

Session 10:

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



“Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”

--C. S. Lewis “Learning in War Time,”
Sermon Lewis preached in 1939.

Evenings with C. S. Lewis

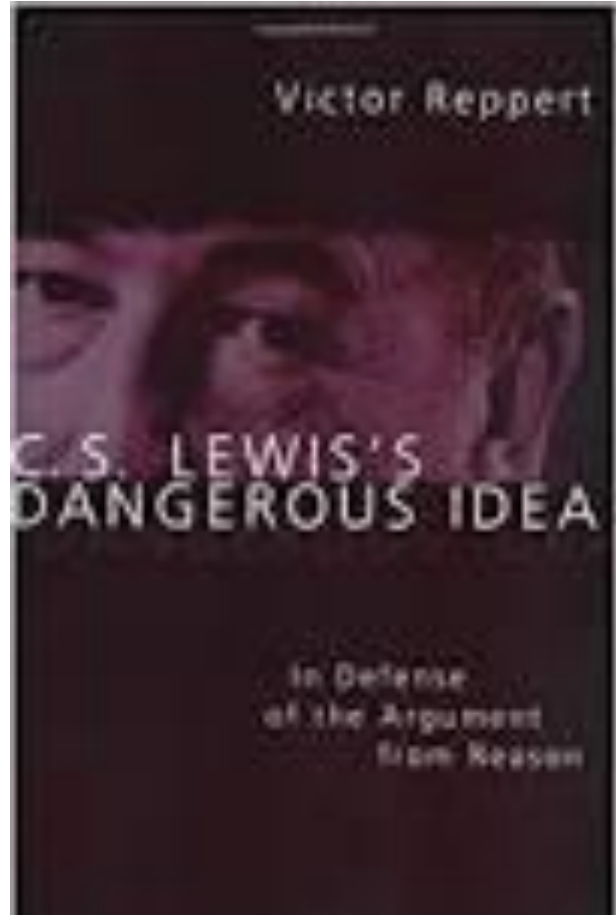
**“The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism”:
*C. S. Lewis’ Argument from Reason***

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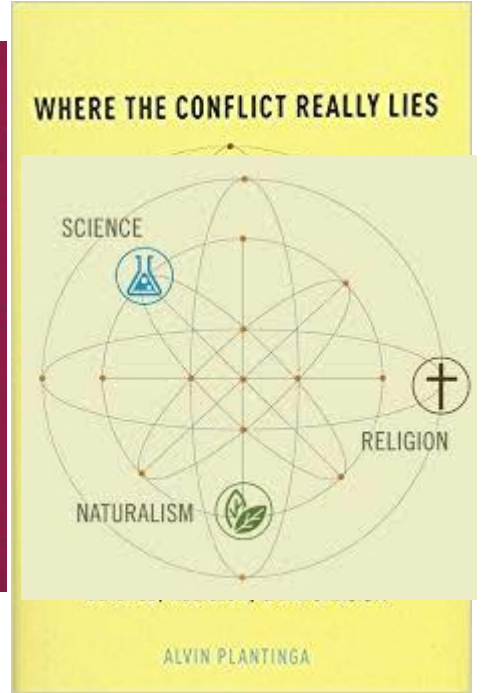
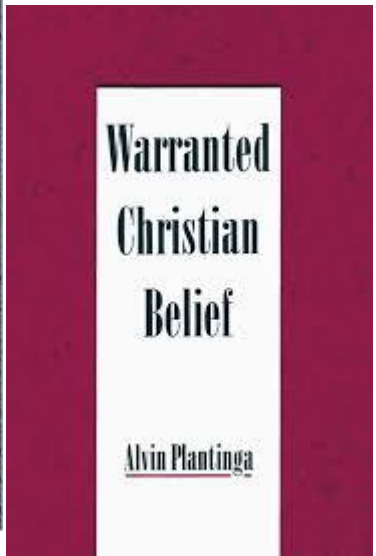
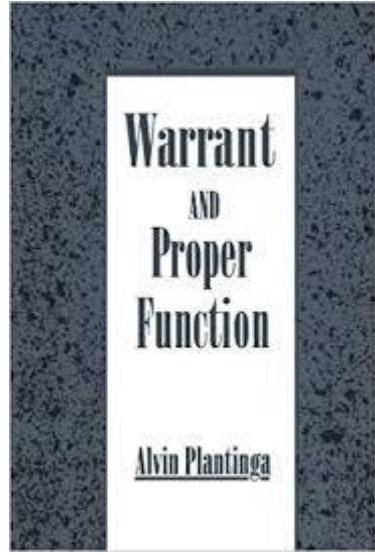
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Examples of the continuing impact of Lewis' Argument from Reason

