



C.S. Lewis' representation of naturalism in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*: A response to Elizabeth Anscombe's critique of *Miracles*

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The impact of Elizabeth Anscombe's critique of C.S. Lewis' *Miracles* (an apologetics work defending the Christian belief in miracles) on the development of Lewis' literary career has been highly contested by critics.¹ Carpenter and Wilson argue that, following the 1948 Socratic debate (two years before the publication of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, hereafter *LWW*) where Lewis and Anscombe debated *Miracles*, Lewis retreated into children's fantasy.² Wilson even suggests that the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair* represents Anscombe as a petty attack on her.³ In contrast, Ward believes Narnia is Lewis' 'way of explaining his case to himself in his imaginative form,' while Reppert similarly states that Lewis does not 'abandon his previous apologetic arguments, but in fact reaffirms his arguments in his later writing.'⁴ This essay contends that, though Lewis did adapt his approach to writing on the Christian faith, he upholds his theological ideas and arguments within his fantasy fiction. I will engage in depth with Anscombe's philosophical critiques to an extent which scholars, when debating Anscombe's influence on Lewis' writing, have not yet done. Furthermore, though Ward argues similarly, using his planetary theory to show the theology of *Miracles* within the Narnia books, I justify this perspective differently by looking at the representation of naturalism within the character of the White Witch.⁵ Naturalism is the belief that nothing exists outside of nature, denying the existence of an external creator God. It was Lewis' arguments against naturalism that sparked his debate with Anscombe. This essay contends that Lewis uses the White Witch to embody his arguments within *Miracles* which dismiss naturalism, as a response to Anscombe's criticisms.

The Lewis-Anscombe debate

Before exploring Lewis' representation of naturalism in *LWW* as a response to Anscombe's critique, it is important to summarise the Lewis-Anscombe debate. In *Miracles* 'Chapter Three: The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist,' Lewis argues that 'all possible knowledge...depends on the validity of reasoning,' and that 'we must believe in the validity of rational thought, and we must not believe in anything inconsistent with its validity.'⁶ Lewis cites Haldane who writes '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

¹ For 'Chapter Three' of Lewis' first version of *Miracles* and Anscombe's written criticisms of it see: Smilde, A. Appendices to 'What Lewis Really Did to *Miracles*: A Philosophical Layman's Attempt to Understand the Anscombe Affair.' *Journal of Inklings Studies*, 1:2 (2011), 9–24.

² Carpenter, H. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends*. (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p.217; Wilson, A.N. *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. (London: Collins, 1990), p.220.

³ Wilson, *Biography*, p.220.

⁴ Ward, M. *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.218; Reppert, V. *C.S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea*. (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p.162.

⁵ Ward, *Narnia*, p.218.

⁶ Smilde, Appendices, p.3.

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no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.⁷ Lewis argues that, under the naturalistic perspective, reasoning cannot be valid because, if nothing exists outside of nature, all our thoughts must simply result from 'irrational' atomic movement.⁸ Any explanation for rational thought fixed only within nature is 'irrational.'⁹ For Lewis, consequently, reason has to originate from outside of nature, hence the divine becomes important. Though Anscombe was a committed Roman Catholic and also disputed naturalism, she disagreed with Lewis' method of refutation. Her criticisms can be divided into three key points.

Rational, irrational and non-rational

Anscombe states that Lewis' use of the word 'irrational' is a 'mistake,' arguing that even if a thought cannot be deemed rational, this does not necessarily render it 'irrational.'¹⁰

You speak of 'irrational causes,' and by that you seem to mean 'any cause that is not something rational.' 'Something rational' you explain by example: 'such as [you say] argument from observed facts.' You contrast the following sentences: (1) 'He thinks that dog dangerous because he has often seen it muzzled and he has noticed that messengers always try to avoid going to that house;' (2) 'He thinks that dog dangerous because it is black and ever since he was bitten by a black dog in childhood, he has always been afraid of black dogs.'¹¹

