CON: NATURALISM UNDEFEATED

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In his contribution to this volume, Victor Reppert offers a significantly revised version of C. S. Lewis’s so-called “argument from reason.” I have been tasked, however, not only with replying to Reppert, but also with showing why Lewis’s version of the argument fails. So let me begin by summarizing Lewis's argument and showing why it falls short. I will then examine and critique Reppert’s revised version to pinpoint why the argument from reason is ultimately a failure.

1. Lewis’s Argument

Lewis first presented the argument from reason at length in the first edition of his 1947 book, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (Lewis, 1947). By my estimation, this version of the argument was successfully defeated by Elizabeth Anscombe in 1948, at a meeting of the Oxford Socratic Club, where she raised objections based on the ambiguity and Lewis's misuse of the words “validity,” “irrationality” and “because.” I will not rehash that debate here. To be charitable to Lewis, let us instead look at the revised version of the argument that Lewis published in response to her objections in the second edition of *Miracles* (Lewis, 1960).

Lewis’s argument from reason is an argument against naturalism, which Lewis defines as the view that nothing supernatural exists and that everything that does exist is either some form of physical "stuff" or is fully explainable in terms of physical stuff. The argument attempts to show that naturalism is not compatible with the existence of reasoning—that is, that reasoning cannot exist if naturalism is true. If successful, the argument shows not only that naturalism is false (because reasoning does exist), but also that naturalism is epistemically self-undermining (because naturalism can be rationally believed only if reasoning is possible).

Why, according to Lewis, is naturalism incompatible with the existence of reasoning? In short, because reasoning requires insight into real objective relations of logical support, and if naturalism is true, then all acts of inference can be fully explained in terms of non-rational causes. If an act of inference can be fully explained in terms of non-rational causes, then it does not involve any insight into real objective relations of logical support, and thus is not reasoning. Thus, if naturalism is true, no genuine act of reasoning can ever occur.
That is the kernel of Lewis’s argument, but let us now examine it in more detail.

Lewis sees reasoning as a mental process that recognizes the "logical relation between beliefs or assertions" (Lewis, 2001, p. 23). In reasoning, we recognize—implicitly or explicitly—that some things we believe or know are reasons for drawing certain conclusions. Reasoning thus presupposes what Lewis calls a “ground-consequent relation” (Lewis, 2001, p. 23). Some things we believe (the ground) are seen as entailing, or providing evidence for, a conclusion (the consequent). And what properly connects the ground with the consequent are principles of logical inference, such as non-contradiction,\textit{modus ponens}, and the rules that govern abduction (inference to the best explanation). If an act of inference is an act of reasoning, it must involve a perception of such logical connections. When we reason, we must perceive or otherwise cognize logical connections that exist, as Lewis says, “outside our own minds” (Lewis, 2001, p. 23) and draw the conclusion for that reason.

If the mind, in drawing an inference, is not moved by perception of real logical laws, then we have no reason to believe that that particular inference was drawn in a reliable manner—that the process by which it was reached is a reliable means of acquiring true beliefs. If we do not see these objectively valid principles of inference, and how they lead from one thing (the ground) to another (the consequent), and accept the latter as a result of this inferential support, then what we call “reason” is not a reliable pointer to reality. In short, if truth-preserving reasoning is to occur, we must draw the conclusion we do \textit{because, and ultimately because}, we recognize a ground-consequent relation between our premises and our conclusion.

But if naturalism is true, Lewis argues, perceived logical connections are not ultimately why we draw the conclusions that we do. Recall that naturalism claims that everything that exists is either some form of physical stuff or is fully explainable in terms of physical stuff. This means that our acts of inference, and the conclusions that we draw, are ultimately explained by the causal interaction of physical stuff. Given what we have learned about the brain, most naturalists would say that such causal interactions happen in our brains. Simply put, they would suggest, we draw the conclusions we draw ultimately because our neurons interact in certain ways, not because of perceived ground-consequent relations.

In her critique of Lewis's original argument, Elizabeth Anscombe argued that a conclusion can be drawn \textit{because} of a physical cause-effect process but also (at the same time) \textit{because} of a rational inference (the recognition of a ground-consequent relation). Both types of explanation can be an accurate account of why the conclusion was drawn because these two different kinds of explanations are not mutually exclusive. This is where Lewis and Anscombe disagree. Lewis believes that even though both natural and mental processes can exist, one must be ultimate—one must be the real, more fundamental, or “full” explanation. Reasoning can exist only if ground-consequent