

A Philosophical Journey through *Miracles*, the *Metaphysics*, and
the *Summa Contra Gentiles*

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Academic interests were almost completely nonexistent to me during my childhood. I did, however, develop a strong affinity for science. Science was more enjoyable to me than history, literature, and the other humanities because the performance of simple scientific experiments does not require the type of critical thinking that I used to loathe. After learning a scientific concept, I would simply walk outside or into my kitchen to personally confirm the basic theory I just learned. My sentiments were static for many years; science was tangible and exciting while the humanities were dull and esoteric. Nevertheless, my noetic pursuits were oriented toward philosophy soon after I picked up a copy of C.S. Lewis' *Miracles* during my senior year of high school. Although at the age of seventeen I was still largely indifferent to intellectual pursuits, I was mature enough to venture into unfamiliar academic territory. Lewis' argument against the rationality of metaphysical naturalism presented in chapter three of *Miracles* work captivated me.¹ How, asks Lewis, can our ability to rationally construct scientific or philosophical theories arise from any combination of non-rational entities, such as atoms?

¹ Lewis defines "metaphysical naturalism" as the belief that there is nothing beyond the "total system" of physical objects and processes (See *Miracles* in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 214). So defined, the naturalist may happily acknowledge the existence of potentially emergent phenomena (such as consciousness) as long as such emergent properties do not exist beyond the reach of physical description. It is notoriously difficult to define "physicality," but that need not concern us here.

After researching and analyzing this “Argument from Reason,” I was convinced that the existence of scientific reasoning was, surprisingly enough, evidence for the supernatural. My nascent intellectual curiosity was further awakened when I read Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and excerpts of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles* within a few months of encountering *Miracles*. Aristotle and Aquinas’ “Argument from Motion” hit me with an intellectual spell much akin to the one placed upon me by *Miracles*. The two classical thinkers are not merely arguing for supernaturalism; they trace the causal chain of motion in the physical world all the way back to a transcendent, Unmoved Mover. As I studied Aquinas and Aristotle, I noticed that Lewis utilizes a metaphysical cause-effect theory similar to the one that underpins the more traditional Argument from Motion to develop his own Argument from Reason. After months of research and discussion, I was led to believe that an examination of the rational inferences involved in science could end with a powerful argument for the existence of a nonphysical deity. A succinct presentation of the Arguments from Motion and Reason will allow me to draw out the implications of the arguments’ conclusions while tracing my journey from irreligious science-enthusiast to theistic student of science and philosophy.²

My first encounter with the Argument from Reason occurred in the opening chapters of *Miracles*.³ Philosopher Victor Reppert’s syllogistic presentation of Lewis’ original argument runs as follows:

² I will not present comprehensive apologies of the Arguments from Reason and Motion in such a brief paper. Victor Reppert’s *C.S. Lewis’ Dangerous Idea*, the “Argument from Reason” chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, and Michael Rea’s *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* contain the strongest presentations of the Argument from Reason. See Ed Feser’s *Aquinas* and Rudi te Velde’s *Aquinas on God* for compelling defenses of Aquinas’ First Way (i.e., the Argument from Motion).

³ I am grateful to my mentor and former professor, Dr. Robert Sloan Lee, for introducing me to Lewis as well as to philosophy in general.

- (1) No belief is rationally inferred if it can be fully explained in terms of non-rational causes.
- (2) If materialism [i.e., metaphysical naturalism] is true, then all beliefs can be fully explained in terms of non-rational causes.
- (3) Therefore, if naturalism is true, then no belief is rationally inferred.
- (4) If any thesis entails the conclusion that no belief is rationally inferred, then it should be rejected and its denial accepted.
- (5) Therefore, materialism should be rejected and its denial accepted.⁴

Let us briefly examine the argument's premises.