Philosopher Victor Reppert's 2003 book defending Lewis' argument



Philosopher Alvin Plantinga's several books that include discussion of his version of the argument from reason



Given that naturalism is at least 'a quasi-religion', "there is indeed a science/religion conflict, all right, but it isn't between science and theistic religion: it's between science and naturalism." That's where the conflict really lies. (Preface, p. x)

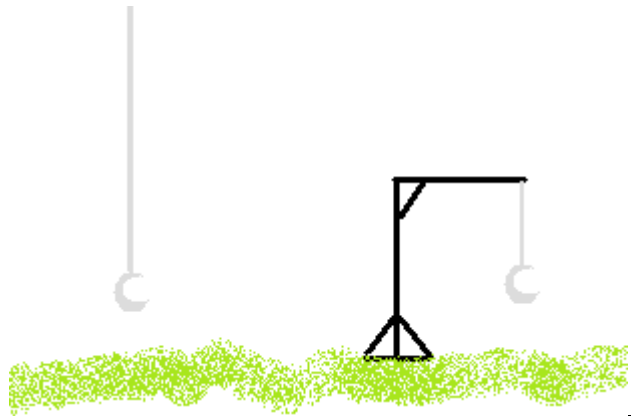
Plan for the day

- Continuing influence of Lewis' argument from reason
- Contrast with secular perspectives (then and now):
Bertrand Russell, Daniel Dennett
- *Pilgrim's Regress*
- "*De Futilitate (On Futility)*"
- *Miracles*
- A discussion with two commentators
- Concluding contrasts with naturalism

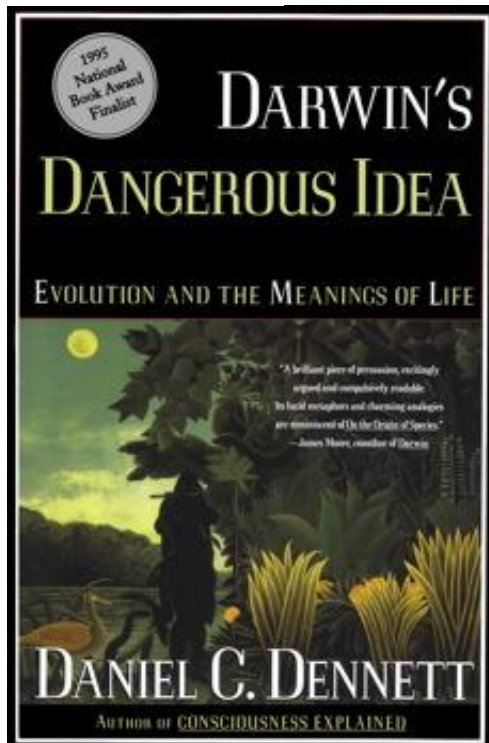
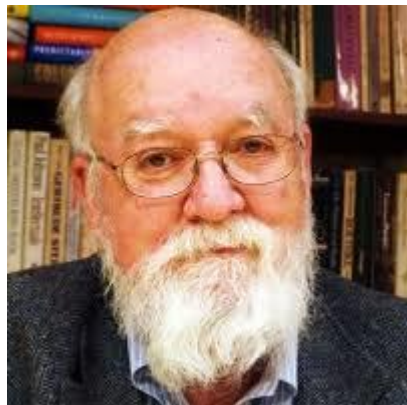
“Paradigm cases of naturalism would be the views of Daniel Dennett in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* or Bertrand Russell in ‘A Free Man’s Worship’.” (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 227)

