The Cardinal Difficulty for Naturalism
C.S. Lewis’ Argument Reconsidered in Light of Peter van Inwagen’s Critique

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ABSTRACT
Peter van Inwagen maintains that C.S. Lewis’ argument against naturalism in Miracles fails, since Lewis has not shown that ‘Naturalism is inconsistent with ... the thesis that some of our beliefs are based on or grounded in reasoning’. In this article, Marcel Sarot shows that C.S. Lewis could not possibly have intended to argue for the inconsistency van Inwagen seems to exact, because that would amount to ‘Bulverism’, a position Lewis opposes. Furthermore, Sarot argues that Lewis did show that naturalism makes the thesis that our beliefs are based on or grounded in reasoning less likely. This, Sarot argues, is enough to make Lewis’ argument against naturalism valid.

Introduction

Academically speaking, we live in the age of naturalism. As the North-American National Science Teachers Association has it: ‘Science, by definition, is limited to naturalistic methods and, as such, is precluded from using supernatural elements in the production of scientific knowledge.’ Naturalism, however, makes it impossible to acknowledge miracles. John Macquarrie explains this neatly:

‘The traditional conception of miracle is irreconcilable with our understanding of ... science.... Science proceeds on the

assumption that whatever events occur in the world can be accounted for in terms of other events that also belong within the world; and if on some occasions we are unable to give a complete account of some happening ... the scientific conviction is that further research will bring to light further factors in the situation, but factors that turn out to be just as immanent and this-worldly as those already known.\footnote{John Macquarrie, \textit{Principles of Christian Theology} (London: SCM Press, revd. ed. 1977), 248}

In recent years, naturalism has been promoted by influential thinkers like Stephen W. Hawking, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, but it was the dominant view already when C.S. Lewis wrote his book on miracles. C.S. Lewis was aware of the growing dominance of naturalism in his time and also saw clearly that naturalism is incompatible with belief in miracles: ‘if Naturalism is true, then we do know in advance that miracles are impossible: nothing can come into Nature from the outside because there is nothing outside to come in, Nature being everything.’\footnote{C.S. Lewis, \textit{Miracles: A Preliminary Study} (Glasgow: Collins 1982), 14.} It does not come as a surprise, then, that a refutation of naturalism takes centre stage in \textit{Miracles} and is, indeed, essential to its argument. When Peter Prof. van Inwagen, therefore, argues that C.S. Lewis’ argument against naturalism in the third chapter of the revised edition of his book \textit{Miracles} fails, this is not the exposition of a minor error in Lewis argument, but an attack on the very heart of it. Lewis’ argument in \textit{Miracles} stands or falls with his refutation of naturalism. And since naturalism has gained rather than lost popularity since Lewis’ attempt at refutation, this attempt has lost nothing of its importance. However, re-reading Lewis, I believe that Prof. van Inwagen’s response rests at least partly on a misreading of Lewis. In the present contribution, I would therefore like to re-consider Lewis’ argument in the light of Prof. van Inwagen’s critique.

Let me begin by providing a very brief summary of Prof. van Inwagen’s reconstruction of Lewis’ argument. Naturalism is the
position that nature (the cosmos, the physical universe) is all there is. If that is indeed the case, everything is governed by the laws of nature (since there is nothing outside of the physical universe). This also applies to our thoughts and beliefs. Our beliefs, then, are events that are caused. Therefore they cannot be based on reasoning. Conclusion: on naturalism, our beliefs are not rational but non-rational. This undermines naturalism, since the belief in naturalism itself cannot be a rational belief if naturalism is true.

