

# A Myth Retold

Re-encountering C. S. Lewis as Theologian

EDITED BY

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WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon  
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A MYTH RETOLD

Re-encountering C. S. Lewis as Theologian

C. S. Lewis Secondary Studies Series

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Wipf & Stock

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

ISBN 13: 978-1-61097-247-5

Manufactured in the USA.

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# 4

## C. S. Lewis's Argument against Naturalism

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JOHN OWENS

THE VIEW THAT HUMAN reasoning might be a simple product of natural causes, coming into existence in the same sort of way as does a stalactite or a volcanic eruption or an avalanche, has long exercised a hold on the philosophical imagination. C. S. Lewis calls the view "naturalism," and believes that it is fundamentally misguided, and even self-contradictory. His first attack on naturalism, in a book published in 1947, dispatches it briskly, in a chapter of a few pages.<sup>1</sup> He holds that naturalism destroys the possibility of valid reasoning, and therefore self-destructs, given that it is a product of reasoning. The problem is to show exactly why reasoning is destroyed or impossible, if the naturalist explanation is allowed. Most of us would agree that some natural causes destroy the validity of reasoning, as when an emotional prejudice interferes with the rational development of an argument. If an argument is shown to depend on such a thing, it is dismissed as invalid. But there might be other kinds of natural causes (which Lewis's critic Elizabeth Anscombe calls "non-rational"<sup>2</sup>) that produce something valid and true. We are familiar with mechanical calculators which work

1. Lewis, *Miracles*, 1947. For the revised version of the argument, see Lewis, *Miracles*, 1960.

2. Anscombe, "C. S. Lewis on 'Naturalism,'" 226.

by natural process, and which use informational premises to produce true conclusions. What if the human brain works in more or less the same way, so that what we call valid thought or reasoning is ultimately the product of a certain sort of complex natural process? Naturalism appeals to those who regard contemporary science as a paradigm of explanation. Anscombe more or less defines naturalism in this way, as the view that “all human behaviour, including thought, could be accounted for by scientific causal laws.”<sup>3</sup> She later glosses this definition as the position that “causal laws could be discovered which could be successfully applied to all human behaviour, including thought.”<sup>4</sup>

Lewis and Anscombe had a celebrated debate in February 1948 that caused Lewis to revise some of his views.<sup>5</sup> But he remained unimpressed by naturalist accounts, and insisted to the end that a reasoning process has to include “a moment of insight” that transcends mere natural process, if it is to be regarded as valid. A calculating machine might arrive at results that are true, but it includes no moment of insight among its premises. Its activity is therefore deficient in an important respect. It is not enough for our thought processes to arrive at results that just happen to be correct. The results need to be produced by activity of a certain quality, described as “insight” or “actual reasoning,” if they are to have any worth. Anscombe notes this point during the debate, remarking that Lewis is probably more interested in the question of whether someone actually reasoned than in the question of whether the reasoning merely led to a true conclusion or not.<sup>6</sup> In my view, Lewis is on to something deep here. But at the time of the argument with Anscombe, there is no sign that he appreciated what it was. Anscombe notes that at the time of the debate, neither of them appreciated the depth of the issue that was in question,<sup>7</sup> and Lewis himself acknowledged that the topic of the debate was not really “validity.”<sup>8</sup> I think that the real topic of the debate is the self-transcendence of knowledge, the fact that it is knowledge of the other, and that this has implications for the status of the human being. In his later writings Lewis shows a profound appreciation

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 229.

5. For an account of the debate, see Walter Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter.” For a more recent discussion see Reppert, *C. S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea*.

6. Anscombe, “C. S. Lewis on ‘Naturalism,’” 228.

7. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, 2:x.

8. Cf. Anscombe, “C. S. Lewis on ‘Naturalism,’” 231.

of such things, for all that he never seems to connect his later discussions with the debate on naturalism.