- C. S. Lewis in 1924 said Russell provided “a very clear and noble statement of what I myself believed a few years ago.”
 - “That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving, that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms” (Russell, in *Why I am not a Christian*)
- Dennett
 - “To put it bluntly but fairly, anyone today who doubts that the variety of life on this planet was produced by a process of evolution is simply ignorant—inexcusably ignorant.”
 - Darwin’s dangerous idea is that life, mind, intelligence, are created by blind, mechanical, processes such as natural selection which create “Design out of Chaos without the aid of Mind.” (Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, p. 50)

“Skyhooks” vs. “Cranes”

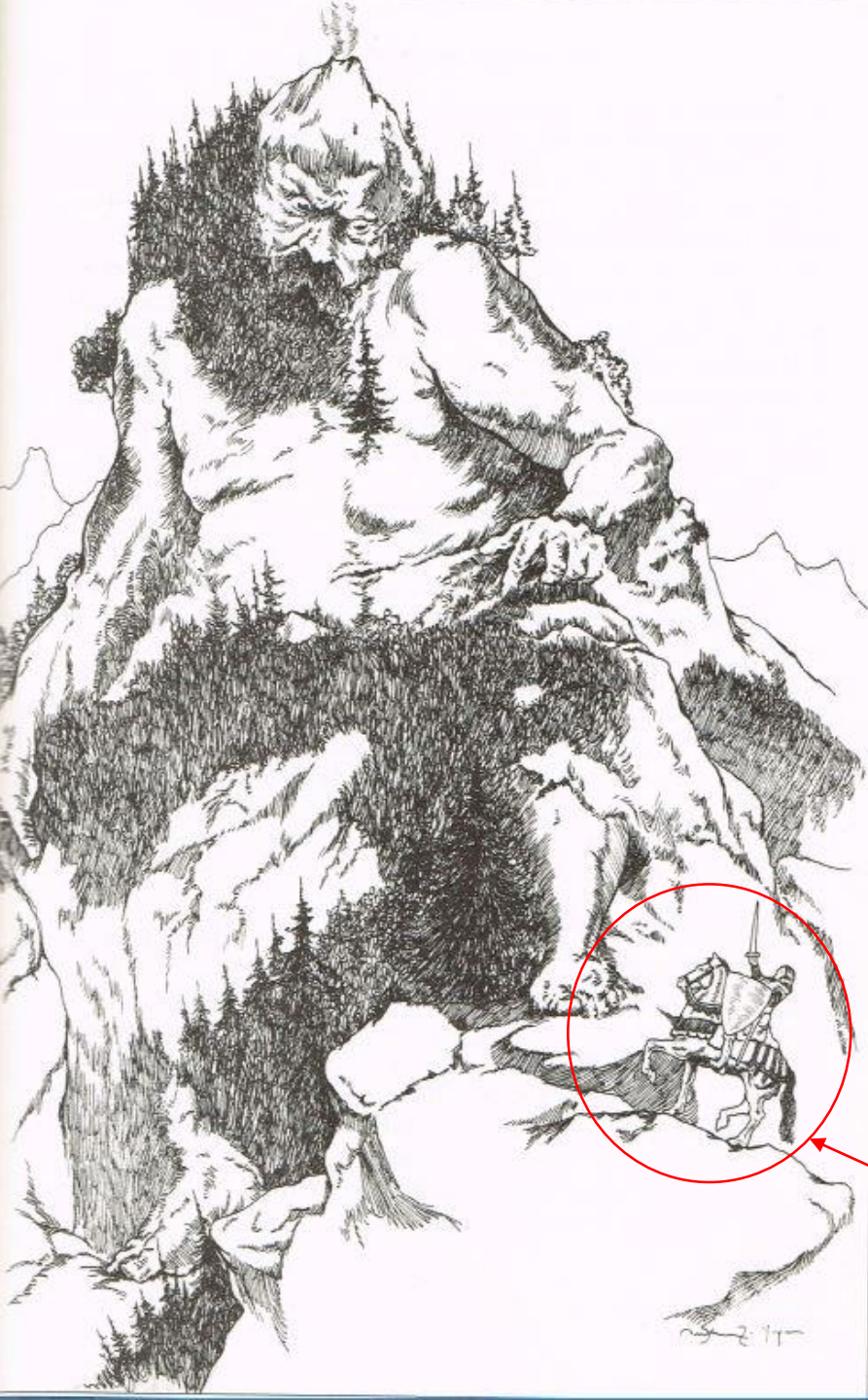


- One of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” philosopher Daniel Dennett in his book *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* contrasts explanations relying on supernatural intervention with naturalistic explanations using the metaphor of “skyhooks” vs. “cranes”.