Prof. van Inwagen's argument against Lewis may be summarised as follows. It is conceivable that a belief is both caused and held for reasons. Therefore, a belief being caused and the same belief being rational are not incompatible. If a belief being physically caused does not preclude that belief being rational, however, the fact that all beliefs are physically caused (as implied by naturalism) does not imply that all our thoughts are non-rational. Prof. van Inwagen subsequently concedes that he has not proven that ‘Naturalism is consistent with (some of) our beliefs being grounded in reasoning’ (p. 37), but claims that he need not do so. Since he merely aims to prove that ‘Lewis has not shown that – has not even given us any reason to believe that – Naturalism is inconsistent with … the thesis that some of our beliefs are based on or grounded in reasoning’

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4 As Arend Smilde shows in his contribution to this special issue, one of the main changes Lewis introduced into the revised 1960 edition of *Miracles* is the substitution of ‘non-rational’ for ‘irrational’. In order to behave irrationally, one needs cognitive skills. Events have no cognitive skills and do not fall into the category of things that can be either rational or irrational. They are non-rational. That Lewis’ use of ‘irrational’ in the original edition of *Miracles* was flawed was pointed out to him in 1948 by Elisabeth Anscombe, ‘A Reply to Mr C. S. Lewis’s Argument that “Naturalism” is Self-Refuting’, *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 224–232, esp. 224–226. That Lewis indeed intended this to be the major improvement in the revised edition of *Miracles* is also shown by his letter to Kenneth R.W. Brewer of 9 May 1962, included in vol. 3 of Lewis’ *Collected Letters* edited by Hooper. I am grateful to Mr. Smilde for drawing my attention to Prof. van Inwagen’s article and for various helpful discussions on *Miracles*.

5 The figures between brackets in the text refer to Prof. van Inwagen, ‘C.S. Lewis’ Argument’ in the present volume.
As Prof. van Inwagen points out, Lewis’ own statement of his argument against naturalism rests on his distinction between the cause-effect ‘because’ and the ground-consequent ‘because’. Lewis introduces this distinction by pointing out the different uses of ‘because’ in the following two sentences:

‘Grandfather is ill to-day because he ate lobster yesterday.’

‘Grandfather must be ill to-day because he hasn’t got up yet (and we know he is an invariably early riser when he is well).’

Lewis explains: ‘In the first sentence because indicates the relation of Cause and Effect: The eating made him ill. In the second, it indicates the relation of what logicians call Ground and Consequent. The old man’s late rising is not the cause of his disorder but the reason why we believe him to be disordered.’ In argumentation, each step is connected with the previous step by a ground-consequent relation. Only if this relation holds can our conclusions be trusted. In nature, events are connected with previous events by a cause-

6 C.S. Lewis, Miracles: A Preliminary Study (Glasgow: Collins 1982), 19.
effect relation. Naturalism holds that thoughts and beliefs are natural events that are connected by a cause-effect relation. Now we are only one step removed from the conclusion that thought and beliefs cannot be rational, and that step, Prof. van Inwagen assumes, is the following:

(1) If a thought is caused in the way a natural event is caused it cannot simultaneously be grounded in the way the conclusion of an argument is grounded.

The question then becomes: On what grounds does Lewis accept (1)? On no grounds whatsoever, according to Prof. van Inwagen. Lewis does not argue the incompatibility of being grounded and being caused, but assumes it: ‘The central premise of Lewis’ argument is that an explanation of a belief fact in terms of “the Cause-Effect ‘because’” precludes any explanation of that fact in terms of “the Ground-Consequent ‘because’”’ (p. 31; italics added). Prof. van Inwagen does not attempt to argue for his view that Lewis holds the incompatibility of being grounded and being caused as a premise. He merely claims it.8

Let me comment here that it is this assumption that Lewis holds (1) as a premise that makes it relatively easy for Prof. van Inwagen to refute Lewis’ argument. If a claim is the conclusion of an argument, one has to show that the argument fails in order to undermine the claim. If a claim is the premise of an argument, one can show the whole argument to be shaky merely by throwing doubt on that claim. Prof. van Inwagen throws doubt on (1) by means of a counter-example. He compares two possible answers to the question ‘Why do you think the earth is round?’

(A) Because the edge of the shadow of the earth on the moon

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7 Prof. van Inwagen stipulates the following definition of ‘belief fact’: ‘If a person has a certain belief, let us call the fact that that person has that belief a “belief fact”. For example, the fact that I believe that Lewis was a Cambridge professor is a belief fact’. Prof. van Inwagen, ‘C.S. Lewis’ Argument’, pp. 30-31.