Lewis's insistence that valid reasoning must include a moment of insight, shows that his argument differs from a similar argument put forward by Alvin Plantinga, which has attracted a good deal of attention, including a book of critical responses.<sup>9</sup> Plantinga criticizes an evolutionary form of the naturalist position, which holds that our beliefs might have developed through natural processes, with evolutionary selection weeding out those which are false, leaving us with beliefs that are largely true. Lewis himself has a brief discussion of this position.<sup>10</sup> So the blind evolutionary drive of a species towards survival enables it to develop beliefs about the world which happen to be true. In arguing against this view, Plantinga points out that for every true belief that helps us operate in the world, there are multitudes of equally effective false beliefs. If I hold the true belief that tigers are dangerous, and therefore run away when I see a tiger, this helps me to survive. But as Plantinga points out (in a rather odd example), a person who holds that tigers are friendly, but who thinks that the best way to pet a tiger is to run away from it, does just as well.<sup>11</sup> These false beliefs are equally effective in ensuring my survival. Given that the number of possible false beliefs far outweighs the single true belief which applies in a particular case, it is much more likely that an evolutionary process produce beliefs which are false rather than beliefs which are true. While at times Lewis gives the impression of considering this form of the argument favourably,<sup>12</sup> it seems in fact far removed from the position he wants to defend. The difference is shown by the fact that within the terms of Plantinga's argument, if it happened that natural processes arrived at true conclusions in a reliable manner, then naturalism would be satisfactory. It seems clear that Lewis wants to put forward a far stronger argument than this. He is against the naturalist position even if it happens that in some or many cases, a natural process produces true conclusions. Again and again, he says that it is not satisfactory if beliefs just happen to correspond to the state of the world. Why exactly this is not satisfactory, and what it is that Lewis has stumbled upon here, is the topic of this paper.

9. Plantinga, "Is Naturalism Irrational?" and "Naturalism Defeated?"

10. Lewis, *Miracles*, 22–23.

11. Plantinga, "Is Naturalism Irrational?," 225.

12. Lewis, *Miracles*, 22.

What is the precise difference between someone whose beliefs just happen to correspond to the world, and someone who holds true beliefs in the fuller sense which Lewis wants to defend, where the beliefs result from “a moment of insight”? The difference emerges if we think of examples of beliefs which just happen to correspond to reality. We know of sophisticated missiles which carry a map of the terrain over which they are to be deployed. The map enables them to manoeuvre effectively in relation to the terrain, so that they might navigate around geographical features which would otherwise block their progress. Naturalist philosophers tend to see the human mind as operating more or less like this (with the difference that the human mind has not been programmed by an intelligence). Its knowledge goes back to a set of guides in the head, which have been formed by causal processes, and which control its behaviour. The workings of these processes might even deliver certain experiences as well. The more accurately the guide can represent what is really there, the more effective is the action that follows. The philosopher Patricia Churchland holds that such maps have arisen through natural selection, and that it is a great advantage for survival if a map actually matches the contours of the reality that it depicts.<sup>13</sup> But it is clear that while there is a sense in which such minds reach true conclusions about the external world, they just happen to have come to these. They would happily have embraced other conclusions, if such conclusions enabled them to operate equally effectively in the world.

One of the most striking things about this sort of theory (which carries a nominalist frame of mind to an extreme), is that it does not allow for relations between things. While it sees the mind as happening to correspond to the way things are, the mind does not relate itself in any sense to the world it represents. For the naturalist view, everything in the world is just itself, and does not reach outside itself in any way. The point is shown in the fact that while there may be a correspondence between picture and world, the correspondence is only ever registered as such from outside the picture. This view has turned up in the history of philosophy in the kind of system proposed by Leibniz, where the perceptions of the individual mind are limited to the interior of the mind, and do not reach beyond themselves to the real world which they represent. It happens that human intentional states often correspond with what is really the case, or at least, to the perceptions of other monads about what is the case. In Leibniz’s

