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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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The Night C.S. Lewis Lost a Debate

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Introduction

The death of Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe on January 5, 2001 marked the passing of one of the twentieth century's most noteworthy analytical philosophers. For those familiar with the writings of C. S. Lewis, it also called to mind one of the few times Lewis admitted defeat in a debate. Specifically, Anscombe's 1948 critique of chapter 3 of Lewis's book *Miracles* has become the stuff of literary legend. [1]

The following essay consists of three points and a conclusion. The first portion summarizes Lewis's argument against philosophical naturalism found in chapter three of *Miracles*. [2] A summary of Anscombe's objections to Lewis's argument comprises the second part. [3] Section three takes note of Lewis's initial response to Anscombe's objections, and how he later revised his argument in light of her criticisms. [4] A brief conclusion will evaluate to what extent Anscombe's critique may have undermined Lewis's original case against philosophical naturalism, or strengthened his revised argument.

1. The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist

Lewis's 1947 edition of *Miracles* may be viewed as a sequel to his earlier works *The Abolition of Man* [5] and *That Hideous Strength*. [6] Whereas these two books were polemics against philosophical naturalism, *Miracles* takes the next logical step by seeking to make a case for philosophical supernaturalism. To make such a

do, insists Lewis. Instead of attributing knowledge to "rational causes" (i.e., the activity of a human mind which apprehends reality via sense perceptions), naturalism teaches (in words of J. B. S. Haldane) that "mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain." Such a process is indeed a cause-effect relationship, but one which Lewis labels "irrational causes," since under this scenario our thoughts are merely materialistic effects caused by atoms in the brain. If this be the case, however, we have no reason to suppose that our beliefs are *true*. Rather, our beliefs simply *are*. But this in turn means "I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms" (p. 28f.). The naturalistic theory that all mental processes are that naturalism is an inadequate philosophy. Lewis endeavors to do so by arguing that a purely naturalistic worldview is ultimately incoherent, in that it fails to explain how we can know anything at all. [7]

Lewis begins by defining "Naturalism" as "the doctrine that only Nature—the whole interlocked system—exists" and that therefore everything we experience can in principle "be explicable . . . as a necessary product of the system" (p. 23). At the same time, however, it "is clear that everything we know, beyond our own immediate sensations, is inferred from those sensations" (p. 25). Such inferences are therefore not in themselves mere sensations, but a form of reasoning. "All possible knowledge, then, depends upon the validity of reasoning . . . no account of the universe can be true unless that account leaves it possible for our thinking to be real insight" (p. 26).

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But this is what naturalism does not do, insists Lewis. Instead of attributing knowledge to "rational causes" (i.e., the activity of a human mind which apprehends reality via sense perceptions), naturalism teaches (in words of J. B. S. Haldane) that "mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain." Such a process is indeed a cause-effect relationship, but one which Lewis labels "irrational causes," since under this scenario our thoughts are merely materialistic effects caused by atoms in the brain. If this be the case, however, we have no reason to suppose that our beliefs are *true*. Rather, our beliefs simply *are*. But this in turn means "I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms" (p. 28f.). The naturalistic theory that all mental processes are merely caused by the irrational movement of atoms in our brain is therefore self-contradictory.

2. Anscombe's Critique of Lewis's Objections of Naturalism

The following year, in a meeting of the Socratic Club at Oxford University, Elizabeth Anscombe responded to Lewis's argument that naturalism was self-contradictory in that it undermines the possibility of valid reasoning. Her reply was a carefully-crafted (though at times turgid) exercise in linguistic philosophy of the sort that was quickly becoming fashionable throughout Europe, [8] but was never embraced by Lewis.

Anscombe set forth major bones of contention against two terms used by Lewis: "validity" and "irrational causes." In each case, she argued, Lewis's use of language was ambiguous, thereby defeating the force of his arguments.