What Lewis, Reppert, and Plantinga affirm in different ways is the mere Christian position that God has always existed, so mind has always existed.

- With previous Christian philosophers they believe it is impossible that mind should be produced from unthinking matter.
- For example, “It is as impossible to conceive that ever pure incogitative matter should produce a thinking intelligent Being, as that nothing should of itself produced Matter.” (John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, Ch. 10)
- Lewis’ argument from reason is developed fully in his book *Miracles* but is affirmed in some of his other books and essays, beginning with his first post-conversion work, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*



The Pilgrim's Regress (1933).

Illustration from Book 3: Through Darkest Zeitgeistheim.

“John is hindered from pursuing his quest by the intellectual climate of the age.”

What was the intellectual climate that loomed as large as a mountain in Lewis' day?

John was imprisoned by Sigismund Enlightenment who told him his idea of the beautiful Island that he had glimpsed was only **wishful thinking**. At last John's **commonsense** revolts on being told nothing in Nature had inherent value, and all arguments were rationalizations of the arguer's desires.

The giant slayer Reason

Reason's riddle

- “Well,” said Reason. “Now hear my riddle. There was a certain man who was going to his own house and his enemy went with him. And his house was beyond a river too swift to swim and too deep to wade. And he could go no faster than his enemy. While he was on his journey his wife sent to him and said, ‘You know that there is only one bridge across the river: tell me, shall I destroy it that the enemy may not cross; or shall I leave it standing that you may cross?’ What should this man do?”
- *What is the point Lewis is trying to make with this riddle?*

The interpretation of the riddle, and Lewis' commentary elsewhere

- “It has two meanings,” said she, “and in the first the bridge signifies Reasoning” “The Spirit of the Age wishes to allow argument and not to allow argument.”
- “How is that?”
- “You heard what they said. If anyone argues with them they say that he is rationalizing his own desires, and therefore need not be answered. But if anyone listens to them they will then argue themselves to show that their own doctrines are true.”
- Or, as Lewis wrote in “The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism”:
 - “‘But’, it will be said, ‘it is incontestable that we do in fact reach truths by inferences’. Certainly. The Naturalist and I both admit this. We could not discuss anything unless we did.” (p. 221)
 - “Reason is our starting point. There can be no question of either of attacking or defending it.” (p. 222)

A second interpretation of the bridge riddle

- Bridge as wish-fulfillment doctrine
 - “I see,” said John. “But what was the second interpretation?”
 - “In the second,” said Reason, “the bridge signifies the giant’s own favourite doctrine of the wish-fulfillment dream. For this also he wishes to use and not to use.”
 - “I don’t see how he wishes *not* to use it.”
 - “Does he not keep on telling people that the Landlord is a wish-fulfillment dream?”
 - “Yes; surely that is true—the only true thing he did say.”
 - “Now think. Is it really true that the giant and Sigismund, and the people in Eschropolis, and Mr. Halfways, are going about filled with a longing that there should be a Landlord, and cards of rules, and a mountain land beyond the brook, with a possibility of a black hole?”
- Examples
 - Lewis—dejected convert; wanted no interference
 - Aldous Huxley (of *Brave New World*) “We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom” (Huxley, “Confessions of a Professed Atheist”).

