *Miracles*.⁹ At least it was a pretty significant event. Lewis had argued that if naturalism were true it would remove all reason for believing that naturalism was true, because it would reduce all thoughts to chemical reactions in our brains produced not by the laws of logic but by the laws of chemistry and physics. He stated his objection by saying that we discount beliefs that have irrational causes. Anscombe replied that irrational causes can produce true beliefs. Well, they can: You can be lucky rather than logical. But does this rejoinder really refute Lewis's point? That question has received varied answers. While the debate itself was thought by many of those in attendance to be a draw, it led to Lewis's revising the third chapter of *Miracles* and softening

⁶ David Kyle Johnson, “Con: Naturalism Undefeated,” *C. S. Lewis's Apologetics: Pro and Con*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2015): 94-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸ See Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Pr., 2003), who summarizes the debate and concludes, rightly in my view, that Lewis's argument is sound.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 1947, op. cit-24.

its title from “The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist” to “The Cardinal Difficulty with Naturalism.”¹⁰ The discussion of whether Lewis’s argument (original or revised) is valid continues, admirably summarized by Victor Reppert.¹¹

On November 12, 1985, Anscombe addressed the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society on her response to Lewis’s revisions. A transcript of that talk has recently been published.¹² In it, Anscombe explained why she still had issues with Lewis’s argument; but in doing so, I would argue, she actually reinforces Lewis’s conclusion.

Anscombe correctly saw Lewis’s argument as an elaboration of J. B. S. Haldane’s, which Lewis quoted: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”¹³ To explain her objection to this argument, Anscombe offers “an analogous supposition”: “It makes sense to say that linguistic marks—that is, marks that are part of a language as they occur in a printed book—are wholly determined by the machinery that printed the book.” In this analogy the marks in the books apparently correspond to Lewis’s “thoughts,” and the printing machinery to his “irrational causes” for those thoughts, which he thought would render the thoughts worthy of being discounted.

Anscombe concludes that “we wouldn’t dream of saying” that the production of the marks by machines gives us any reason for supposing that any of the propositions in the book were either true *or* false. She sums up her argument with two observations: first, that the supposition that the words in the book are “wholly determined by . . . the printing machinery is true,” and second, that this truth has “no bearing whatever on whether anything said in the book is true” *or* on whether we have any grounds for thinking so.¹⁴ The knowledge that the marks were produced by a machine does not necessarily render them false; therefore, Anscombe argues, Lewis was wrong.

RESPONSE TO ANSCOMBE ET AL

The first thing to be said about Johnson is that he has seriously misrepresented Lewis’s argument, at least as it has been developed by later thinkers like Reppert. The argument does not claim that “reasoning cannot exist if naturalism is true.” Truths and reasons can exist in a naturalistic world. But can the individual thinker be in a position to *know* that they are true and valid? Johnson tries to answer yes by pointing to artificial intelligence, that is to computers like

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 1960, op. cit., 20-35.

¹¹ Victor Reppert, *Dangerous Idea*, op. cit.; cf. his “The Lewis-Anscombe Controversy: A Discussion of the Issues,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 19:1 (Sept., 1989): 32-48.

¹² Elizabeth Anscombe, “S. S. Lewis’s Rewrite of Chapter III of *Miracles*,” *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, ed. Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14-23.

¹³ J. B. S. Haldane, “When I am Dead,” *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London: Charto & Windus, 1927), p. 209; qtd. In Lewis, op. cit., 1st ed. 22, 2nd ed., 24.

¹⁴ Anscombe, op. cit., 16.

Deep Blue and Watson, which produce brilliant chess moves or true answers to “Jeopardy” questions.

Johnson admits that, being computers, they do not actually know or believe anything. But he thinks this is not a problem because they can produce “reliably true beliefs” without having any of the non-physical elements Lewis appeals to in human thinking. But how do we *know* that these beliefs are reliably true? Because non-computers—human beings—can check them, confirm that the programming is correct, and verify them using judgment and discernment. Absent those human checks, the computers might well be producing true content, but how would we know this? For in Naturalism, those human beings are machines just as much as the computers are. The analogy has as much tendency to confirm Lewis’s argument as to overturn it. As we will see with Anscombe’s printing press below, attempts to show that a mechanical process can duplicate meaningful human thought and produce warranted beliefs have a tendency to backfire.

