

Readings for Session 10:
“The Cardinal Difficulty with Naturalism”: *C. S. Lewis’ Argument from Reason*

Assigned:

1. Brief Statements in Lewis’ Essays and Books Relevant to the Argument from Reason

This is a selection of three very short excerpts from “*De Futilitate* [On Futility],” *A Grief Observed*, and *The Pilgrim’s Regress*.

2. Ch. 3: “The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism” from *Miracles*.

This is the core of Lewis’ argument from reason from the 1960 edition of *Miracles* which includes revisions he made in response to criticisms and suggestions made by the philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe.

In Ch. 1, Lewis had argued that “what we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience” to explain that before one can consider historical evidence pertinent to miracles, one must first consider the philosophical question of whether miracles are even possible. In Ch. 2, Lewis distinguishes between the philosophies of Naturalism and Supernaturalism, with Naturalism considering Nature as one “great total interlocked event” that exists on its own, whereas Supernaturalism posits the existence of One Thing that exists on its own and that has caused all other things to be.

Some notes regarding terms and references made:

- a. p. 217, 1st column: “no heel-taps”: a heel-tap is a small amount of alcoholic drink left at the bottom of a glass after a drink, and so “no heel-taps” here means there is nothing left unexplained.
- b. p. 217, 2nd column and p. 218, 1st column: Lewis here gives a sketch of ideas in theoretical physics which in a subsequent chapter he identifies as an aspect of quantum physics.
- c. p. 220, bottom of 1st column and top of 2nd column: “*tinnitus*” is a purely subjective perception of noise or ringing that is a symptom of, for example, an ear injury or a circulatory disorder.

Other relevant resources:

3. Reppert, Victor (2003). *C. S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Reppert, a PhD in philosophy from the University of Illinois, provides a clearly written, understandable introduction to Lewis’ argument from reason with references to modern variations on his argument.

4. Burson, Scott, & Walls, Jerry (1998). *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Burson and Walls give a brief summary of Lewis’ argument from reason in the context of a discussion of the cumulative case for belief made by Lewis and Schaeffer.

5. Anscombe, Elizabeth (2015). “C. S. Lewis’s Rewrite of Chapter III of *Miracles*” in White et al. (Eds.) *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Philosopher Anscombe gives a summary of her dialogue with Lewis about the original form of his argument from reason, which led to his producing an improved version of the argument in the 1960 edition of *Miracles*.

6. Plantinga, Alvin (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This is the third volume of Plantinga’s trilogy on whether it is rational and warranted to accept Christian belief. In this book (on pp. 227-240), he sets forward his “Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism” (originally presented in his *Warrant and Proper Function*) which is essentially a more formal statement of Lewis’ argument. Plantinga argues that evolutionary, naturalistic philosophy is inconsistent with viewing our cognitive faculties as a reliable means of reaching truth. I can provide to anyone interested a short, five-page summary of a lecture by Plantinga presenting his argument.

Lewis's Argument from Reason

Notes for Steve Whitehouse

3 Dec 2017

My Background

Grew up in Maine. Father a postal clerk, Mother a housewife and clerk in Woolworth's after I was 12. Both parents strong Christians. Grew up in a strong Christian Church. Provided good foundation for my Christian faith, but no apologetics. Left me ill-prepared to deal with general skepticism present in American society. Provided motivation for my interest in apologetics starting when I was about 25 (36 years ago).

Engineer by education, training and experience. 3 degrees in Engineering Mechanics which investigates the response of objects to applied forces. Used in mechanical engineering, structural engineering, etc. to determine how to control the motion of systems such as vehicles; or ensure systems like buildings, bridges and airplanes do not break when supporting forces developed under operational conditions. I have spent professional life developing mathematical models of processes in physical reality using primarily Newton's Second Law of Motion ($F=ma$) and Hooke's Law ($F=kx$). Big fan of scientific method. 10 years ago I wanted to develop a better understand how problem solving in general and mathematical modeling in particular work. This desire led to an interest in philosophy, particularly epistemology: what is truth, how do we acquire it, how do we recognize it when we find it, how are our beliefs justified.

