Over the past century and a half, philosophical naturalism has certainly become more prevalent. It has been frequently hailed as the philosophical perspective that takes science more seriously than its rivals do. Its prevalence, it seems to me, is based to large extent on a certain mental picture. To use Daniel Dennett’s terminology, the idea is that science progresses by replacing skyhooks with cranes (Dennett, 1995, p. 73) Whereas a skyhook is a mind-first explanation, a crane is a bottom-up explanation that is, at its base, nonmental. Thus, rainbows were first thought to be the result of God’s telling Noah that he would not flood the earth anymore (a skyhook), but is now explained as the result of mindless light refraction (a crane). The greatest triumph of naturalistic explanation came with Darwin’s theory of evolution. There, in a domain in which nearly all educated people saw marks of intelligent design, Darwin was able to provide a bottom-up account of speciation through the trial and error of evolution by natural selection. Richard Dawkins famously said that while one could have been an atheist before Darwin, Darwin showed how to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist, freeing atheism from its most serious explanatory problem (Dawkins, 1986, p. 6). The successes of brain science and artificial intelligence show that our mental life can be fully treated in the same way. Instead of thinking of the mind as independent of matter, we can expect the mind to be explained as simply the activity of a part of the physical world we call the brain.

The terms sometimes used to describe this type of position are naturalism, materialism, and physicalism. Naturalism is thought to hold that everything is part of nature, and thus rules out such entities as God while perhaps allowing such things as numbers or Platonic forms, whereas materialism or physicalism says that everything is matter, and that therefore there are no non-material entities such as forms. However, this distinction really does not make much of a difference to the argument from reason that I will be presenting here, because that argument concerns states of mind and how those states are caused.

A fundamental question today is whether the trend described above is a permanent one, or whether there is a point at which reductive explanations will break down. One point that is often overlooked in all of this is that many successful scientific reductions have involved siphoning off certain features
from the physical to the mental. Consider the reduction of heat to the mean kinetic energy of molecules. As Richard Swinburne notes:

[This reduction has been achieved at the price of separating off the phenomenal from its causes, and only explaining the latter. All reduction from one science to another dealing with apparently very disparate properties has been achieved by this device of denying that the apparent properties (i.e. the “secondary qualities” of colour, heat, sound, taste, etc.) with which one science dealt belonged to the physical world at all. It siphoned them off to the world of the mental. But then, when you come to face the problem of the sensations themselves, you cannot do this. If you are to explain the sensations themselves, you cannot distinguish between them and their underlying causes and only explain the latter. In fact the enormous success of science in producing an integrated physico-chemistry has been achieved at the expense of separating off from the physical world colours, smells, and tastes, and regarding them as purely private sensory phenomena. The very success of science in achieving its vast integrations in physics and chemistry is the very thing which has made apparently impossible any final success in integrating the world of mind into the world of physics (Swinburne, 1997, p. 191).

Another important argument supports the claim that the reductive tendency is headed for a stop, and that is the argument from reason. The argument did not originate with C. S. Lewis by any means. Echoes of it occur in Plato, a version can be found in Kant, and it was developed in a form quite similar to that of Lewis by the British politician and philosopher Arthur Balfour. It was Lewis, however, who made the argument popular and who stated it in a new and forceful way. Versions of the argument occur in many of Lewis’s essays, as well as in his book Miracles: A Preliminary Study (1947, 2nd ed. 1960). The essence of the argument is that if naturalism is true, we could not know that naturalism is true, or that anything else is true, as a result of a train of reasoning. But enterprises such as the natural sciences presuppose that we can acquire knowledge through trains of reasoning, so to accept the sciences we have to deny naturalism, in spite of the fact that it is science that is often thought to support naturalism.

1. The Argument from Reason: Then and Now

My own development of Lewis’s argument against naturalism has resulted in some structural and terminological changes to the argument. Those familiar with current debates in philosophy of mind will readily understand why. The way contemporary philosophers use terms like “naturalism” and “valid”