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## Has Naturalism Put Reasoning in a Bind?

### I think I think... I think?

It's the Matrix. You're Neo and you're sitting right in front of Morpheus. Hopefully you've seen the film. Morpheus gives you a glimpse of what's going on in the real world, and it's scary, and then he offers you a choice, he offers you two pills:

"You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

The problem is, you're a robot. Your software has been programmed to always consider the blue pill as the better option. You also think you've genuinely thoroughly considered your options and made a rational choice because you're programmed to think that too. Sad times. Matrix over.

Are we programmed to think a certain way? Every time we use our brain we assume its circuits are wired correctly. We take in new information and compare it to old data, judging and weighing things up. But how do we know our perceptions are accurate? How do we know our wiring is set correctly? We have no option but to start with an inadequate picture and just keep trying, adding knowledge to knowledge, building up a rough picture as we go. We step out in faith, hoping that what we do next will prove those assumptions to be true. Our experience validates whether those assumptions were true or false, and that is how we gain *knowledge*.

But what if your logic chip is merely configured to make you think you're thinking logically? How could you truly know whether or not that's the case, using logic alone? When it comes to the very tools we use to understand the world around us - we simply have to trust that they're reliable. You have no way of knowing whether your ability to reason is reasonable, as thinking it through requires reason itself.

So the point is this - we tend to carry the assumption that we can know the truth, and herein lies a deep sense of faith, a belief that truth is attainable and that our intellect doesn't deceive us. It is this faith that drives every intellect. If we assume that the world around us can be understood we also assume that our minds are up to the task of understanding it. We trust our reasoning and metaphysical assumptions. We believe things can be definitely known and so we research to know things. As Albert Einstein famously said:

"Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion. To this there also belongs the faith in the possibility that the regulations valid for the world of existence are

rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. The situation may be expressed by an image: science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”

To come to any truth you must first employ your reasoning, but reasoning is only made possible via the instrument of our mind. If our thinking is not valid then all reasoning is destroyed by its own credentials. So here’s the ultimate question: how can we know if our thinking is valid? It’s not an easy question, because to prove that the mind can correctly make sense of reality requires using the mind in the first place to do the proving, but that’s the very thing you’re trying to prove. And so the loop begins.

## Rebuilding the foundations of truth

Let’s start with the history. It used to be a theistic worldview that provided us with a basis to justify this presupposition behind science and all human reasoning – *the presupposition that our thinking can be valid*, that there is general reliability of our sensory and cognitive faculties for the purpose of discerning the truth. According to the Christian worldview, since nature had been designed by the same rational mind who had designed the human mind, the early modern scientists who began to investigate nature also assumed that nature was intelligible. It could be understood by the human intellect, since the human intellect, however corrupted, is the product of a rational creator. Modern science was specifically inspired by the conviction that the universe is the product of a rational mind who designed the universe to be understood and who also designed the human mind to understand it. As one philosopher of science put it: “Western science was grounded in the belief that the natural order is the product of single intelligence from which our own intelligence descends.”

In this sense (among others), it was the Christian worldview that finally gave birth to modern science. If you take a thorough look at the history of science, you will find that belief in a rational and intelligent creator inspired the development of modern science and gave rise to what we call the scientific revolution ranging from approximately 1550 to the 1800s. The great fathers of modern science were often theistic and referred to their theistic views as great inspiration and motivation for their scientific enterprise. They even saw their scientific work as revealing the wisdom and power of God – an “act of worship.”

Then something changed. From the eighteenth century, an entirely different philosophy of science emerged. Just as scientists were beginning to formulate the origin and evolution of life on earth, the worldview of scientific materialism gradually began to dominate thinking about the meaning of science. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection stands out particularly. In ‘On the Origin of Species,’ published in 1859, Darwin argued that living organisms – previously considered a powerful example of God’s creative power – only *appeared* to be designed. Darwin proposed that the concrete material mechanism of natural selection acting on random variation could explain the adaptation of organisms to their environment without invoking an actual intelligent or directing agency. If the origin of all biological organisms could be explained naturalistically, as Darwin argued, then explanations invoking a creative intelligence were unnecessary and even vacuous (click for more). Gradually atheism supplanted theism and began to replace science’s theistic origins with a new philosophical grounding – materialism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, scientists had turned to entirely materialistic theories for everything from the origin and development of life, including human life, to the origin of the earth and solar system. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the worldview of scientific materialism began to pick up traction as it claimed to offer a comprehensive materialistic answer to the prime-reality question. Under materialism, scientific explanations are limited to suggesting only materialistic

entities or natural processes in scientific explanations. Positing creative intelligence as explanations in the history of life and the universe would violate the materialistic worldview. And so since philosophical materialism had begun to claim sole control over science itself, any explanations pointing to an immaterial mind, idea, or plan did not, in principle, qualify as proper scientific explanations.

