

THE ARGUMENT FROM REASON

John M. DePoe

Why does reason exist? Where does the "furniture" (i.e., logic, propositions, modality, etc.) of rationality come from? These are strange questions, but they are important ones. We use reasoning all the time. We rely on logical principles every day for decisions ranging from the trivial to the momentous. What accounts for these fundamental concepts that we depend upon for our day-to-day living? Everyone agrees that Christian theism can readily account for these entities. Some Christians, however, claim that naturalism, the leading atheistic rival to theism, cannot account for the furniture of rationality. Indeed, they claim that the existence of rational thought as we know it is evidence for the existence of God. This is what is known as "the argument from reason."

C. S. Lewis formulated one type of argument from reason in his book [Miracles](#). In chapter three, Lewis states his cardinal difficulty with naturalism:

All possible knowledge, then, depends on the validity of reasoning. If the feeling of certainty which we express by words like *must be* and *therefore* and *since* is a real perception of how things outside our own minds really "must" be, well and good. But if this certainty is merely a feeling *in* our own minds and not a genuine insight into realities beyond them--if it merely represents the way our minds happen to work, then we can have no knowledge.

Lewis believes that naturalism cannot account for rationality. Lewis writes that naturalism "discredits our processes of reasoning or at least reduces their credit to such a humble level that it can no longer support Naturalism itself." Keep in mind that naturalism is a worldview that requires all existing entities to be physical entities or reducible to entities in the physical world. As Lewis sees it, naturalism cannot give the right kind of **causes** necessary for rational thought to exist. Physical entities can *cause* things to happen in a "cause and effect" manner--like when salt *causes* slugs to melt. Physical entities cannot, however, account for rational *causes* or reasons, which Lewis refers to as "ground and consequent." These rational causes explain the *reasons* why one holds some belief.

The problem for naturalism, according to Lewis, is that rationality requires rational causes, which it cannot account for. For example, a naturalist could explain someone's belief entirely in terms of behaviorist

psychology (all these factors *caused* this person to hold this belief), but it cannot analyze the rational causes that support someone's belief. In order to do that, one needs something more than the physical world. In fact, naturalism describes all beliefs in terms of physical, natural causes, which in turn, has no room for mental causes. Lewis closes the third chapter of *Miracles* with this conclusion:

Reason is given before Nature and on reason our concept of Nature depends. Our acts of inference are prior to our picture of Nature almost as the telephone is prior to the friend's voice we hear by it. When we try to fit these acts into the picture of nature we fail. The item which we put into that picture and label "Reason" always turns out to be somehow different from the reason we ourselves are enjoying and exercising as we put it in. [. . .] But the imagined thinking which we put into the picture depends—because our whole idea of Nature depends—on thinking we actually doing, not *vice versa*. This is the prime reality, on which the attribution of reality to anything else rests. If it won't fit into Nature, we can't help it. We will certainly not, on that account, give it up. If we do, we should be giving up Nature too.

J. P. Moreland has suggested another way to think of the argument from reason. In his [Scaling the Secular City](#) (pages 92-96), Moreland argues that naturalism is self-defeating insofar as it claims that we can rationally affirm it. He writes:

The world could have had nothing but matter in it. But if one claims to know that physicalism is true, or embrace it for good reasons, if one claims that it is rational position which should be chosen on the basis of evidence, then this claim is self-refuting. This is so because physicalism seems to deny the possibility of rationality. (p. 92)