Questions

1. Do you find Lewis and Plantinga's argument from reason compelling? That is, is viewing human reason as a reliable means of attaining true beliefs inconsistent with a naturalistic or materialistic philosophy? Are there criticisms you have about the content of this argument or how it might be used?

I find the Argument from Reason a compelling and fundamental indictment of Naturalism, but not necessarily a ringing endorsement for a Theistic view in general or the Christian view in particular.

Using what appears to be basically a reductio ad absurdum type argument, Lewis shows that a belief in Naturalism and Evolutionary processes (N&E) provides no justification for believing that N&E are likely (or even able) to produce the kind of reasoning processes necessary to assert that N&E are valid assumptions in the first place.

N&E provide no explanation of the following:

1. How matter, energy, space, time and natural processes guided by the “Laws of Nature” got here with the properties they have in the first place (Perhaps the existence of these entities can be accepted as brute metaphysical facts in the same way a Christian accepts the existence of an all-powerful intentional God as a brute metaphysical fact, but then there’s the issue of the “Big Bang”!).
2. How entities in Item 1 led to the development of living matter whose further development was guided by E-based principles.
3. How living matter acquired the ability to reproduce and pass on traits via genes (a classic chicken-and-egg dilemma of the first order).
4. How some forms of living matter eventually developed the ability to reason and communicate.

Item 4 is especially hard to understand given Lewis's distinction between events driven by Cause and Effect (C/E) in N-based processes, and events driven by Ground and Consequent (G/C) such as “if A then B” found in reasoning processes. That is, how do C/E-based events lead to G/C-based events in the brains of sentient creatures.

This issue has at least two levels of difficulty. First and foremost, what N-based mechanisms could possibly account for the development of G/C-based reasoning. It would appear that a language is required to reason. What N-based mechanisms account

for the development of a requisite language? Given that a language develops, how is it possible to relate C/E-based events in the brain (e.g., firing of neurons) to the processes needed to assess the validity of thoughts expressed in a language? In particular, how do C/E-based events allow us to establish a proper correspondence relationship between thoughts expressed in language and states of affairs in physical reality (like light produced by a star several light years away)? Second, if it is conceded that such reasoning processes can come about “by accident”, what is the likelihood that the resulting processes would be those needed to interact effectively with the world. The odds would appear to be extremely low given the infinite number of reasoning processes that could develop by accident, e.g., truth-accessible reasoning process TARP_s (like the ones used in mathematics and science), truth-independent reasoning processes (TIRP_s) like those associated with astrology, delusional conspiracy theories and false religions) and random reasoning processes (RRP_s) which provide no correlation between reasoned conclusions and physical reality.

So Lewis’s argument clearly demonstrates one of two things:

1. It is necessarily so that N&E do not lead to the proper reasoning processes needed to assert N&E (if there is in fact no C/E-based process that leads to the G/C-based processes needed to evaluate the truth of a thought), or
2. It is extremely unlikely that N&E lead to the proper reasoning processes to assert N&E given the unlikely of producing a truth-accessible reasoning process by accident.

Either way, anyone who believes N&E can have no confidence that his or her belief is valid. Therefore, believing N&E would appear to be irrational and incoherent. The Theist does not suffer from this outcome since the theistic view provides a rational and coherent explanation for our ability to reason using G/C-based processes.

I find the argument compelling because it relies on assumptions derived from common every-day experience, and on sound principles of reasoning without reliance on obscure technical concepts or hand-waving kinds of arguments. The reasoning is difficult however, because it takes us to the limit of what we are able to comprehend in abstract thinking. I also find the argument fundamental because it shows that the premises of N&E are irrational and incoherent. I also find this argument satisfying (in what is perhaps an un-Christian manner!) because those that hold to N&E often have a smug and condescending satisfaction that they are inherently rational and religious people are naively superstitious.

