

A (New) Brief Form of the Argument from Reason

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Ten years ago Victor Reppert published an important book entitled, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (IVP, 2003). In it Reppert explains and defends an argument against philosophical naturalism made popular by Lewis and set forth in some detail in Lewis's book, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (HarperCollins, 2001). The "argument from reason," as it has come to be known, was not intended to prove God's existence directly, but to show that unguided natural laws and forces cannot explain at least one phenomenon that all nearly all observers acknowledge: the human mind's power of rational inference.

Reppert's book does an admirable job of dispelling misconceptions about Lewis's thesis and the history connected with it. Reppert explains that Lewis actually presented a cluster of arguments that questioned variously the natural character of propositions and beliefs, the laws of logic, and truth and falsity as categories.

Over the past decade I have returned often to Reppert's book and to Lewis's challenge to naturalism. I can do no better than those authors at arguing their particular points. Occasionally I have tried to make the broader case in my own way, for better or worse. To be able to sharpen the argument in some respect or make it easier to grasp would leave me more than satisfied. I offer the present essay as evidence that however short I might have fallen in achieving those goals my determination has not flagged.

A Preliminary Problem with Naturalism

A perusal of online resources in philosophy will quickly reveal how difficult it is to define philosophical naturalism. It is daunting to define nature itself in a way that includes, say, abstract objects and yet excludes those supernatural beings, such as God and spirits, that secular-minded people find objectionable. As a practical matter, naturalism places a premium on scientific knowledge and tends to lump religious beliefs in with superstitions.

As far beyond me as it is to tackle the subtleties of defining naturalism, I will here offer what I think is a belief that most secularists would affirm as a key to their perspective on the world: **Only beliefs based on evidence are likely to be true.** Notice that beliefs failing to qualify under this statement are not necessarily false, nor are all evidence-based beliefs likely to be true. Basis in evidence, no more strictly defined, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for credibility. In that respect the statement is modest enough. Nor does it exclude religious beliefs for which appropriate evidence can be produced.

As moderate and sensible as our statement appears, it presents a logical difficulty when we ask why it itself should be regarded as likely to be true. To recommend it *a posteriori* we would have to argue in viciously circular fashion that evidence is valuable based on evidence. Belief in the role of evidence must represent an intuitive insight, necessary *a priori* for further truth-seeking—and therefore disqualified under our proposed generalization about beliefs.

Firm as the ground under us might have felt as we took an initial step toward naturalism, it has turned to quicksand and we find ourselves retreating. We have no choice but to amend our statement to the effect that evidence is sufficient but not necessary for the probable truth of beliefs, akin to claiming that the likelihood of a mountain having snow on its top varies with the mountain's height without denying that the likelihood might also vary with its latitude. Intuitions cannot be turned away at the door.

Perhaps we can subject intuitive claims to Ockham's Razor, an appeal to explanatory efficiency. A trouble here is that efficiency of explanation depends in part on how we weight the intuitions in question. As an example consider the "laws of nature," which cannot be observed or experienced and can only be approximated ever more closely by scientific laws. The powerful intuition that an order underlies the actual objects of study prevents many scientists and philosophers from discarding "laws of nature" as part of their explanatory toolkit.

Although it not possible to dismiss summarily religious beliefs that rest upon intuitions, not all such beliefs cohere equally well with each other and with other knowledge. We are not obliged to entertain intuitive notions that are mutually contradictory, nor those that run counter to beliefs that have strong evidential backing. There is no escaping the hard work of examining religious beliefs with all the resources we can muster, weighing every aspect of experience without favoring any in advance.

The success of the sciences since the Enlightenment, not just in generating insights and technologies but in supplanting supernatural explanations, is the mainstay of the case against all religious belief. Counterpoised against this case is a longstanding difficulty locating certain aspects of mental life wholly within the matrix the sciences provide. The persistence of the "soft problem" of intentionality (the way thoughts pertain to things other than themselves) and the "hard problem" of consciousness (how sensations can be captured in biological descriptions), among others, must temper any celebration of science's triumphs.