13. Churchland, *Brain-Wise*, 302–8, 364. The use of the “map” analogy is quite common. See for example Ramsey, “Naturalism Defended,” 18.

system God has arranged such a set of coincidences, and God also registers the correspondence of the mind's perceptions to things beyond them. But the human mind itself does not relate itself directly to anything outside it in this way. As Leibniz famously says, the monads have no windows through which anything could enter or depart.<sup>14</sup> A philosopher of a different stamp, who shares important premises with Leibniz—David Hume—sums it up with his usual clarity and succinctness: “We never really advance a step beyond ourselves.”<sup>15</sup>

Naturalism holds the nominalist premise, that everything is simply itself, and that while some things may correspond to other things in the world, they do not relate themselves to the other things. In the naturalist view, no event reaches outside itself to any other event. Lewis sums it up in referring critically to the view that the workings of the mind are straightforward events: “[e]vents in general are not ‘about’ anything and cannot be true or false.”<sup>16</sup> If, as the naturalist view has it, our convictions are simply events like this, they are “a fact about us—like the colour of our hair.”<sup>17</sup> For a fact to become a representation, we have to introduce a relation into things, namely the eye of an observer who has an interest in knowing how the image in the mind corresponds to the object in the world. Such an observer must be really related to the world, if the scheme is to work. Nor is it enough that the beliefs of the observer simply happen to mirror the state of the world in their turn. If it is like this, then the problem is simply pushed back a level, and we need a new observer at a higher level who can note the correlation between the lower observer's beliefs and the world, and grasp it in the sort of relation traditionally called “knowledge.”

Naturalists want to argue that there is no problem with a world in which everything remains within its own limits, and where the only sort of “knowledge” consists of brain states which happen to be correlates of states of affairs in the world. The eye of the technician that correlates the map of the missile to the outside terrain works in much the same way as does the missile itself. So the observer who has an interest in the outcome is viewed in turn as a configuration of materials and forces, that act in a way which is naturalistically explainable. Anyone who considers this argument quickly realizes that whatever is thrown at the naturalist position, it

14. Leibniz, “The Monadology,” 7, 643.

15. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.2.67.

16. Lewis, *Miracles*, 21.

17. *Ibid.*, 109.



will always have an answer. Even validity and truth can be redefined to fit the scheme, so that they are integrated into a naturalist account. What we call “moments of insight” might be just correlations which help us make our way in the world, delivering certain conscious experiences at the same time, including a sense that we are seeing directly into the outside world.

Lewis insists that the naturalist account is not enough, and that a recognition of truth is needed, which proceeds from a real relation of knower to reality. As he says, a premise has to cause a conclusion “by being seen to be, a ground for it.”<sup>18</sup> An act of knowing must be determined “in a sense, solely by what is known.” “[W]e must know it to be thus solely because it is thus.”<sup>19</sup> The “positive character” of the act of knowledge “must be determined by the truth it knows.”<sup>20</sup> He sees a contrast between two sorts of causal action. With the first, the world produces certain effects in us, whether we like it or not, including our beliefs. With the second, there is a different sort of causality, where “the truth” of the matter does the causing, and where we see ourselves as having “insight” into a state of affairs. Lewis expresses this as the difference between “responses to stimuli” (things like pains),<sup>21</sup> and acts of knowledge which are “insights into, or knowings of, something other than themselves.”<sup>22</sup> But this second kind of action, which Lewis defends as leading to knowledge of the truth, needs clarification. I know what it is for the wind to act on me. It is not immediately clear what it means for “the truth” of a situation to act on me. Nor is it clear why this second kind of relation matters so much, given that we can imagine our knowledge working more or less effectively without it.

If it is not enough that conclusions just happen to be true, then the relation between mind and knower must include some sort of necessity. It is not however clear what could be meant by “necessity” here. Obviously it does not refer to the physical necessities of natural causal action, as this sort of necessity precisely characterizes the naturalist view, where the world’s causal action builds up a set of beliefs without any regard for whether they are true or not. Lewis indicates a possible different meaning of “necessity” in a much later work, *The Abolition of Man*, which begins with a discussion of those for whom the remark of a tourist about Niagara Falls is taken to

18. *Ibid.*, 21.