The materialistic assumptions about what scientific theories must look like influenced the way many scientists conducted their work, including Darwin. These new materialistic theories suggested that the whole history of the universe and life could be told as a nearly seamless unfolding of the potentiality of matter and energy. The default cosmology of the nineteenth century – which wrongly assumed that matter and energy were eternal and self-existent, reinforced this materialistic perspective since it seemed to eliminate any need to consider the question of the ultimate origin of matter. Not surprisingly, the rise of scientific materialism altered the way many intellectuals conceptualised the relationship between science and theistic belief, so that many began to perceive science and theistic belief as standing in overt conflict with one another.

So although the founders of modern science saw the testimony of nature and science as actually supporting belief in God, by the beginning of the twentieth century, science, despite its theistic origins, seemed to have no need for the God hypothesis. By the end of the 20th-century science was predominantly viewed under a materialistic/naturalistic umbrella, and so any thought of God had been deemed unfit, and even heretical for the field of science.

But in science, arguments shouldn't be dismissed without serious thought. This new metaphysical presupposition imposed on modern science now has to make sense of human reasoning itself. The question is this: according to naturalism can our thinking still be justified as valid? If it can't then the human intellect, with which we understand science, is left in the dust. Science itself then necessarily falls. The stakes are high.

## **Is our thinking valid?**

The atheist often identifies with the naturalistic view that there is nothing beyond nature. This view defines nature as the box of space and time in which all matter and energy exists. Atheism denies the existence of a transcendent reality and so claims that nature exists 'on its own'; it is self-referring. Since God is described as supernatural (transcending nature), the naturalist cannot consider God a part of reality. Our minds and thinking capabilities in this view are ultimately a product of nature and nature alone. We are simply and entirely material. No soul, no mind. Just a body, just a brain.

If our thinking is a product of nature and the structure of nature is a cause-and-effect relation, then every event in nature must be connected to a previous event in accord with some law of nature. This is *physical determinism*. By an earlier event "fully" causing a later event, I mean that the earlier event necessitates the later event, not merely makes it probable that it will occur. If physical determinism is true then every movement we make must have been predetermined by events long before we were born in accord with physical laws in such a way that our intentions and beliefs themselves are caused by some previous series of naturally occurring events. So according to the physical determinist, it is not just physical events but also mental events that are fully caused by physical events.

Now it's worth making the note that not all naturalists ascribe to determinism since debates on the subject of quantum mechanics has meant that naturalists are often divided on whether our world is actually deterministic. However, *it's still fair to say that whether we are determined merely by predictable laws of nature or by random fluctuations in the quantum field, in either scenario our*

*lives are wholly determined by something outside ourselves, making determinism still the only causal theory consistent with naturalism, hence why most naturalists are determinists.*

With physical determinism as an atheistic assumption to the nature of reality, all intentions, beliefs, thoughts, and desires are *caused events*, meaning our thoughts would arise whether truly justified or not. So, if nature is truly an interlocked system where all causes are non-rational (if any rationality is emergent, not primitive), then thinking has no validity since it is all a product of non-rational causes. If our thoughts were wholly determined by impersonal material forces or chemical reactions, we would have no reason to trust the reliability of our thoughts since such forces and chemical reactions have no obvious relationship to the object of our thinking. Professor Haldane put it this way: *"if my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true... and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms."*

And that's the point. If everything, including our mental states, are predetermined by some physical events, then how do we trust what we think? We believe what people tell us because we believe their intentions and beliefs cause them to say what they do. But if universal epiphenomenalism were true, then the words that come out of their mouth would not come out of their mouth because they intended that they should. That's just an illusion. They actually would come out of their mouths solely because of some prior brain event (which is caused by some other physical event before that, and that before that...). So we would know that the words are formed by some brain process that is not the result of any intention on the subject's part to utter those words.

But if physical determinism were true, how would you even prove it? For example, in order for mental events to be sufficient evidence for a deterministic physical theory, we would need to have a justified belief that the theory predicted those events. To work out what a complicated theory predicts involves a long process of calculation. No scientist can hold such a calculation in his head, he will need to write down the stages of the calculation. And he will need to believe that he writes down each line of the calculation because he "sees" (i.e. has a conceived thought) that each line is entailed by the previous line. He assumes that some mental event of his - a conscious belief - is causing (via some brain event) his hand to write what it does. And to assume that is again to assume that mental events cause brain events. So he can only justifiably believe that all physical events are caused by and only by physical events by making the assumption that sometimes they aren't. So evidence for physical determinism that gives rise to the view that all our thoughts are predetermined by physical law can only be trusted on the assumption that physical determinism is false.

And that's the problem. To establish a theory of physical determinism we would need evidence of a kind that could only be obtained on the assumption that the theory is false. Naturalism can only be proven true if we are allowed to assume that it is false.