De Futilitate (On futility)

- Addresses the key role of logic in science (pp. 673-674)
 - “We reach our knowledge of the universe only by inference.”
 - “Particular experiments, far from taking us out of the magic circle of inference into some supposed direct contact with reality, are themselves evidential only as parts of that great inference.”
 - “If logic is discredited, science must go down with it.”
- Notes the peculiar quality of thought some call “aboutness”
 - “We are compelled to admit between the thoughts of a terrestrial astronomer and the behavior of matter several light-years away that particular relation we call truth. But this relation has no meaning at all if we try to make it exist between the matter of the star and the astronomer’s brain, considered as a lump of matter. The brain may be in all sorts of relations to the star no doubt: it is in a spatial relation, and a time relation, and a quantitative relation. But to talk of one bit of matter being true of another seems to be nonsense. It might turn out to be the case that every atom in the universe thought, and thought truly, about every other. But that relation between any two atoms would be something quite distinct from the physical relations between them.”
 - “Acts of thinking are no doubt events; but they are a very special sort of events. They are ‘about’ something other than themselves and can be true or false.” (Cardinal Difficulty, p. 220)

Miracles: A Preliminary Study (1947; second revised edition, 1960)

- Chapter 1: “What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience.”
 - Cites commentary on John’s gospel which says it must have been written after the execution of Peter because Jesus is represented as predicting Peter’s execution.
- Chapter 2: The Naturalist and the Supernaturalist
 - *What’s the meaning of “Nature”*
 - Not “whatever there is” or “the whole show”
 - Not “what we perceive with our 5 senses”
 - Rather the Natural is what springs up of its own accord
 - Nature is “the great total interlocked event” going on in space and time
 - Corollary: every event happens because some other event has happened.
 - The Supernaturalist agrees that there must be something that exists on its own, but thinks this Fact is not the whole show, but the One Thing that caused all the other things to be.

Ch. 3: The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism

- “All possible knowledge depends on the validity of reasoning.” (p. 218)
 - If the feeling of certainty reflected in words like *must be* and *therefore* merely represents how our minds happen to work rather than reflecting a genuine insight into realities beyond our minds, we can have no knowledge.
 - “Unless human reason is valid no science can be true.”
- Haldane’s memorable quote
 - “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of the 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.”
 - *Does Haldane doubt his brain is composed of atoms?*
 - No. He is succinctly stating that a strict materialism refutes itself.

Two different senses of the word “because”

- The Cause-Effect “because”
 - “Grandfather is ill today *because* he ate lobster yesterday.”
 - This is what Aristotle referred to as “efficient causation.”
 - Naturalistic causal explanations that explain an event by subsuming it under some physical law exemplify cause-effect relations.
- The Ground-Consequent “because:
 - “Grandfather must be ill today *because* he hasn’t got up yet (and we know he is an invariably early riser when he is well).”
 - As a syllogism:
 - When Grandfather is well, he always gets up early.
 - Grandfather did not get up early today.
 - Therefore, Grandfather must not be well.

It seems both kinds of connections must apply simultaneously to mental acts, but they are “wholly distinct”

- The problem: thoughts that are the effects of specified causes are viewed as groundless
- To say a thought is “caused by...” is so different from being proved that we treat them as mutually exclusive. Examples:
 - Wishful thinking
 - “You say that because you are... someone who would benefit from tax reform.”
 - Parallel in senses: *tinnitus*, ringing in ears is not hearing
- Associations vs. being *seen to be* a ground
 - Associations: can be built up by accidental pairings (e.g. classical conditioning) rather than necessary relationships
 - Acts of knowing, in contrast, are not psychological associations, but the perception of a logical relationship, an implication.

Contemporary philosophy and the argument from reason

- Our commentators:
 - Steve Whitehouse
 - Ty Camp

Toward the end of “The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism” Lewis considers biological and psychological mechanisms but rejects them as inadequate explanations of the origin of reason

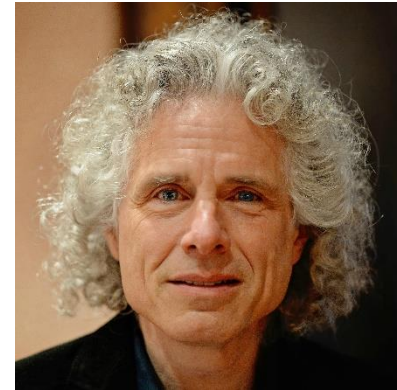
- Even if natural selection could improve vision from a photo-sensitive spot to the human eye, it would not bring us “an inch nearer to a knowledge of light”: “It is not men with specially good eyes who know about light, but men who have studied the relevant sciences” (p. 221)
- Similarly, experiences of association might condition people to expect fire when smoke is seen, but “such expectations are not inferences and need not be true”: inference comes in when you go on to attempt the “discovery of the connection”.