None of the foregoing constitutes the argument from reason. It is an introductory reminder that the elaborateness of the edifice of the sciences is not enough to refute all belief in the supernatural. Having set the stage, I will present a simplified version of the argument itself.

Distinguishing Reason from Natural Processes

Within naturalistic philosophy, reason or rational inference is thought to be fully accounted for as an "exaptation," a function evolved for one purpose and subsequently used for others. Having originally conferred on our forebears an ability to respond to their environment with a flexibility not otherwise possible, reason has been redirected to such activities as launching satellites, composing symphonies, and researching the brain. Because reason so interpreted qualifies as a biological process like any other I have

constructed a table in which it is set alongside respiration and digestion. Since any number of biological processes of the human organism might be included, the list below is only representative.

Process	Type	Organ	Product
Respiration	Chemical	Lungs	Oxygenation of blood for cell metabolism
Digestion	Chemical	Digestive Tract	Sugars and nutrients for cell growth and metabolism
Reason	Electro-chemical	Brain	Reliable beliefs enabling complex adaptive behavior

We will here waive quibbles over treating beliefs as physical and grant the position of the host of a science program on public television who asked rhetorically, “What are beliefs but electrical impulses in the brain?” Although currently we cannot read a person’s beliefs directly off brain activity, the usefulness of the polygraph in lie detection makes such a capability at least plausible. The table above even suggests that beliefs might be broadly defined as those patterns of nerve impulses that give rise to certain behaviors.

Having set aside the question of whether neural firings that *signal* beliefs may be identified *as* beliefs, we confront a problem that that is both simpler and more stark when we consider whether the entries in the table can be scientifically confirmed. If as an academic exercise we were to raise doubts about respiration, examination of the structure of movement of lungs along with analyses of blood going to and returning from them would show the description to be sound. The confirmation of digestion could be performed in a similar way.

The last entry, reason, resists confirmation because of the claim that it tends to generate reliable beliefs. Confirmation of any of the entries in the table requires that we make rational inferences from evidence and therefore entails the the assumption that rational inference is substantially reliable. Put differently, we must *assume* that reason yields reliable beliefs in order to *confirm* that it does, which means that confirmation is impossible. To accept circularity this tight and vicious into scientific thinking would threaten the rational basis of science itself.

To understand the logical problem with confirming reason as a natural process is to realize that continued accumulation of scientific knowledge about the brain cannot solve it. Mapping cognitive abilities onto brain physiology ever more finely will not remove the priority of reason that constitutes the obstacle. Consequently, we can expand our table as follows:

Process	Type	Organ	Product	Confirmable?
Respiration	Chemical	Lungs	Oxygenation of blood for cell metabolism	Yes
Digestion	Chemical	Digestive Tract	Sugars and nutrients for cell growth and metabolism	Yes
Reason	Electro-chemical	Brain	Reliable beliefs enabling complex adaptive behavior	No

Reason stands out by comparison not only to respiration and digestion in humans but organic processes more generally, from locomotion to photosynthesis. It seems that we have successfully distinguished reason from natural processes whose basic descriptions can be confirmed by science. We here make the assumption—apart from which philosophical naturalism unravels—that the susceptibility of a process to confirmation by the scientific method is a fair way of determining whether it is natural. What examples are there of processes that are accepted by science as part of nature and yet which in principle defy scientific confirmation?

Lewis’s original claim that rationality must lie outside of nature for reasons that are scientifically intractable is looking the more plausible from our brief examination. However, perhaps we can purchase some breathing space for the effort to naturalize reason by amending our table so as to sidestep the question of reliability of beliefs, as below:

Process	Type	Organ	Product	Confirmable?
Respiration	Chemical	Lungs	Oxygenation of blood for cell metabolism	Yes
Digestion	Chemical	Digestive Tract	Sugars and nutrients for cell growth and metabolism	Yes
Reason	Electro-chemical	Brain	Beliefs enabling complex adaptive behavior	Yes(?)