With regard to Lewis's references to the "validity of reason" Anscombe argued

that it does not necessarily follow that arguments and conclusions based purely on a materialistic view of human thought are invalid. To the contrary:

Whether [the materialist's] conclusions are rational or irrational is settled by considering the chain of reasoning that he gives and whether his conclusions follow from it. When we are giving a causal account of his thought, e.g. an account of the physiological processes which issue in the utterance of his reasoning, we are not considering his utterances from the point of view of evidence, reasoning, valid argument, truth, at all; we are considering them merely as events. . . . Even though all human activity, including the production of opinions and arguments, were explained naturalistically, that could have no bearing on "the validity of reasoning" i.e. on the question of whether a piece of reasoning is valid or not. Here I am speaking of "reason" in a non-psychological sense, in which "a reason" is what proves a conclusion. If we have before us a piece of writing which argues for an opinion, we can discuss the question: "Is it good reasoning?" without concerning ourselves with the circumstances of its production at all. [9]

This brings us to Anscombe's second objection, namely, that Lewis had equated the term "irrational cause" with "non-rational cause." In so doing, she replied, "you are led to imagine that if the naturalist hypothesis . . . were true, human thought would all be explained away as invalid." The previous paragraph noted her critique of Lewis's notions of validity and invalidity. Now we turn to the heart of the matter: namely, that Lewis's arguments were seriously impaired because he tended to confuse "the concepts of cause and reason . . . because of the ambiguity of such expres-

sions as 'because' and 'explanation.'" [10]

A key element of her critique was to distinguish between two senses of the word "because." This word can be used to refer either to *motives* or to *causal laws*. In the former instance, says Anscombe, "I am not making a *causal* enquiry at all: I am asking for grounds, not causes." [11] To say "because" in the sense of explaining our *reasons* ("grounds") for doing something is not the same as saying "because" and in the scientific language of material "cause" and effect.

On the basis of her analysis of "because" as a *ground* or motive for behavior, and "because" as a *cause* of a material effect, Anscombe noted:

The naturalistic hypothesis is that causal laws could be discovered which could be successfully applied to all human behaviour, including thought. If such laws were discovered they would not shew that a man's reasons were not his reasons; for a man who is explaining his reasons is not giving a causal account at all. "Causes", in the scientific sense in which this word is used when we speak of causal laws, is to be explained in terms of observed regularities: but the declaration of one's reasons or motives is not founded on observation of regularities. "Reasons" or "motives" are what is elicited from someone whom we ask to explain himself. [12]

On the basis of her observation that "the declaration of one's reasons or motives is not founded on observation of regularities" (as opposed to scientific causes, which are so founded), Anscombe continued: "It appears to me that if a man has reasons, and they are good reasons, and they are genuinely his reasons, for thinking something—then his thought is rational, whatever causal statements we may make about him." [13]

She therefore concluded: "A causal explanation of a man's thought only reflects on its validity as an indication, if we know that opinions caused in that way are always or usually unreasonable." [14]

3. Lewis's Response to Anscombe's Critique

Lewis's initial reply to Anscombe [15] conceded two of her points. First, Lewis stated that "*valid* was a bad word for what I meant; *veridical* (or *verific* or *verif-erous*) would have been better." Second, he noted: "I also admit the cause and effect relation between events and the ground and consequent relation between propositions are distinct. Since English uses the word *because* of both, let us here use *Because CE* for the cause and effect relation . . . and *Because GC* for the ground and consequent relation."

Lewis went on to state, however, that "the sharper this distinction [between *CE* and *GC*] becomes the more my difficulty [with Naturalism] increases." The "difficulty" is that the Naturalist's view of human thought allows "because *CE*" to subsume "because *GC*" so that the latter is merely a subset or function of the former:

If an argument is to be verif-ic the conclusion must be related to the premises as consequent to ground, i.e. the conclusion is there because GC certain other propositions are true. On the other hand, our thinking the conclusion is an event and must be related to previous events as effect to cause, i.e. this act of thinking must occur because CE previous events have occurred. It would seem, therefore, that we never think the conclusion because GC it is the consequent of its grounds but only because CE certain previous events have happened. If so, it does not seem that the GC sequence makes us more likely to think the true con-

clusion than not. And this is very much what I meant by the difficulty in Naturalism.

This distinction between *because GC* and *because CE* became central to Lewis's revision of chapter 3 of *Miracles*. Now entitled "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism," [16] the revised argument was almost twice as long as the earlier version—thirty-one paragraphs versus sixteen in the original—and much more rigorously analytical. In this regard Anscombe's critique served a constructive purpose. (Lewis did end up retaining the word "valid" to characterize reason and reasoning, however, his earlier reply to Anscombe notwithstanding.)

