

# The Argument from Normativity to Supernature

## Part 1: Introduction

*But if I go to the east, he is not there;  
if I go to the west, I do not find him.  
When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;  
when he turns to the south,  
I catch no glimpse of him.  
Job 23:8-9*

Most people who ignore God are not atheists. They give too little thought to whether God exists to arrive at a firm conclusion, nor do they ponder deeply what God might expect from us if he did exist. However, people who discount God after paying attention to the question of his existence usually subscribe to a form of the philosophy called naturalism. Naturalism is a technical word that has different applications in different subject areas such as art, literature, and philosophy. In the present context naturalism includes the beliefs that nature is all there is and that nature is reliably investigated and understood through science. Included within naturalism are physicalism, scientism, and secularism.

“What you see is what you get” is a good motto for naturalism. Of course, it must be stretched to include information from all the senses and from scientific instruments, and even mathematical calculations applied to that information. Electricity, magnetic fields, and the wind cannot be seen, but their effects can be seen and, even more importantly, they can be detected and measured with scientific instruments and confirmed by experiments. Secularists devoted to naturalism reject God, angels, demons, and whatever else cannot in principle be detected or confirmed experimentally. The secularist sees himself as choosing scientific progress over superstition, acknowledging the hard fact of an unconscious and indifferent universe rather than consoling himself with the fantasy of a purposeful universe governed by a Supreme Being.

Religious people sometimes accuse secularists of being hypocritical when they advocate theories of the origin of life. Past history, obviously, cannot be repeated as an experiment. But this is partly a misunderstanding of the reasoning involved. The secularist asks, “Among all the phenomena that can be observed and experimentally confirmed, which are most likely to have produced biological life?” Given that qualification, the best candidates in the field are chemical processes and the genetically-based interactions of organisms with each other and with the nonliving environment.

I know firsthand how naturalism feels. When I was in my late teens, I went through a dry period in my faith during which the world around me felt empty of everything except what was physical. I did not cease to believe in God but he seemed to become remote. The more learning and thinking I did, the weaker the arguments of popular apologetics appeared to me. Perhaps God did not intend us to have arguments for faith that could withstand critical assault, I thought. We were simply commanded to believe.

Yet it did not ring true that we are commanded to believe, period. Jesus issued commands, but he also appealed to the evidence of his own works and to the common human experiences of his audience (John 10:37-38; Matt 7:9-11; Luke 11:17-20). Paul was willing be thought a fool for Christ, but when he witnessed he reasoned with his listeners from their own beliefs forward to the truth of the gospel (Acts 9:22; 17:22-31). He persuaded people instead of simply issuing commands to believe (Acts 17:2-4; 1 Cor 9:22).

It was about this time that I discovered C. S. Lewis. I first read his books *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Still later I read a more of Lewis's writings, both fiction and nonfiction. The spiritual boost I received is one from which I continue to benefit. I did not find Lewis's books to be beyond criticism nor did I agree with every point he made. But Lewis enabled me to gain a perspective that was richer and more in tune with the divine truths revealed in Christ through the pages of the Bible.

What Lewis most impressed upon me were two arguments that I had never seriously considered. One of these is that the moral sense possessed by all rational human beings cannot in principle be explained by science. And since physical realities in principle *can* be explained by science, we find that by having a conscience we have a connection to something outside physical reality, that is, outside nature. But what reality lying outside or apart from nature could have an essential quality of moral judgment? God as revealed by the Scriptures is an obvious answer. Not all questions about our moral sense are answered by the idea of God, but it offers some kind of explanation whereas an empty physical universe offers none at all.

The second argument, known as the Argument from Reason, observes that our faculty of reason, like our moral sense, in principle cannot be explained by science. And once again, since nature is what science in principle *can* explain, our rational mind entails a connection to something—more properly, someone—who can only be described as supernatural.

You may have noticed that in the past few paragraphs I have repeatedly used the words “in principle.” By doing so I am pointing to what must be the case by virtue of the way we use words and attendant ideas. That which holds “in principle” is either necessarily true or else its denial does violence to those shared human experiences and intuitions that we depend on in order to have a discussion. Arguments from what is true “in principle” are the most forceful that anyone can make.

Our moral and rational senses are not identical, but they are so closely related that they can be brought together as the basis for a multipronged argument, the Argument from Normativity. *Normativity* denotes objective standards or *norms* for the way things ought to be as opposed to the way things simply are. Norms are the basis for value judgments. Whatever strengths my particular version of the Argument from Normativity may have must be credited to Lewis and others whose rational defense of the Christian faith inspired it; its weaknesses belong on my doorstep alone.

Two bible texts set the stage for what follows. The first is John 1:9, which describes God's eternal Son, the Logos, as the light that comes into the world and enlightens every man. My premise is that every rational human being does indeed have shining within them, no matter how dimly, a light of reason (Greek, *logos*) and conscience that originates outside the physical world.

The second text is Romans 7:3, where Paul says that he beholds within himself a war between his sinful inclinations and “the law of my mind,” meaning conscience illuminated by God's revealed will.

The act of looking within oneself, not by physical sight but through thought, is called introspection. This ability we have to turn inward to “behold” at least in part the workings of our minds and hearts will turn out to be of key importance in the essays that follow.