8 He adds a note, but that note does not refer to Lewis but comments on the precise way in which Prof. van Inwagen understands ‘explanation’.
during a partial lunar eclipse is always an arc of a circle – no matter where the moon is in the sky. And only a ball casts a circular shadow from every angle.

(B) Because the way the universe was in the remote past and the laws of physics made it inevitable that I should now have that belief. (p. 32)

The question is: is (A) (which is an explanation in terms of grounds) incompatible with (B) (which is an explanation in terms of causes)? In Prof. van Inwagen’s own words: ‘Does the existence of a ‘Cause-effect “because”’ explanation of a belief fact in every case preclude there being a ‘Ground-consequent “because”’ explanation of that belief fact?’ (p. 33; italics PvI’s) It is important to note here the ‘in every case’: Prof. van Inwagen needs only one plausible counter-example to refute (1). The problem is, that he cannot prove the existence of any counter-example, because naturalism cannot be proven and as a result type-B claims (claims like that made in (B) above) cannot be proven. He ends up by making a weaker claim concerning his counter-example: ‘We have no reason to suppose that if a certain belief fact is caused by various other belief facts (with the same subject), its being so caused precludes its having a “type A explanation”’ (p. 35). In short, Prof. van Inwagen does not prove Lewis’ alleged premise to be untrue; he merely shows that one can think of counter-examples that, if they obtained in reality, would be incompatible with (1). And since, according to Prof. van Inwagen, Lewis does nothing to show that they do not obtain, his argument rests on a shaky premise (1) and his conclusion is shaky as well. Lewis failed to show that naturalism is incompatible with rationality.
Lewis’ Argument Restated and Vindicated

I will now show that

(2) There is no reason to hold that Lewis accepts (1)

(3) There is reason to hold that he accepts a mitigated version of (1), (1')

(4) (1'), contrary to (1), is not undermined by Prof. van Inwagen’s argument

(5) (1') is not a premise of Lewis’ argument, since he supports it by reasons.

For me, these reasons are compelling. The aim of this article, therefore, is not merely to defend one of the great Christian apologists of the recent past against a misdirected counterargument, but also to support his arguments against naturalism as still worth considering in the present.

Since Lewis nowhere explicitly states or defends (1), then, can we find out whether he supports it or not? I would like to argue that we can. Lewis states with respect to explanation in terms of a natural cause and explanation in terms of grounds that ‘we behave in disputation as if they were mutually exclusive.’

The mere existence of causes for a belief is popularly treated as raising a presumption that it is groundless, and the most popular way of discrediting a person’s opinions is to explain them causally—“You say that because (Cause and Effect) you are a capitalist, or a hypochondriac, or a mere man, or only a woman.”

Lewis claims here that when we know that a view is caused, e.g., by undergoing hypnosis, drinking too much, or taking antidepressants, this counts against taking this view as a view grounded in arguments.

9 Lewis, Miracles, 20.
He does not claim that that explanation in terms of a natural cause is incompatible with explanation in terms of grounds. Why not? Because he does not believe so. That this is indeed the case, can easily be seen from his opposition against Bulverism, the logical fallacy one commits by explaining why (Cause and Effect) one’s opponent holds a certain position and assuming that this explanation suffices to show him or her wrong. In Lewis’ own words:

You must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong. The modern method is to assume without discussion that he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly. In the course of the last fifteen years I have found this vice so common that I have had to invent a name for it. I call it Bulverism. Some day I am going to write the biography of its imaginary inventor, Ezekiel Bulver, whose destiny was determined at the age of five when he heard his mother say to his father – who had been maintaining that two sides of a triangle were together greater than the third – ‘Oh, you say that because you are a man’. ‘At that moment’, E. Bulver assures us, ‘there flashed across my opening mind the great truth that refutation is no necessary part of argument. Assume that your opponent is wrong, and then explain his error, and the world will be at your feet. Attempt to prove that he is wrong or (worse still) try to find out whether he is wrong or right, and the national dynamism of our age will thrust you to the wall’. That is how Bulver became one of the makers of the Twentieth Century.  