Anticipating objections

- “It is incontestable that we do in fact reach truths by inferences.”
 - “Certainly. The Naturalist and I both admit this.” But the naturalistic explanation of the evolution of reason “is inconsistent with the claims that he and I both have to make for inference.”
- Evolution increases useful habits, and if they are useful they must reach truth.
 - But we have no assurance that “If useful, then true.”
 - The more honest approach: Give up making truth claims. But this would mean “no more Naturalism!”

Secular, naturalistic perspectives on the mind undercut truth, and are unable to explain human reason

- Francis Crick (co-discoverer of DNA): “You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact **no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells** and their associated molecules” (*The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*).
- Steven Pinker (Harvard psychologist): “Given that the mind is a product of natural selection, **it should not have a miraculous ability to commune with all truths**’ it should have a mere ability to solve problems that are sufficiently similar to the environmental challenges of our ancestors.” That the mind has the ability to construct theories of the universe and our place in it “seems biologically frivolous and vain.” (*How the Mind Works*)
- Patricia Churchland (philosopher, materialist): “Boiled down to essentials... the principal chore of our nervous system is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive... **Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost.**”

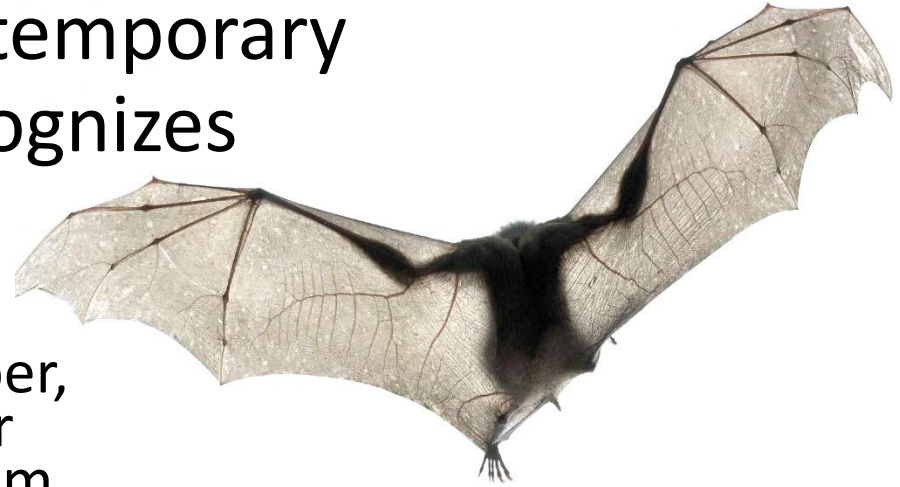


Occasionally a secular thinker will grasp and admit the problem

- “The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy.
- “Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”

Charles Darwin

Thomas Nagel: one contemporary secular thinker who recognizes the problem



- This was hinted at in his 1974 paper, “What is it like to be a bat?”: “For consciousness to be explained from a reductionist stance, the idea of the subjective character of experience would have to be discarded, which is absurd.”
- Perhaps even more noteworthy are positions expressed in his recent book, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*: “Evolutionary naturalism provides an account of our capacities that undermines their reliability and in doing so undermines itself.” (p. 27)



Not just philosophical issues about truth, but what is most meaningful in our daily life, is at stake

- “You can’t, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes. You can’t go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it.”

C. S. Lewis, “Living in an Atomic Age”

Conclusion

- “The idea of a wholly mind-less and valueless universe has to be abandoned at one point—i.e. as regards logic: after that, there is no telling at how many other points it will be defeated nor how great the reversal of our 19th century philosophy must be.”
Lewis, *De Futilitate*, p. 681