Although the argument indicates that a Theistic view is rational and coherent, it does not necessarily reveal that a Theistic view is the only one that can be used to account for the ability to reason we all appear to have. In addition, even if you argue that the argument compels one to accept a Theistic view, the argument does not necessarily reveal that Christianity provides the correct Theistic view. However, I am satisfied with an argument that reveals that N&E is inherently irrational and incoherent, and that Theism (T) is rational and coherent, and provides a plausible explanation for the phenomena of interest in Lewis's argument.

Criticisms:

Pg 219: Every Event has a Cause. Does Quantum Mechanics (QM) dispute this? I do not know enough about QM to have a valid opinion, but my intuition tells me it is a possible N-based objection.

Pg 220: Passages on this page indicate Lewis is a realist (believes in a mind-independent reality) and holds to a correspondence theory of truth (a thought is "true" if it corresponds to a state of affairs in reality that actually obtains). Can these passages be criticized from anti-realist (idealist) points of view, or using insights from other theories of truth (e.g., pragmatism or coherence)? Please note that it appears that a Naturalist must implicitly hold a realist point of view to some degree, since he or she believes that N&E are all that exist, and the mental processes that would be associated with an idealist point of view are a subset of the reality embodied in N&E.

Near the end of Chapter 3 (starting with first full paragraph on pg 222), Lewis addresses the potential criticism associated with acceptance of the correspondence theory of truth to some extent with his "humble" position that accepts an evolutionary feeling-based pragmatism, but refutes this position by citing that inference is on trial and this argument uses inference to vouch for itself.

Lewis also addresses this issue one paragraph later with his "still humbler" position that proposes there is no truth, there is only doing with some degree of skill (e.g., setting a bone, building a bridge, making a Sputnik). [As an aside, I think we have actually arrived at this point in the U.S. where it can be asserted that "truth" is not based on concepts such as correspondence, pragmatism or coherence, but is essentially whatever your colleagues let you get away with, but I digress!] Lewis addresses this possibility by stating that this position essentially does away with all philosophy and the assertions it supports, such as N&E.

Summary of Key Concepts in Chapter 3 of “Miracles”

1. Mental events are about something. As a result, mental events can be T or F based on the correspondence of what they are about with reality.
2. Item 1 provides the bases of any valid reasoning process.
3. Based on N&E, our reasoning processes have been developed over course of history, but have been driven by unguided E-based processes. Therefore, the resulting reasoning processes cannot be guaranteed to be a truth-accessible reasoning process except by accident.
4. N&E can only operate on stimulus and response to increase survivability, but not on mental processes associated with knowledge and truth. E refines responses to stimuli, but provides no mechanism to improve inference.
5. Pragmatism might be possible with just E-based feelings and no reasoning process. Stated another way, a feeling-based pragmatism can be seen to be the result of E, but not an inference-based correspondence.
6. Lewis admits expectation based on coincidental experiences could be explained by E-based processes, but this does not lead to knowledge. Also, E cannot explain inferences based on axioms (like those of Euclidean geometry) which are not based on experience.
7. Reasoning processes reached by inference using E-based mechanisms provide no explanation of or justification for the assertion that N&E are valid premises.
8. Humble argument: E-based mechanism for development of reasoning processes not understood, but resulting reasoning processes are useful, and therefore “true” based on their utility. This argument involves a new definition of truth (pragmatism) and relies on inference, which is supposedly on trial.
9. Humbled argument: no truth, just doing well or not well. Does away with all of philosophy, including N and E. From this perilous perch, Naturalists assert that N is all there is, while claiming no such thing as truth. N has now become wholly a matter of faith.
10. A Theist is not committed to this position by his or her presuppositions. Reason comes before Nature, and therefore does not fit into Nature. Our concept of N depends on reason, not the other way around.

After addressing the first question, Harold posed a more philosophically oriented question for Ty and a more scientifically oriented question for Steve:

2. a) Ty: Is accepting the validity of the argument from reason tantamount to adopting a dualistic Cartesian position on the mind-body problem? Why or why not?
- b) Steve: While the argument from reason tries to make an inference from the nature of the human mind and its reasoning ability to a divine Intelligence, an alternative tack would be to begin with some feature of the physical universe such as the apparent fine-tuning of physical parameters necessary for life and argue those features require a designing Intelligence. Which sort of argument, one beginning with reason or one beginning with physical evidence, do you find more compelling?