Are Johnson’s proposed versions of naturalism actually able to escape the dilemma posed by The Argument from Reason? It is not at all clear that they do. It is easy to make up a phrase like “supervenient properties” or “emergent properties”; but just because you have named something does not mean it exists. That is the fallacy of reification. It is not so easy to show how mental realities like consciousness and intention can “emerge from” or “supervene on” a purely physical substratum,

Can machines produce real thought? I must confess that I had to read the pages where Anscombe draws her conclusion several times to be sure I had not missed something. For while Anscombe’s analogy is interesting, the conclusion she draws from it is simply astonishing. If the analogy is apt at all, surely it points in exactly the opposite direction!

Why? Because a moment’s reflection will show that the marks on the page of the book are not in fact caused wholly by the printing machinery at all. The misrepresentation of reality involved in claiming they are so caused is, well, egregious.

I have published thirteen books, so I know a little something about how this process works. The words in those books were not generated wholly by the printing press at all. (Neither were the words you are hearing now.) They were generated by me (a certifiable non-machine), edited by an editor who was presumably also not a machine, and then agreed upon by me. The type (in the old days) was set by another human being following directions given by the results of the first process. It is only because there were (presumably) rational agents involved that the marks in the resulting books mean anything at all. If some of those marks are correctly interpretable as truth claims, whether true ones or not, it is only and precisely because somewhere behind the machines there was a *personal agent* volitionally *asserting* them *by means of* the machine that produced the physical book.

Think for a moment about what this more accurate description of printing means. If I thought a book in my college bookstore had been produced by printing presses without any input at all from (allegedly) rational and personal agents, I should have no reason to buy it or read it. It might by accident contain marks that formed propositions that in fact obtained in the real

world—but that would give me no reason for believing them, as Anscombe rightly perceived. And that was precisely Lewis’s point: If the universe contains *warranted* true beliefs (to steal a phrase from a later thinker), then it cannot be reducible to an impersonal machine. To claim that the thoughts occurring in that universe were produced wholly mechanically does not prove that they are false, but that was never what Lewis claimed. He claimed that it removes our warrant for believing them—including our warrant for believing the thought that they were produced mechanically. Therefore, Naturalism cannot be a *warranted* true belief; therefore, it cannot be accepted as true except by blind faith.

Lewis left himself open to the kind of quibbling Anscombe and others have offered by being uncharacteristically careless with his words. He originally laid down the rule that “No thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes.”¹⁵ But of course *thoughts* are not valid or invalid; arguments are. He was closer to getting it right when he said that “No account of the universe can be true unless that account leaves it possible for our thinking to be a real insight.”¹⁶ We must not only be able to generate true statements, in other words; we must be able to *see* that they are true, as opposed to simply assenting to them, true or false, only because of our brain chemistry. Valid arguments would be one of the ways we achieve such seeing. Now, it might be possible for true beliefs to occur in a naturalistic universe, as some of the sentences in Anscombe’s book generated wholly by the machinery of printing might be true. But could there be *warranted* true beliefs? That position is much harder to defend, and Anscombe’s analogy does nothing to defend it. In other words, we can quibble about terminology if we like, but the general thrust of Lewis’s argument was certainly sound. It can be attacked only by those who wish to wrangle about words.

Far from undermining Lewis’s reasoning, then, Anscombe’s analogy ironically actually confirms it. It does not finally matter that irrational forces can produce thoughts that happen to be true. If we are limited to non-rational, because physically determined, means of producing *and evaluating* those thoughts, we are never in a position rationally to assert them as truth claims. The naturalist then can believe in naturalism, but he cannot, logically and consistently with his naturalism, assert that naturalism is true. If the marks in our books (and the books of our brains) were put there wholly by the machinery of printing, we have no reason to suppose that they are true, or even that they were produced by printing presses.