19. *Ibid.*, 22.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 23.

22. *Ibid.*, 21.

be “a remark about his own feelings,”<sup>23</sup> in other words an articulation of a causal impact which the world has made on the tourist. Lewis contrasts this understanding with a more traditional one, where reality itself seems to call forth a particular response from us, so that we are faced with a kind of moral compulsion, feeling that we should give the response which reality not only causes, but which it also deserves, in that the response describes it accurately as it is. One of his examples is the call to see children as “delightful” or old men as “venerable.”<sup>24</sup> Here there is a peculiar sort of “necessity” in question, which does not work of its own accord, independently of subjectivity, but which operates as a kind of call for recognition. Humans are not forced in any physical sense to grant such recognition. The call can however haunt them if they refuse it, and even pursue them until they give in. At least the “good” person experiences such a call in this way. Lewis opposes this understanding to the naturalist view, which sees our beliefs as imposed on us by natural process, and where the relation between beliefs and world is just one of chance.

Such descriptions of human moral experience are common enough. What is less common is the point that they show us how we come in the first place to the idea of “reality,” getting beyond the shadowy objects of the naturalist view, which are essentially projections out of a causal impact of an object on our knowledge apparatus. The moral call solicits an acknowledgment of what reality somehow deserves. To come to something like this is to get beyond the distortions introduced by our own interests, which encourage us to limit our view of the thing to its significance for us. When describing this transition, Lewis insists that valid reasoning does not simply “record a psychological fact about our . . . emotions at the moment.”<sup>25</sup> It takes account of the fact that reality can merit certain responses, as opposed to just arousing or producing them.<sup>26</sup> The “good” person is precisely the one who has learned the right habitual reactions to the reality of things, so that they cannot help but rejoice in the presence of what is good, and recoil from what is bad. Lewis sees the older Western tradition of education, established by Plato and Aristotle, as trying to bring its students to the point where such reactions are easy and natural.<sup>27</sup>

23. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 7–8.

24. *Ibid.*, 17.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 15.

27. *Ibid.*, 15–16.

Lewis offers a striking example of what is meant in the book *A Grief Observed*. The book begins with a state of mind that is basically the result of causal impact, something which lends itself to description within a naturalist schema. It describes the passage towards a different state of mind, where the subject becomes really related to something outside him. It is a moral journey, one which calls up all the reserves of patient endurance which a human being can muster. The causal impact is of course the death of Lewis's wife Joy. The book starts with his living through the effect of this, and it gives a harrowing account of the states of mind which the bereavement induces. Lewis's description of these caused states, made from a later point when he has passed beyond them, employs some significant expressions. The states of mind are "a self-hypnosis induced by my own prayers,"<sup>28</sup> a "pipe-dream" or a "phantom,"<sup>29</sup> "dreams" and "houses of cards."<sup>30</sup> Such terms are classic expressions of perceptions which are simply causal products. In the history of philosophy, they have been summed up in the image of the "dream." While a dream is a type of awareness, in that it presents itself as an object of the mind, the only connection it has with the world is that it is ultimately caused by the world. It has no direct representative relation to the world, but remains a mere perception, leaving me immersed in my own states, even as it appears to take me beyond them. It is of course possible that the content of my dream happens to correspond to what is the case in the world. I might start to dream of rain precisely at the moment when rain starts beating on the roof, and the sound of the rain might even have caused me to have the dream. But while the dream is caused by the rain, it is not a representation of it in any strong sense. The dream happens to correspond to reality, but does not relate itself to reality, remaining a private possession of a monad without windows. It does not attain the "real" world which we share with others, but remains a private possession, where in Hume's phrase "we never really advance a step beyond ourselves." The world remains essentially private, and there is no relation to a world which we might share with others. The philosopher Heraclitus has a classic expression of this from the beginnings of Western philosophy: "The world of the waking is one and shared, but the sleeping turn aside each into his private world."<sup>31</sup>

28. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 11.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 33–35.