C.S. Lewis could only accept (1) at the price of giving up his opposition to Bulverism; there is no indication that he ever did so, however.

We understand by now why Lewis did not claim that explanation in terms of a natural cause and explanation in terms of grounds are

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mutually exclusive. He phrases his position cautiously: ‘we behave in disputation as if they were mutually exclusive.’ This counterfactual formulation suggests that instead of (1), Lewis supports

(1’) If a thought is caused in the way a natural event is caused, it is not likely to be grounded in the way the conclusion of an argument is grounded.

(1’) has the following advantages over (1). Firstly, by claiming incompatibility, Lewis would make himself very vulnerable to counterexamples. Alcohol does not sit well with rational argumentation, but that does not mean that no one under the influence of alcohol will ever have good reasons for some particular view. Exit incompatibility. Lewis would have expected that people like Prof. van Inwagen would have come up with counter-examples. And secondly, and not unimportantly for Lewis, (1’) is compatible with his critique of Bulverism in that it still allows him to claim that a position cannot be rejected on the mere ground that its adoption can be causally explained. As Victor Reppert has argued, ‘One can criticize Bulverism without committing oneself to Anscombe’s implausible thesis that how a belief is formed is irrelevant to how the belief is justified.’

Moreover, (1’) suffices to support Lewis’ argument against naturalism. All Lewis needs in order to show that naturalism undermines rationalism is the claim that if a thought is caused, it is not likely to be grounded. As soon as we accept this claim, naturalism through its claim that all our thoughts are caused will lead to a distrust of our own thoughts. By way of support for (1’), Lewis merely needs to show that there is nothing in causation that makes it verific, in other words that the process of causation is such that it is unlikely to yield grounded knowledge. This is exactly what he does by arguing that ‘the two systems [that of ground-consequence

and that of cause-effect are wholly distinct.'

He continues: ‘To be caused is not to be proved. Wishful thinkings, prejudices, and the delusions of madness, are all caused, but they are ungrounded.’

Moreover, Lewis argues – as we have seen above – we generally take being caused as a sign of not being well-grounded.

A little bit further on, Lewis provides still another argument. There he asks what makes belief into knowledge and subsequently argues that this knowledge-generating attribute is absent from the process of causation. What, according to Lewis, is the difference between believing something and knowing something? Beliefs generally ‘are “about” something other than themselves.’ If a belief is to count as knowledge, it ‘must be determined … solely by what is known’, i.e. by what it is about. My belief that my wife is at home can count as knowledge if it is caused by seeing, hearing, etc. that my wife is at home, and not if it is caused by something else (e.g., alcohol, or the novel I am currently reading). So it is the fact that beliefs are about something (philosophers would be inclined to say: that they are intentional), that makes it possible for beliefs to be true. This does not apply to events in general: ‘Events in general are not “about” anything’ and therefore ‘cannot be true or false.’

It has by now become clear that Lewis does support (1’) by argument, and does not merely assert it as a premise. The final question we need to ask is: To what extent is (1’) undermined by counterexamples like that of Prof. van Inwagen? If (1’) is true, counterexamples are to be expected. The number of counterexamples depends upon the degree to which it is unlikely

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16 Since, as Arend Smilde shows elsewhere in this issue, Lewis introduces the notion of aboutness only in the revised edition of *Miracles*, and since the revision was primarily prompted by Anscombe’s critique, it seems not unlikely that this notion was inspired by Anscombe’s *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957). I suggest that it is a way in which Lewis bows his respect to Anscombe.
that a thought that is caused like a natural event is caused, is also grounded in the way the conclusion of an argument is grounded. I do not want to quibble about this, and I am willing to admit – as I think Lewis would have admitted – that this is not very unlikely. There will be counter-examples, then, even though as a general rule, one would not expect a thought that is caused in the way a natural event is caused to be grounded in the way the conclusion of an argument is grounded. Since counter-examples are to be expected, Prof. van Inwagen’s counter-examples do not succeed in undermining (1’). In order to do that, we would need a refutation of Lewis’ arguments in support of (1’).