Being rather plausible, premises (2) and (4) require minimal comment. Premise (2) follows from the definition of "metaphysical naturalism," since physical objects and processes do not act for deliberate reasons. Premise (4) is derived from our intuitive and practical need for reasoning capabilities. Indeed, the resolute skeptic who denies premise (4) for arbitrary (as opposed to rational) reasons is implicitly throwing science, philosophy, history, or anything that requires reasoning out the window. Such a person gives every appearance of being beyond the reach of rational persuasion. The claim in (3) follows from (1) and (2), while the conclusion, which states that supernaturalism is true, is entailed by (3) and (4). The crucial premise is (1). Lewis' justification for premise (1) hinges on his distinction between two types of relationships: "Cause and Effect" relations and "Ground and Consequent" relations.⁵ Cause-effect relationships describe physical processes. Consider our sense of touch. The cause of the physiological aspect of our perception is a proximate object compressing the

⁴ C.S. Lewis' *Dangerous Idea*, 57-8.

⁵ *Miracles in The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 219.

mechanoreceptors within our skin and the effect is an electrochemical signal extending into our central nervous system.⁶ Ground-consequent relationships, on the other hand, encompass “logical relation[s] between beliefs or assertions.”⁷ When we study a logically valid argument, for example, we can see that the premises establish the putative truth of the conclusion. The key distinction between the two relationships is that one is capable of countenancing our rational thought processes, while the other does not have the conceptual resources to do so. The cause-effect relationship cannot explain reasoning processes because the initial steps in any form of reasoning do not cause us to think about the next logical step; rather, they can serve only as a basis for doing so. When a scientist posits a simple, coherent, explanatorily powerful, and empirically adequate scientific theory to account for a specific corpus of data, the data does not blindly force the scientist to create a certain theory. Nevertheless, as Lewis contends, if the reasoning process of the scientist were governed by the cause-effect relationship exemplified in all wholly physical events, then we should expect that the starting point of the process, namely, the data, would necessitate the formulation of a particular theory. However, this proposition is absurd; it is extremely implausible that numbers on a page literally cause scientists to propose a particular theory to account for that data as opposed to some other theory (or none at all). Moreover, scientists sometimes disagree on the theoretical explanations for a specified body of data.⁸ Put simply, premise (1) states that there is a

⁶ *Neuroscience for Dummies*, 69; *Biology: Fourth Edition*, 1028.

⁷ *Miracles in The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 219.

⁸ For example, there are four primary physical interpretations of quantum mechanics. Scientists generally agree on the mathematical equations governing the quantum world, but the physical meaning of the math is still debated. The four primary interpretations are hidden variables (DeBroglie-Bohm), no hidden variables (Copenhagen), choice has no consequences (Everett Many Worlds), and choice is nonexistent (Superdeterminism). Thus, the data does not entail a specific scientific interpretation. See James Sinclair, “At Home in the Multiverse?” in *Contending with Christianity’s Critics*, p. 16.

conceptual bridge between the non-rational, physical world and the rational, mental world.

Lewis submits that the naturalist cannot cross such a bridge with any amount of neurophysiology or causal gymnastics.⁹

Since I was familiar with the ins and outs of scientific inquiry when I first read *Miracles*, Lewis' allusion to scientific reasoning within his development of the Argument from Reason captured my attention. For probably the first time in my life, I was fascinated by an argument that had little direct relevance to scientific study.¹⁰ Lewis' argument seemed (and still seems) simple, elegant, and powerful. I was unaware of it at the time, but *Miracles* had made the first chink in my armor of intellectual indifference. Soon after my introduction to philosophy, I was encouraged to research the strength and history of the Argument from Reason.¹¹ I learned that the Argument from Reason has a rich history. The character of Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedo*, tells his friends that calling the "bones and sinews" of his body the causes of his remaining in prison "is too absurd."¹² Rather, Socrates suggests, it is his decision to remain in prison that compels him to do so. Socrates' commonsense explanation is significant because the character incidentally separates the non-rational, physical realm from the rational, mental realm.¹³

Immanuel Kant makes a similar distinction when he differentiates human agents "being caused

⁹ The naturalist might object that the mental realm "supervenes" upon the physical realm within the brain. Such an *ad hoc* postulation can lead to problems for the naturalist further down the road. Why would brain matter without divine intervention possess the bizarre capability to generate a rational, perceiving agent? Moreover, how exactly can a group of atoms and molecules produce private, subjective sensations? For a discussion of the naturalistic supervenience theory, see A.D. Smith's "Non-Reductive Physicalism?" in *Objections to Physicalism* (1993) and J.B. Stump's "Non-reductive Materialism: A Dissenting Voice" in *Christian Scholars Review* 36 (2006).