31. Heraclitus, "Fragments," 31.

In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis describes the journey of a human being away from such dreams, which are projections which result from the impact of feelings of loss, to an awareness of reality as it is. A large part of this journey consists of his overcoming a state where, as at least appears in hindsight, his mind is dominated by the mere effects of what has happened to him, to arrive at a point where he can see the reality of things. It is only when he has in a sense got past the effect of Joy's loss, that he can come to appreciate the reality of what he has lost. There is a place in the middle of the book where he says "suddenly at the very moment when, so far, I mourned Helen least, I remembered her best. . . . To say it was like a meeting, would be going too far."<sup>32</sup> He has come to a point where he finds Joy "obstinately real," so that he is beyond the place where she is just a projection out of his own interior state. This is to come to a reality whose significance is independent, and whose worth does not come down to Lewis's likes or dislikes.<sup>33</sup> He puts this remark in the context of one of his favourite themes, that reality is iconoclastic, always letting us know that it is more than just the object of our thoughts. The one you love, in this life, "incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to."<sup>34</sup> It is striking that among other things, this is a moral journey. At the beginning of the book, he is tempted to give in to the dream, and produce a view of his situation which is a product of the causal influence which the situation exercises. It is a moral achievement not to give in to this, but to come to acknowledge the reality of it all.

It is striking that there is no obvious phenomenological difference, no quality of the object before the mind (like Hume's attempted criterion of "force and liveliness"<sup>35</sup>), that might distinguish the real Joy from the dream-image which stood for her at the start of the book, and was a kind of fabrication of Lewis's grief. We do not seem to encounter the reality of something at this level. Even when someone addresses us in some way, we are never forced to acknowledge their reality, and can always stand off and register their actions simply as "data," to which we supply a hypothesis. The life of another does not force itself on us. As some philosophers have noted, we can regard others as simulations or machines or zombies, if we want. Lewis's journey from projections towards reality seems connected with the

32. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 37.

33. *Ibid.*, 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 52.

35. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.1.1.

fact that by the end of the journey Joy faces him again. She has moved from being an image that is a frozen product of grief, to the point where she appears before Lewis again with a life of her own, that somehow faces him directly, and challenges the illusions that his grief has brought. She comes before him again with a life of her own. Lewis has a striking experience of this, which he describes as “[j]ust the impression of her mind momentarily facing my own.”<sup>36</sup> Most of us can relate to what Lewis is trying to say, and yet it is mysterious what more such an experience brings, that was not there before. The detailed content of such an image is no more than it was when Joy was just a frozen product of Lewis’s mind. In both cases there is a registration and processing of stuff, colours and movements, the sorts of things a sensor, whose operation can be naturalistically explained, can pick up and process. At this level, where content is simply “registered,” it does not matter whether the object is real or not. Our dealings with the world can be described in a perfectly good naturalist manner, and we can imagine a well-programmed machine that would perform them just as efficiently.

But the good person never remains just at this level. Starting with our experience of other persons, we acknowledge their reality, seeing them as having a significance beyond just the significance they have for us. Part of Lewis’s overall project is to highlight the strangeness of this move, however basic it is to the life of humans. The move to the reality of the other oddly transcends anything we could consider in the way of interactions between material things, the kind of model on which the naturalist hypothesis tries to construct its view of knowledge.

This peculiar relation that discovers the reality of the other is of a different order from the registration of objective content. When we realize this, the fundamental mysteriousness of human relational life comes into focus, along with the possibility of an openness to the divine. Christians believe that the first principle of the world’s changing manifold is a “someone,” and not “something,” so that reality bears in on us ultimately as someone who stands over against us, with the force of a challenge. While this transcends other relations which the human being takes up, it is not completely different from the way in which we come to acknowledge the reality of other living things, especially other human beings. Lewis has a vivid description of his coming to this awareness in a religious sense towards the end of *Surprised by Joy*, as he comes to the decisive moment of his reconversion and return to Christianity. He is in the bus going up Headington

36. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 57.