Haldane and Lewis were right. Naturalism cannot be asserted as true in a manner consistent with naturalism; theism on the other hand can be asserted as true without contradiction. This does not in itself prove that theism is true, i.e., that God exists. But it does show that theism logically could be true, while naturalism cannot. My conclusion then is that Lewis was right and that he ought to have stuck to his guns and continued speaking of the “self-contradiction” of the naturalist rather than merely of naturalism’s “cardinal difficulty.” Anscombe had pointed out a problem with the *wording* of Lewis’s original argument, but not with its *substance*, even though she apparently thought she had done the latter. Re-reading

¹⁵ Lewis, op. cit., 1947, pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

Lewis's revisions to *Miracles* suggests that even he was not as clear about the difference as we can be now. The Argument from Reason is ironically confirmed by the very analogy that its most famous critic thought had refuted it.

APPLICATION

Lewis's Argument from Reason is a curious argument. In my experience, people tend either to see its point intuitively and immediately or have a hard time getting their heads around it. To help them get their heads around it, we need to be aware both of the initial attempts to rebut it and of developments that have taken place since the 1940s. Those who are capable of articulating their resistance to it usually take one of two tacks. One is to employ an argument similar to Anscombe's original response discussed above: Non-rational causes do not have to have irrational results. The other is to question whether Naturalism necessarily has to be a form of reductionism. People might be aware of more recent forms of it that try to avoid that trap by positing that the mind is an "emergent property" of the physical brain.

Anscombe's final attempt to defend her objection ironically helps us defeat it. We can ask people to imagine a scenario in which there actually are sentences created by non-rational causes: the book whose marks are indeed *wholly* generated by machines. Even if some of its marks turn out to be sentences, and even if some of those sentences avoid irrationality, has this process given us any reason to believe them? It is not enough that it gives us no necessary reason to *disbelieve* them. In the absence of any non-mechanical source for those sentences, belief in them is simply moot. Anscombe ironically helps us see that, correctly understood, Lewis was right about the unavoidably undermined status of truth claims in a naturalistic world.

Could the notion of "emergent properties" get us past this dilemma, as Johnson suggests? Emergent properties is a hot topic in philosophy right now.¹⁷ The discussion can get pretty technical. The idea is based on the correct observation that when purely physical entities interact, they can produce properties not inherent in either of the original objects. For example, when hydrogen and oxygen combine, you get water, which has the property of wetness that neither hydrogen nor oxygen had as such when they were alone. It "emerges" from them. So the theory extrapolated from this observation is that maybe the structures of the physical brain are so complex that mental properties, including consciousness, can emerge from those structures, purely physical though they are in themselves. It is thought that this process solves the problem of reductionism inherent in previous versions of Naturalism.

The problem is that this is a gargantuan extrapolation. No one has shown *how* non-physical realities such as intention or logical inference, not to mention consciousness, can arise from the specific physical properties possessed by brain cells. In addition, water is still a physical substance, even if it does have properties possessed by neither hydrogen nor oxygen. But thought and consciousness are not. The phrase "emergent properties" functions like a verbal

¹⁷ For an excellent overview of it, see J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 77-103.

magic wand that can simply be waved over the mind-body problem to make the reductionism that is native to Naturalism conveniently go away. The Socratic question, “How exactly do we get from *any* complex combination of physical states to the validity of logical inference?” is one to which I have never received a satisfactory answer.

In both cases, it is helpful to focus, not on the question of whether truth could exist in a naturalistic world, but whether *warranted truth claims* could exist there. It has to be truth that I can validly perceive as truth on some basis independent of what the physical state of my brain dictates. There has to be a way of judging between my brain state and that of the person who disagrees with me other than a third brain state that is just as dependent on non-rational factors as our own. Nobody has shown how *that* is possible in a rigorously naturalistic world. Lewis’s discussion of this cardinal difficulty—actually, self-contradiction, if the naturalist insists on asserting his naturalism as truth—remains the best place to start in coming to understand the great gift God has given us: knowledge and truth that are capable of having a basis and of being believed *on* that basis.