¹⁰ The only relevance the Argument from Reason could have to science pertains to the limitations of neuroscience in explaining the functioning of reason in the human mind. However, this view represents more of a metaphysical boundary for neuroscience than a hard fact about the processes of the human brain.

¹¹ I am, once again, grateful to Dr. Robert Sloan Lee for sending me on this historical quest.

¹³ *Phaedo*, 98a-99b.

to act” from “having a reason to act.”¹⁴ There is no doubt that Lewis, who was a very scrupulous and well-read scholar, was familiar with these authors and borrowed from their insights (along with Arthur Balfour’s *Theism and Humanism*). Multiple variations of Lewis’ original argument now exist: arguments from intentionality, truth, and mental causation are just a few. The influx of arguments against naturalism has obviously spawned many objections from naturalistic philosophers, but I remain convinced that all forms of Lewis’ Argument from Reason are sound.¹⁵ Lewis’ argument certainly burst my self-imposed scientific bubble and helped escort me into the world of philosophy, but I was merely open to a supernatural ontology and not really committed to one. Something more than an argument against naturalism was needed to finalize my intellectual journey.¹⁶

In the months following my brief exposure to the warming light of philosophy, I half-heartedly dabbled in the works of modern and ancient thinkers alike. At the behest of my mentors, I picked up the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. Like most high school students who have been introduced to a liberal arts education, I had read excerpts of these thinkers’ works and possessed a nominal understanding of their beliefs. I had even encountered Aquinas’ First Way (i.e., Aristotle’s Argument from Motion) in a philosophy class, but, unfortunately, in high school I lacked the initiative to carefully consider the merits of the argument or to venture beyond a lukewarm understanding of the metaphysical system that

¹⁴ *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ch.3.

¹⁵ Well-known objectors include naturalistic philosophers Keith Parsons, Richard Carrier, Daniel Dennett, and Theodore Drange. Discussions of the Argument from Reason may be found in past issues of philosophy journals *Philo* (2.1, 1999; 3.1, 2000) and *Philosophia Christi* (3.2, 2001; 5.1, 2003).

¹⁶ The Argument from Reason raises the probability of the theistic hypothesis insofar as it rules out the viability of philosophical naturalism; however, with the exception of Presuppositionalists, like Cornelius Van Til and Greg Bahnsen, neither Lewis nor the modern proponents of the Argument from Reason formally trace human reason to the Judeo-Christian God within their actual arguments.

undergirds the argument. Grasping the strength of Aristotle's Argument from Motion was possible only after reading through the *Metaphysics* and using supplemental works to develop a functional knowledge of Aristotelian metaphysics.¹⁷ During this period of time, I also learned that "Aristotle's view of nature, including his ideas about ends in nature, had become part of a large theological system" through the work of the medieval Christian and Muslim Scholastics.¹⁸ At the forefront of the Scholastic movement is, of course, Thomas Aquinas, and the opening pages of Aquinas' most famous theological tracts, the *Summa Theologica* and the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, contain Aristotle's Argument from Motion.¹⁹

Aquinas' First Way was the key that finally opened my mind to the pursuit of philosophy. I found each of the Five Ways interesting, but the First Way was especially intriguing since it tapped into my love of science. Science is, after all, the study of motion in the forms of locomotion and alteration.²⁰ What better way to lead a scientist to theism than by presenting him/her with an argument that begins with an empirical fact and ends with the existence of God?²¹ The First Way begins by stating that we observe motion. Motion is the "reduction of something from potentiality to actuality," and only something that is actualized

¹⁷ See *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (editor Jonathan Barnes; 1995), Eleonore Stump's *Aquinas* (2003), and *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (editor Brian Davies; 2002) for explanations of Thomistic-Aristotelian metaphysics.