Instead of moving us closer to a natural description of reason as we might have hoped, the revised entry has simply shifted the problem. Casting reason solely as an engine of behavior in order to make its description testable turns out to be costly. Reason’s generation specifically of reliable beliefs was what made it *both* selectable during evolutionary history *and* capable of being redirected into acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. With the new description we forfeit the stock evolutionary explanation of reason as we commonly understand it. The link between reason as a behavioral driver and reason as means to knowledge is shown to be untestable and therefore fails to qualify as a scientific hypothesis. It is almost irresistible to think beliefs that lead to sophisticated behavior must be substantially and systematically reliable, as Lewis notes (Ibid., p. 33), but such a connection firmly resists confirmation.

Reason defined in terms of the behavior it engenders cannot serve as a means of analyzing, among other things, propositions concerning natural processes. Even if we were able to step outside ourselves and observe the behavior generated by our ideas concerning

nature, we would need a reflective rationality to appreciate what the behavior was indicating about brain function. Just as Lewis observed, the scientifically testable process we have inserted into our objective scheme of nature and labeled as “reason” turns out not to be the kind of reason we must employ to evaluate the scheme itself (Ibid., pp. 35-36).

One value of this admittedly brief exercise is to point up the shared nature of the difficulty in fitting either reason or qualia (the felt qualities of sensations) into a naturalistic framework. The so-called “hard problem” of consciousness I referred to in the previous section has to do with the peculiar character of experiences. One can assemble all the objective facts about pain, for instance, or color vision but remain ignorant of a crucial property of either in the absence of actually having suffered pain or seen colors. Something about sensations *as we subjectively experience them* cannot be captured in a factual account of behavior and brain chemistry. Similarly, something about rational inference *as we subjectively experience it*, specifically its connection to beliefs that are true or reliable, cannot be incorporated into the description of reason without rendering it incapable of confirmation and therefore disqualifying it as a natural process.

Part of naturalism and its variant physicalism is the causal closure thesis, namely, that effects only result from causes that are explicable—to the extent that they are explicable at all—in terms of the laws of nature. A breach of closure now occurs if human actions are caused by rational inference, because then effects would be following from a process that cannot qualify as natural. It is, after all, through scientific testing and confirmation that processes are situated within the framework of scientific laws that are our best approximations of the laws of nature. A breach is just as unavoidable when we descend from behavior to brain processes under the dictum “no change in the mental without a change in the physical” since, again, in reason we have a transnatural process that undoubtedly causes mental changes and consequently physical ones.

In my own experience the naturalist response to arguments like the one I have just outlined is a recitation of recent work in cognitive science, neuroanatomy, artificial intelligence, etc., along with a rehearsal of the historical gains of natural explanations over supernatural ones. The naturalist builds a good case for suspicion about arguments for God or some other supernatural dimension of reality based on what could be temporary scientific ignorance. The trouble is that the argument from reason turns out not to be of that kind. Moreover, the prudence of critically examining the argument from reason (or from morality or beauty or intelligibility) does not by itself constitute a refutation.

Those who allow science unlimited time to tinker its way past logical barriers might contemplate the asymptote, a mathematical boundary line that a defined curve approaches ever more closely but never intersects. How would you answer someone who insists that perhaps the curve will contact the line at some point not yet specifically plotted? For that matter, how do we know that a repeating decimal such as $1/3$ does not stop repeating at the quadrillionth digit absent enough computing power to check?

I began this essay by noting that, like C. S. Lewis, Victor Reppert does not see the argument from reason as a formal proof of God’s existence. The argument does demonstrate that the fundamental level of reality cannot consist of unconscious, unintelligent physical causes. The notion of an all-governing Intelligence transcending time and space is not an ad hoc invention to explain why reason stands out from natural processes. The idea of God is already on the table, as it were, before the peculiar properties of reason come into view. If the evidence of reason conforms better to a universe grounded in Mind

than in mindlessness, it is discomfort that the advocates of naturalism may have to live with for the long term.