Hill, and becomes aware of the ultimate reality as bearing in on him. It is as though he is confronted by a person who asks acknowledgment, although there is no person present to him in any usual sense. He says "[w]ithout words and (I think) almost without images, a fact about myself was somehow presented to me. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out."<sup>37</sup> He felt he was wearing stiff clothing, or a suit of armour, like a lobster, that he could keep on or not. Eventually, he chose to take it off.

While this was a free choice, it was one where it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. To refuse the response would feel like wilfulness on our part, as though we were keeping something out, and refusing an open stance towards the world. When this sort of choice comes at us at the highest, purest level, it is the religious choice. I think it helps if we see that the religious experience of being addressed by reality in some way, is not a strange exception to our normal ontology, but is in fact an example of the norm, the kind of thing we do whenever we come to an appreciation of reality that gets beyond a mere projection of objects. This well sums up what is needed to approach reality as reality, a kind of moral acknowledgment which we have the power to withhold, but which every good person makes to some degree. This would imply that the religious move is rather more in continuity with other everyday moves of human beings, than a secular frame of mind would like to think. The sort of response in question is what a machine cannot do, however much it can simulate the various registrations and reactions that accompany such a response.

Lewis first addresses these questions in a book on miracles. He wants his readers to consider the possibility that God sometimes acts directly in the world, intervening from outside its normal causal workings. To make this plausible, he has to break the spell of the naturalist view, which insists that natural causes sufficiently explain whatever happens, so that there is never any need to appeal outside the spatio-temporal order. Lewis's strategy is to show that not only is nature open to being influenced from outside, but that this happens quite often. Every time we attempt a piece of reasoning, something from outside nature (what Lewis calls, rather misleadingly, "the supernatural") is brought to bear on nature, so that even the everyday use of reason cannot be thought of as just part of the natural world. To contemporary ears, this can seem an odd position to hold. But it relates to the older Western tradition, and is captured in Aristotle's famous, quixotic comment

37. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 179.

that “[i]t remains, then, that Reason alone enters in, as an additional factor, from outside, and that it alone is divine.”<sup>38</sup> Lewis sees that if he can show that the natural order is susceptible to frequent causal action from outside like this, then a divine agent’s occasional action within this order will seem less strange.

Lewis tries to argue that naturalism, the view that everything, including our knowledge, works by mere causal process, is incompatible with rational thinking. But his argument implicitly shows that it is incompatible with a good deal more than this, and that in the end, it excludes any real relation to reality. This means that the naturalist view cannot accommodate life-processes at all, but inevitably sees them in such a way that they are reduced to simulations. Nor can it accommodate the strange relation to others that is knowledge, however well it mimics the material processes that accompany it. In a naturalist view we are only ever shadows for one another, experienced phantoms, and not realities. Lewis has a surprising statement of the implications of the point in *A Grief Observed*. It comes early in the book, where Lewis has been wondering if non-believing naturalist explanations might not be right. In other words humans might be material configurations which have thrown up strange properties, so that Lewis’s wife Joy was no more than this. Lewis sees that this is to relegate his wife to non-existence in fact, so that if this is what she was, she never really “existed” at all. The statement is astonishing in its stark simplicity, and shows how Christian views of immortality or afterlife, cohere with a deep and powerful ontology of this-worldly entities. He says: “If Helen ‘is not,’ then she never was. I mistook a cloud of atoms for a person. There aren’t, and never were, any people. Death only reveals the vacuity that was always there. What we call the living are simply those who have not yet been unmasked. All equally bankrupt, but some not yet declared.”<sup>39</sup>

38. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 171.

39. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 25.