Lewis's revised argument added a third element to the twofold distinction between *because CE* and *because GC*. This third element was nothing less than the *human act of knowing anything*. Specifically,

An act of knowing must be determined, in a sense, solely by what is known; we must know it to be thus solely because it is thus. That is what knowing means. You may call this a Cause and Effect because, and call "being known" a mode of causation if you like. But it is a unique mode. The act of knowing has no doubt various conditions, without which it could not occur But its positive character must be determined by the truth it knows. If it were totally explicable from other sources it would cease to be knowledge Any thing which professes to explain our reasoning fully without introducing an act of knowing thus solely determined by what is known, is really a theory that there is no reasoning. [17]

But this is precisely "what Naturalism is bound to do" by its very nature, Lewis went on to say. This is because Naturalism reduces all events to a mechanistic cause-effect nexus of stimulus and re-

sponse. But such reductionism does not explain human knowledge. To the contrary,

The relation between response and stimulus is utterly different from that between knowledge and the truth known [k]nowledge is achieved by experiments and inferences from them, not by refinement of the response. It is not men with specially good eyes who know about light, but men who have studied the relevant sciences. [18]

Now the Naturalist will agree that we reach truths via inferences. And in so doing he will be right, Lewis affirms. But the question is not whether Naturalists employ inference, but *whether their account of the origins of human reason is consistent with the fact that all people employ inferences to reach conclusions they deem to be true*. Herein, says Lewis, lies the difference between the Naturalist and the Supernaturalist:

The difference I am submitting is that [the Naturalist] gives, and I do not, a history of the evolution of reason which is inconsistent with the claims the he and I both have to make for inference as we actually practice it. For [the Naturalist's] history is, and from the nature of the case can only be, an account, in Cause and Effect terms, of how people came to think the way they do. And this of course leaves in the air the quite different question of how they could possibly be justified in so thinking. This imposes on [the Naturalist] the very embarrassing task of trying to show how the evolutionary product which he has described could also be a power of 'seeing' truths. [19]

But such a task is self-defeating and thus "absurd," as Lewis puts it, since any argument set forth by the Naturalist must by

definition set forth inferences, which argue that something is true *because GC*. But the Naturalist's Cause and Effect worldview leaves room only for *because CE*. Such attempts to make "reason" the end product of a chain of Cause and Effect turns the human experience upside down, placing nature before reason and thus reducing inferences to mere products of nature. [20]

The Theist, on the other hand, views reason—i.e., "the reason of God"—as "older than Nature" and the cause of the orderliness of Nature, which in turn provides the foundation for all reasoning and knowing. From this it follows that:

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 while we put it in. [21]

And if naturalists continue to insist that our "imagined thinking" is merely an "evolutionary phenomenon," it is good to remember that all such "imagined thinking" depends "on the thinking we are actually doing, not vice-versa." [22] To employ an old proverb, one cannot have one's cake and eat it too.

Lewis's final three sentences, which echo themes found in the last paragraph of his *The Abolition of Man*, [23] underscore the priority of Reason over Nature:

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. [24]

4. Conclusion

Elizabeth Anscombe's critique of C.S. Lewis's third chapter of *Miracles* focused on his use of the word "valid" and his discussion of causality. In each case Lewis's initial reply conceded her points. In section 3 of this essay we noted how Anscombe's linguistic analysis of the word "because" motivated Lewis to rewrite the third chapter of *Miracles* in a more rigorously philosophical manner that included extensive discussion of the difference between a "cause" on the one hand and a "ground" on the other. This aspect of the Lewis/Anscombe debate is an exemplary instance of peer review of scholarship at its best. Lewis's original argument against Naturalism contained flaws (though I personally believe it still inflicted serious damage to the Naturalistic worldview), [25] and Anscombe's critique helped make it stronger, if at points more complex for the lay reader.

On the other hand, it is worth repeating that Lewis did *not* reject the words "valid" and "validity" in his rewrite of chapter 3 of *Miracles*. In retaining this common and flexible word (as opposed to opting for the more ponderous "veridical," "verific" or "veriferous"), Lewis clearly renounced his initial repentance over the use of "valid."

Nowhere in his revision of *Miracles* chapter 3 does Lewis explain why he retained the word "valid." One can only guess at his reasons for so doing, so I shall conclude by venturing such a guess: namely, that upon further reflection Lewis realized that he and Anscombe spoke of "validity" in two somewhat different but equally valid (!) senses.