## **Evolved for utility, not truth**

Now let's address this from a slightly different angle. If our thinking is derived from nature, then our reasoning came to exist by natural processes. In the atheistic worldview, it's common to believe that the *sole* determiner of human development is *purely* the evolutionary principle 'survival of the fittest'. The atheistic view of evolution is that there is no intelligent input to our existence, no God who formulated the mental mechanism of reason. In this naturalistic view, our cognitive faculties for reasoning have evolved *only* in ways conducive or beneficial to survival, not necessarily truth. In confessing your reasoning has not evolved for truth but survival, you may have reason to think that your thoughts help you survive but how can you trust what your mind tells you to be true? Survival and truth are not the same thing. In fact, true beliefs often are not advantageous for survival. Even

the well-known atheist John Gray recognises the difficulty that according to a naturalistic view of Darwin's theory it is impossible to know the truth, since *"the human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth."* Natural selection doesn't care if our beliefs are true; all they care about is that we survive. To believe in materialistic evolution as the full account of human existence and to think that your beliefs are true is like stepping on a scale and thinking it will tell you the time. Scales tell weight, not time. Evolution aims at survival, not necessarily truth.

Atheism (or hard-atheism if you prefer) asserts that God does not exist - this is a truth claim. But the naturalistic worldview also asserts that our reasoning faculties are not designed for truth, and if not, and if just for survival, then how can you search for truth when that dimension is not an evolved part of human reasoning? What basis do you have?

This worried Charles Darwin. He went on to say, *"with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of lower species, are of any value or at all trustworthy."* C.S. Lewis affirmed this when he mused, *"Suppose there was no intelligence behind the universe, no creative mind. In that case, nobody designed my brain for the purpose of thinking. It is merely that when the pointless atoms inside my skull react for chemical or physical reasons, that this gives me, as an irrational by-product, the sensation I call thought. But if so, how can I trust my own thinking to be true? But if I can't trust my own thinking, how can I trust the arguments leading to any worldview?"* In other words, if our mind came to exist by natural, mindless unguided processes in a ultimately pointless universe, then why do we trust it? Would you trust a computer if it was the end product of mindless unguided processes via random forces? Better yet, could you even be confident in its computations (and so call it a computer) if it wasn't created by a rational mind?

Therefore, you may, if you like, give up all claims to the truth. You may say simply *"our way of thinking is useful"* - without adding *"and therefore true."* It enables us to build a bridge and keep ourselves alive and that is good enough. The old, high pretensions of reason must be given up, for it is a behaviour evolved entirely as an aid to survival.

But we should go beyond humility. C.S. Lewis said, *"unless human reasoning is valid no science can be true."* Yet naturalism undermines the foundations of the very rationality that is needed to construct or believe any kind of argument whatsoever. Naturalists cannot claim their thinking is justifiable without (philosophically speaking) cutting their own throat. I am therefore left to reject naturalism (and so atheism) because how could I consider a worldview that threatens the very rationality needed for science, philosophy or any subject of thought for that matter?

## **The resurrection of reason**

Instead of suggesting that nature exists 'on its own', the Christian understands that nature came from the supernatural. In this view, nature has not eternally existed so it must have had a first cause that transcends nature. Nature is derivative, not primary. Its creation is dependent upon God's eternal independent nature. The Christian view teaches that God, being supernatural, is the only reality that can truly exist by itself, and that our natural reality is a product of God's creation. God exists on His own terms and we and the natural world exist because He exists. R.G. Collingwood said, *"Throughout the long tradition of European thought it has been said that nature, though it is a thing that really exists, is not a thing that exists in itself or in its own right, but a thing which depends for its existence upon something else."*

Christian theology declares that we are not wholly mechanical machines. We have mechanical bodies, yes, but there is an element to us which transcends the physical - we're spiritual beings inhabiting a physical body. The significance is huge: although we are part of the natural world there

is a part of us breathed directly by God that reaches beyond the natural world. As C.S Lewis wrote:

*“Humans are amphibians-half spirit and half animal... As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change.”*

Although we are natural we are also supernatural. We are attached to the physical domain yet not wholly determined by it, therefore our rational minds are not entirely subject to the chance spin of atoms, putting us in a better position to objectively review and evaluate the physical world. What position are you to step back and evaluate the physical world if you are also fully determined by it?

The moment a naturalist thinks about nature, they forget the fact that they are thinking. If we believe anything about the world we must believe in thought itself and this requires us to believe that our own thinking must be more than a merely natural event. Therefore something other than nature exists. The supernatural is not remote and abstract, it's as intimate as breathing. Denial of it depends on a certain absent-mindedness. Human reason is proof of the supernatural, and so are proofs of God. God and nature have come into a certain relation, namely, in every human mind. For the Christian, God comes before nature and this enables us to know that nature is derived. So for the theists, the human mind in the act of knowing is illuminated by the Divine reason. However, we should not consider our acts of reason as something 'above' or 'beyond' nature. Rather, reason is given before nature and on reason our concept of nature depends.

Even before setting out a case for belief in God based on evidence, it is in the Judeo-Christian worldview that all intellectual reasoning itself finds its justified basis.