

Consciousness and Reason: Naturalism's Achilles Heel

Much of the impetus for the worldview of naturalism comes from the apparent success of science in progressively edging out teleological explanations and replacing them with explanations that are framed exclusively in terms of physical mechanisms and forces. But what happens when naturalism attempts to take the final step in its journey, and explain consciousness and reason — which are the very conditions of our being able to do science — in purely physicalist terms? In this session, we examine the ways in which consciousness and reason pose a fundamental challenge to naturalism, resisting its attempts to fit them into its categories.

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I. Introduction

In this seminar we're going to consider the challenges that the phenomena of consciousness and reason pose for naturalism. The basic idea is that there is something special about conscious experience and about *rational* thought processes, that is difficult to account for on the naturalistic worldview, but which is unsurprising given a theistic worldview. C. S. Lewis expresses the core idea: “[Naturalism] goes on claiming territory after territory: first the inorganic, then the lower organisms, then man's body, then his emotions. But when it takes the final step and we attempt a naturalistic account of thought itself, suddenly the whole thing unravels. The last fatal step has invalidated all the preceding ones: for they were all reasonings and reason itself has been discredited.”¹

II. What is Naturalism?

Naturalism not only claims that nature is all that exists, but in addition, naturalism has a particular idea of what nature is like. Naturalists have in mind the understanding of the natural world that has arisen from modern science; the understanding of the natural world as a vast physical system built out of countless sub-microscopic particles, existing in time and space, and governed by a set of laws (e.g. law of gravity). Whatever physicists eventually find to be the most fundamental physical particles—naturalists say that those fundamental physical particles are the building blocks out of which everything is made.²

We can define naturalism as the following two theses:

- (1) everything that exists is ultimately built out of the most basic building blocks of physics
- (2) the basic building blocks of physics are lacking in consciousness, purpose, and value

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperOne, 1970), p. 138.

² Peter van Inwagen, ‘What is philosophy? What is naturalism?’, in *Analytic Philosophy without Naturalism*, ed. Antonella Corradini, Sergio Galvan, and E. J. Lowe (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 79.

III. Three Striking Phenomena

- A. **Conscious experience in general**—that there is such a thing as the first-person perspective; what it's like to see red or to taste coffee. It seems as though no amount of information about the physical goings-on in the brain is going to answer the question: why is there first-person experience at all? Why is it that certain patterns of neural firing in the brain are accompanied by conscious feelings and sensations?³
- B. **Intentionality**—the about-ness of thoughts; the fact that thoughts are *about* things; they *represent* things.⁴
- C. **Cognitive reliability**—that our minds have the capacity for forming *accurate/true* representations of the world. Cognitive faculties are things like vision, hearing, memory, rational intuition, and so on. Without reliable cognitive faculties—vision, hearing, memory, rational intuition, and so on—we lack the raw materials to arrive at knowledge of the world.

IV. Why Naturalism Struggles to Accommodate These Three Phenomena

- A. **Conscious experience in general.** By its very nature, conscious experience is a first-person phenomenon; science is in the business of giving third-person explanations. Any attempt to explain the experience of seeing red which leaves out the first-person perspective will necessarily fail to capture what is essential to the experience of seeing red. That physical brain states are accompanied by a very different kind of state, namely, conscious experiences, is a fact that cries out for explanation, and naturalism doesn't seem to have any good explanation to offer.⁵ The naturalist seems to have the following options: (a) deny that there really are such things as first-person, conscious experiences; (b) claim that it's just a brute fact that certain brain states are accompanied by first-person, conscious experiences (a bit like claiming that objective moral truths are just brute facts of the universe).
- B. **Intentionality.** Here is the crucial question: if the thoughts in our heads are actually nothing more than the motions of physical particles, how can they be about anything at all? How can a collection of physical particles moving in a certain manner represent the Statue of Liberty? This difficulty is even acknowledged by the prominent naturalist philosopher John Searle, who writes that "So far no attempt at naturalizing intentional content has produced an explanation (analysis, reduction) of intentional content that is even remotely plausible."⁶ Could the naturalist point to the fact that pixels and inks marks, which are clearly physical things, have about-ness? This wouldn't help, because physical things like ink marks and pixel arrangements have their intentionality only because we human beings give it to them; their intentionality/about-ness is grounded in our capacity for intentionality.

³ Frank Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (1986), pp. 291-95.

⁴ See Victor Reppert, 'The Argument from Reason', in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).

⁵ Robert Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Ch. 16.

⁶ John Searle, *The Re-Discovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 50.

C. Reliable cognitive faculties. Alvin Plantinga has developed an argument for thinking that if naturalism is true, then our cognitive faculties are not likely to be reliable. Plantinga isn't arguing against evolution per se. Rather, he's arguing that unguided evolution, which is how our minds would have originated if naturalism is true, is unlikely to have given us cognitive faculties that are well-suited to grasping truth. What natural selection is ultimately selecting for is *behaviour*. Those creatures who behave in certain sorts of ways will tend to survive and reproduce more often than creatures who don't behave in those ways. So for instance, running away from predators would be a behaviour that is conducive to survival and reproduction; so natural selection can be expected to select for creatures who tend to perform that particular behaviour. But what Plantinga points out is that there is no necessity at all for creatures who behave in ways that promote their survival to have true beliefs about the world.⁷

V. Conclusion

Arguments from reason and consciousness contend that the phenomena of consciousness, intentionality, and cognitive faculties are much more easily explained on theism than on naturalism. By itself, of course, this doesn't show that Christianity is true, though it contributes to a cumulative case.

However, one could argue that Christian theism has a particularly apt explanation for the phenomenon of rational thought. A number of prominent philosophers have argued that the meaning of words has an essentially social dimension: it always involves more than one person; meaning only ever exists when there is community. The Christian claim is that ultimate reality, the foundation of all things, is an interpersonal community: three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Community, which is the necessary condition for meaning to exist, is the bedrock of reality according to Christian theism.

Recommended reading:

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*

Victor Reppert, "The argument from reason," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Ch. 10.