According to Moreland there are five factors that are needed for rationality that naturalism cannot account for (see pages 92-96). (1) Minds must have intentionality capable of having thoughts *about* and *directed* towards things in the world. (2) The reasons, propositions, thoughts, laws of logic, and truth must exist and be accessible to people's minds and thought processes. (3) One must be able to "see" how logical arguments are cogent—this means recognizing the flow and cogency of the argument, not just being physically caused to believe something. (4) An enduring self is required to follow an argument over an extended period of time, seeing the argument flow from beginning to end. (5) Some type of agent causation (that is irreconcilable with physical determinism) is needed for personal reflection and a rational evaluation of arguments. Naturalism cannot account for these five factors. Most of them require an immaterial mind that operates apart from deterministic causation that occurs in chemical brain-states. Moreover, Moreland revisits similar distinctions made by C. S. Lewis about the need for rational causes, not just physical causes, for a belief to be cause rationally. Finally, Moreland introduces that naturalism doesn't have a robust metaphysical worldview that permits non-physical tools required for rationality (e.g., reasons, propositions,

laws of logic, etc.). Theism easily accommodates all of these factors for rationality. Therefore, theism is more plausible than naturalism on the grounds of rationality.

The argument from reason is perhaps most clearly presented in Victor Reppert's book, [C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea](#). Reppert spells out a number of ways to formulate the argument from reason. His arguments move in three steps: (1) show that reason and rationality are fundamental, undeniable aspects of our existence; (2) demonstrate that rational inferences require a type of dualism (physical causes and non-physical reasons); and (3) argue that theism is necessary to account for these aspects of rationality. In favor of (1) Reppert points to nine factors: (a) states of minds have "about-ness" or intentionality; (b) thoughts and beliefs are true or false; (c) human beings can be in the condition of accepting, rejecting, or suspending belief about propositions; (d) logical laws exist; (e) humans are capable of apprehending these laws; (f) accepting the truth of a proposition plays a crucial causal role in producing other beliefs, and the propositional content of mental states is relevant to the playing of this causal role; (g) the apprehension of logical laws plays a causal role in the acceptance of a conclusion as true; (h) the same individual entertains thoughts of the premises and then draws the conclusion; (i) our processes of reasoning provide us with a systematically reliable way of understanding the world around us. Not only does he show that the nine reasons stated above are facts about our existence that show rationality is undeniable to our existence, but naturalism cannot account for any of these nine reasons!

Reppert's second move, to demonstrate that rational inferences require a type of dualism is tied directly with C. S. Lewis's argument. Reppert's point is stated clearly in the following excerpt:

If the physical realm is causally closed, then it looks on the face of things as if it will go in its merry way regardless of what mental states exist, and if this is the case, then mental states simply do not matter with respect to what events are caused in the physical world. (p. 89)

The final step in Reppert's argument shows that theism is necessary to account for the aforementioned aspects of rationality. Matter cannot be the fundamental essence of the universe, if we are going to claim to be rational. A rational mind must be the keystone of a rational world. Theism claims that a rational mind is the foundation for the world. This postulate accounts for the inescapable aspects of rationality that permeate our existence. Naturalism cannot account for rationality.

"Rationality" is a serious problem for naturalists. Theism, however, readily accounts for rationality. Naturalism is self-defeating insofar as it affirms there is something rational. Until it is demonstrated (1) that there is no such thing as rationality; or (2) naturalism can provide the metaphysical depth to account for rationality; or (3) that theism equally cannot account for rationality. Otherwise, it seems that theism has an explanatory edge over naturalism.

BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

- C. S. Lewis, [Miracles](#). An excellent examination of the philosophical assumptions against miracles. Includes a scathing critique of naturalism. Chapter three contains the main portion of the argument from reason.
- Victor Reppert, [C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea](#). A brilliant analysis of the argument from reason and naturalism's attempt to deal with it. Also includes some excellent advice and background to reading/using Lewis as a philosopher.
- Angus Menuge, [Agents Under Fire](#).
- William Hasker, [The Emergent Self](#). This is a devastating critique of the metaphysical inadequacies of naturalism. Would strongly recommend to those in need of rigorous philosophical arguments against naturalism.
- J. P. Moreland, [Scaling the Secular City: a Defense of Christianity](#). Chapter 3, "The Argument from Mind," contains a number of insights that parallel the argument from reason. An excellent introductory resource to see the failures of naturalism.