Cosmological argument: something outside of us exists, where did it come from? Ignoring position of extreme skepticism (i.e., nothing exists outside of us), possible answers appear to be (i) Created itself, (ii) always existed, (iii) was created by an independent entity. (i) is self-contradictory, requires the ability for something to exist and not exist at the same time. (ii) discredited for an N by the Big Bang theory. Leaves us with (iii), but N's trying to weasel out of this with arguments regarding oscillating universe, string theory, multiverse, etc.

Teleological argument: fine tuning and irreducible complexity in nature (how to explain genetic-based reproduction). Did it come about by accident or by intent. Is nature deterministic or intentional? Multiverse argument.

Both arguments start with tacit assumption that all of us (Naturalists and Theists) possess a truth-accessible reasoning process (TARP). So arguments from both points of view appear to start on an equal footing. We can make compelling arguments that Theism (T) provides better responses to the Cosmological or Teleological arguments than Naturalism (N), but we can't get N off the battlefield. Plus Naturalists will always come up with some alternative explanation, no matter how far-fetched. The argument from reason explicitly shows that reasoning processes derived from N&E are inherently suspect, and therefore, a Theist has a right to participate in the argument but an N does not.

A concluding question would be one that brings the discussion back to the level of practical application:

3. What do you think is the value in general of philosophical arguments in apologetics and evangelism? Have you had experiences or discussions with unbelievers where such arguments were helpful?

Philosophical (apologetic) arguments have been helpful to ME!!! They have strengthened my faith and given me confidence in the veracity of the Scriptures [Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, ***mind*** and strength ... and ... always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence (1 Pe 3.15)].

I assume they have been helpful to my son and daughter, especially Susan who teaches anatomy and physiology at a community college, although I have not explicitly asked either John or Susan about this issue.

Valuable in discussions with some people at work

Purpose of music in an N-based world (worship in a T-based world)

WTC attack – 1st plane possibly an accident; 2nd plane indicated an intentional attack.

The following is an example of a “reductio ad absurdum” argument obtained from the following website:

<http://www.myastrologybook.com/proof-square-root-2-irrational-number.htm>

Assume that the $\sqrt{2}$ is a rational number. Therefore, by the definition of a rational number, there must exist whole numbers m and n such that $m/n = \sqrt{2}$.

If m and n are not reduced to lowest terms (i.e., if they contain common factors), reduce m and n (factor out their common factors) until we are left with new whole numbers p and q that have no common factors. Then $p/q = \sqrt{2}$.

Squaring both sides of this equation we get $p^2/q^2 = 2$ and then multiplying both sides by q^2 we get $p^2 = 2q^2$.

But this tells us that p^2 is even since it equals a multiple of 2, namely $2q^2$. If p^2 is even it follows that p must be even, since 2 cannot appear in the square of a number unless it is a factor of the number itself (the prime factorization theorem tells us that all numbers are composed of unique prime factors; therefore if 2, a unique prime, appears in p^2 , its source must be p itself). Therefore we can represent p as $2r$ (where r is a whole number), which by substitution in the above equation gives us $(2r)^2 = 2q^2 \rightarrow (2r)(2r) = 2q^2 \rightarrow 4r^2 = 2q^2 \rightarrow 2r^2 = q^2$

which tells us that q^2 is even, and therefore by the above reasoning q itself is even.

But if both p and q are even, then they are both divisible by 2. But p and q have no common factors, since starting with m and n we factored out all common factors to arrive at p and q, a fraction reduced to lowest terms! Therefore, by assuming that $\sqrt{2} =$ a fraction of whole numbers p/q reduced to lowest terms, it logically follows that that fraction p/q is not reduced to lowest terms. And since by following the rules of logical inference our assumption arrives at a contradiction to itself, it follows that our assumption must be false. Therefore there are no whole numbers that as a fraction equal $\sqrt{2}$. In other words, $\sqrt{2}$ is not a rational number.