Specifically, Anscombe spoke of "validity of reason" in a *purely formal*

sense—i.e., arguments are “valid” in the sense of being *internally coherent*, no matter what their source. For example, “A is A” is a “valid” statement, no matter how we may have “really” arrived at it (whether by means of external referents or atoms in our brain). Anscombe, in the tradition of her mentor Wittgenstein, engages in *linguistic analysis*. Her use of the word “reason” would be clearer had she said “reasoning.” That is, her use of “reason” is *nominalistic*.

Lewis, on the other hand, spoke of “the validity of reason,” i.e., not merely whether formal arguments are internally coherent, but whether our inferences from sense perceptions (i.e., our “reason”) disclose objective referents *outside of our heads*. Lewis’s use of “reason” could thus be termed *realistic*.

One could express this contrast between Anscombe’s and Lewis’s respective uses of “validity” is yet another way: Is the *brain* all there is? Or do human beings possess a rational *mind* as well? [26] But this question cannot be answered descriptively purely from within the canons of formal logic, any more than one can “picture in a picture *how* a picture a picture pictures what it pictures,” to use the language of Anscombe’s philosophical mentor Ludwig Wittgenstein. [27]

In like manner, one cannot state in a statement *how* a statement is related to that to which it refers. The fact that one cannot do so, however, does not deny the existence of objective referents external to statements we make on the basis of what our minds perceive and conceive. For when we act upon the assumption that statements based upon our percepts and concepts have valid counterparts in an external world, we find that this assumption makes sense of the world as we know it, and is not self-contradictory in the way Lewis described the inherent epistemological flaw of phi-

losophical naturalism in both *The Abolition of Man* [28] and chapter three of *Miracles*.

Notes

- 1 See e.g. John M. Dolan, “G. E. M. Anscombe: Living the Truth,” *First Things* Number 113 (May 2001), 11f., who opines that Anscombe “trounced” Lewis. On the other hand, George Sayer notes that Anscombe herself was not convinced she had refuted Lewis’s main argument in chapter 3 of *Miracles*. See Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), 307f.
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), chapter 3, “The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist.”
- 3 G. E. M. Anscombe, “A Reply to Mr. C. S. Lewis’ Argument That ‘Naturalism’ Is Self-Refuting.” *Socratic Digest* Number 4 (1948), 7-15.
- 4 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1974), chapter 3, “The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism.”
- 5 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1947).
- 6 C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Collier, 1946).
- 7 One could view *Miracles* as both exposition and implications of the final paragraph of *The Abolition of Man*.
- 8 Anscombe’s close association with Ludwig Wittgenstein, many of whose works

she translated and edited, no doubt affected the approach she used in her reply to Lewis. See e.g. Dolan, *op. cit.* above, note 1.

9 *Socratic Digest* Number 4, 10f.

10 *Ibid.* 11.

11 *Ibid.* 12

12 *Ibid.* 13

13 *Ibid.* Anscombe expounds further on the various nuances of "cause" on page 14.

14 *Ibid.* 15

15 Summarized in *Socratic Digest* Number 4, 15f.

16 See above note 4.

17 "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism," *Miracles* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1974), 26f.

18 *Ibid.* 28f.

19 *Ibid.* 31f.

20 *Ibid.* 32ff.

21 *Ibid.* 36

22 *Ibid.* 34ff.

23 *The Abolition of Man* 91. The final paragraph reads: "But you cannot go on 'explaining away' for ever: you will find you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to 'see through' first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see."

24 *Miracles* (1974), 36

25 The person Lewis refers to as the "Naturalist" is, in my judgment, in the same position as the moral relativist, at least in one respect. To quote the late Edward John Carnell: "that which is indispensable to a given condition cannot meaningfully be repudiated by one who stands within the privileges of that condition." *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 65; emphasis Carnell's. This is analogous to what Lewis is saying regarding the philosophical naturalist: At one and the same time the naturalist denies the existence of the very conditions which make human reason an enterprise that can stand over against the rest of the cosmos and arrive at conclusions which are more than merely random physical effects upon our brains.

26 The question of whether humans possess a "mind" as well as a "brain" has

sparked lively debate in recent years. See e.g. Stanley Kurtz, "No Brainer" *National Review Online* June 25, 2001. See also Michael Polanyi's discussions of "mind" and "brain" in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago, 1958), cf. index references and especially chapter 8, "The Logic of Affirmation."

27 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1922), 4.12f.

28 See note 23.