Conclusion

In light of the above, Lewis’ argument can be re-stated in a way that is both closer to Lewis than Prof. van Inwagen’s restatement, and invulnerable to his objections: Naturalism is the position that nature (the cosmos, the physical universe) is all there is. If that is indeed the case, everything is governed by the laws of nature (since there is nothing outside of the physical universe). This also applies to our thoughts and beliefs. Our beliefs, then, are events that are caused. If a thought is caused in the way an event is caused, however, it is unlikely to be grounded in the way a conclusion from an argument is grounded. Therefore naturalism undermines belief in the rationality of our thoughts, and since naturalism itself belongs to our world of thoughts, naturalism undermines itself. According to Lewis, this is the ‘cardinal difficulty’ for naturalism.\(^{18}\) It is not the only difficulty, and in the remainder of Miracles, he notes more difficulties for naturalism.

\(^{18}\) The title of the revised chapter 3 of Miracles is: ‘The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism’ (italics added); Elisabeth Anscombe adds a ‘[sic]’ to that title (‘Introduction’, Collected Philosophical Papers, ix). The original title was ‘The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist’.
Though in *Miracles*, Lewis’ cardinal difficulty functions in the context of a longer and quite complex argument, I have discussed it as an independent argument. I feel justified in doing so by the role this argument has played in the subsequent discussion on naturalism. As I noted in the introduction, Lewis’ argument has lost nothing of its importance. It is not only still relevant, but it is also still referred to in the contemporary discussion.¹⁹ Alvin Plantinga, who is often considered the most important living champion of the argument, shows awareness of the fact that his argument ‘bears a good bit of similarity to’ C.S. Lewis’.²⁰ Plantinga has developed a new version of the argument, in which he inquires how probable it is that our cognitive faculties are reliable given naturalism and given the fact that our cognitive faculties are the result of an evolutionary process. Evolutionary processes, Plantinga argues, are supposed to lead to survival, not to truth. If our cognitive faculties have developed through an evolutionary process, then, they are geared towards survival. Does this mean they are geared towards truth as well? That depends on how they are connected with behaviour. It is conceivable that cognitions hardly influence behaviour; in that case, there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that our cognitive faculties have developed to become truth-producing faculties. Even if our cognitive faculties contribute to the genesis of behaviour, Plantinga shows, it is conceivable that false beliefs produce adaptive behaviour, and he produces counterintuitive but possible examples like that of Paul: ‘Perhaps Paul very much *likes* the idea of being eaten, but whenever he sees a tiger, always runs off looking for a better prospect because he thinks it unlikely that the tiger he sees will eat him.’²¹

This is a much simplified summary of Plantinga’s version of the argument; an adequate summary and discussion obviously goes

beyond the limits of this article.\textsuperscript{22} It suffices, however, to draw attention to two weaknesses in Plantinga’s argument, that do not in a similar way affect Lewis’ argument. Firstly, Plantinga’s argument does not focus on naturalism as such, but on naturalism combined with a specific theory, the theory of evolution. This means that (a) its scope is smaller, (b) the justification of Plantinga’s argument requires a discussion of all the intricacies of the theory of evolution and (c) if Plantinga’s argument succeeds, it is not naturalism that is defeated, but naturalism-cum-evolutionary theory. And, secondly, \textit{prima facie} it is probable that beliefs lead to behaviour (I take my umbrella with me only when I expect rain), and that true beliefs heighten the probability of survival, and Plantinga needs quite a number of counterintuitive examples to ‘strengthen’ his case. Altogether, Lewis’ argument is simpler, more elegant and more convincing, and has besides the advantage of targeting naturalism as such and leaving specific scientific theories out of consideration. Therefore, a defence of Lewis’s form of the argument has more than an archaeological interest; it is an argument that deserves to be taken seriously in the contemporary debate, more so perhaps than some of its current successors.

\textsuperscript{22} For detailed discussion of Plantinga’s argument, see James K. Beilby (ed), \textit{Naturalism Defeated?: Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism} (Thaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002).