¹⁸ *Ancient Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, 91.

¹⁹ Aquinas bluntly admits that he is appropriating Aristotle's work: we "shall first set forth the arguments by which Aristotle proceeds to prove that God exists" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.13.2).

²⁰ Aristotle writes in *Physics* III.1 that the four types of motion are locomotion (walking), alteration of substance (chemical reactions), alteration of quantity (filling a half-empty glass with water), and alteration of quality (change in color).

²¹ More than just an empirical observation is obviously needed. Philosopher Peter Kreeft writes that the Five Ways use three types of premises: an "implicit logical principle" (like the Law of Excluded Middle), an "explicit empirical datum" (like motion), and a "metaphysical principle" (like the impossibility of a causal infinite regress). See *A Shorter Summa* p.55.

can effect such a reduction.²² Therefore, “nothing is moved at random, but there must always be something present to move it.”²³ Therefore, the causal chain of movement either goes to infinity or ends with an unmoved mover. However, the causal chain cannot go to infinity because every member of the series has “no causal power on [its] own” and must resultantly derive its causal power from a first cause, namely, the Unmoved Mover.²⁴ Without a first cause that is pure actuality, the whole causal chain of motion is impossible. Note that the First Way does not establish the existence of the God of Classical Theism; the Unmoved Mover is a single, wholly actual, incredibly powerful, transcendent, and eternal being.²⁵ The Argument from Reason, then, compelled me to reject naturalism, while the Argument from Motion filled the resultant conceptual void in my mind by establishing the existence of a powerful deity.

I have not presented a case for Christian theism. Moreover, there are doubtlessly many objections to the two renowned arguments I have discussed.²⁶ I am comfortable with both of these facts. The purpose of this brief paper is not to stringently defend the Arguments from Reason and Motion, but to explain how a few months of reading, research, and discussion resulted in an exciting and permanent change in my intellectual life. The most exciting portion of my journey from intellectual insouciance to engaged philosophical inquiry was, for me, not my conversion from spiritual indifference to theism, nor was it the newfound – and still strong – love of philosophy that I acquired. Rather, it was the joy of finding intellectual continuity between different authors from different traditions and time periods, for Lewis uses a close

²² Aquinas, 65.

²³ *Metaphysics*, XII.6.33.

²⁴ Aquinas, 71.

²⁵ Aquinas believed that the Five Ways considered together could establish the existence of the Judeo-Christian God. Aquinas holds that, through observation and reason, we may deduce God’s attributes because we are justified in deriving “causes from their effects” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I.12.).

²⁶ The replies to these objections are often ignored rather than answered.

variant of the metaphysical cause-effect theory employed by Aquinas and Aristotle in the Argument from Motion in his own Argument from Reason. Aquinas and Aristotle evoke a cause-effect theory of physical phenomena to prove that all present motion is directly enacted by a completely actualized Unmoved Mover; Lewis utilizes an approximation of this theory to show that philosophical naturalism is an inadequate conception of reality. The similarity of thought shared by these intellectuals is not *ipso facto* surprising since Aquinas had obviously read Aristotle and Lewis surely read both Aquinas and Aristotle. That these writers use equivalent ideas for different purposes is what really draws my attention. Such differences beckon us to inquiry regarding their understanding and deployment of the particular cause-effect theory of physical reality under consideration. Does Lewis use the cause-effect theory in a manner that is compatible with the Thomistic-Aristotelian use? What inspired Lewis to remove any mention of “potency” or “actuality” in his Argument from Reason? I enjoy poring over such questions when my head is clear of everyday thoughts. Aristotle opens his *Metaphysics* by opining that “all men by nature desire to know.”²⁷ I cannot say whether this claim is true, but I can say that Lewis, Aristotle, and Aquinas have helped me join the ranks of those who truly “desire to know.”

²⁷ *Metaphysics*, 1.1.

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