While Lewis only distinguishes between these two examples (Lewis argues example (1) is rational and example (2) is irrational), Anscombe states that you can also distinguish, under example (2), between a man who 'gives no answer' for his fear of black dogs ('it is here quite natural to speak of "irrational causes"') and a man who justifies his fear by stating 'that he behaves like this because he was once bitten by a black dog.'¹² The latter, Anscombe says, is not rational. However, because grounds are provided it cannot be deemed irrational, but 'non-rational.'¹³ These non-rational causes, Anscombe argues, do not necessarily create erroneous beliefs; they are simply physical events. Notably, Lewis does later rewrite 'Chapter Three' of *Miracles*, publishing a revised edition. Smilde observes that in this edition, 'all instances of 'irrational' were changed to 'non-rational.'¹⁴

Validity

Anscombe also criticises Lewis' use of the term 'valid':

You can talk about the validity of a piece of reasoning, and sometimes about the validity of a kind of reasoning; but if you say you believe in the validity of reasoning itself, what do you mean?¹⁵

For Anscombe, 'a best explanation argument begins not by calling into question the validity of human reasoning but by assuming that validity as an established fact.'¹⁶ Validity is a 'fact' that is determined not by questioning the validity of reason itself, but by maintaining a

⁷ Smilde, Appendices, p.4.

⁸ Smilde, Appendices, p.4.

⁹ Smilde, Appendices, p.4.

¹⁰ Smilde, Appendices, p.9.

¹¹ Smilde, Appendices, p.8.

¹² Smilde, Appendices, p.8.

¹³ Smilde, Appendices, p.8.

¹⁴ Smilde, 'What Lewis really did,' p.17.

¹⁵ Smilde, Appendices, p.9.

¹⁶ Reppert, *Dangerous Idea*, p.660.

system where good and bad reasoning is distinguished after observing one's argument for their thought, then comparing it to established examples of valid and invalid reasoning:

You say: 'But if this were so, it would destroy the distinction between valid and invalid reasoning.' But how? Would it imply that you could no longer give the explanation you gave, point to and explain the examples, say which arguments proposed to you are valid and which invalid in just the same way as you did before the naturalistic hypothesis was supposed?'¹⁷

In Lewis' response to Anscombe he does 'admit that valid was a bad word for what I meant.'¹⁸ However, he does not proceed to amend this in his revised edition, as he does with 'irrational.'

Cause and Ground

This is the crux of Anscombe's criticisms against Lewis. Anscombe argues that Lewis does not distinguish between ground explanations (e.g. this man is having an allergic reaction because his tongue has swelled up) and causal explanations (e.g. this man is having an allergic reaction because he ate a peanut, which he is allergic to) as different ways of justifying whether a thought is rational or irrational. The former requires simply explained beliefs/observations, while the latter requires knowledge of what comes before and directly leads to an event/thought. Anscombe argues that:

Given the scientific explanation of human thought and action which the naturalist hypothesis asserts to be possible, we could, if we had the data that the explanation required, predict what any man was going to say, and what conclusions he was going to form. That would not mean that there was no sense in calling what he did say true or false, rational or irrational.¹⁹

Anscombe states that naturalism would mean we could, with the right data analysis, predict what a person would conclude based on a traced chain of events (causal). However, this does not make a thought irrational, especially if explained grounds are also provided. Lewis does vastly amend 'Chapter Three' of *Miracles* by writing new paragraphs which distinguish the difference between ground and cause. However, he maintains that even when a ground reason is provided, if the cause is still 'non-rational' (to use Lewis' amended vocabulary), that thought cannot be valid.²⁰ For Anscombe, cause and reason must sit next to each other, whereas for Lewis they are divorced. Lewis argues that the causal explanations within naturalism are inherently flawed since this bases all causal reasoning on observed regularities, hence 'we would assume all swans are white until we saw a black one.'²¹ For Lewis, if the explanation of the ground does not clearly align with the explanation of the cause, then it is not a valid argument.

Lewis' response and LWW.

Following this debate, Lewis significantly transforms his approach in presenting his theological views. Ward cites 'The Apologist's Evening Prayer,' where Lewis 'prays to be delivered from 'cleverness' shot forth in public debate on God's behalf.'²² Notably, Brazier views the Lewis-Anscombe debate as a dispute over the impact of reason versus revelation

¹⁷ Smilde, Appendices, p.9.

¹⁸ Smilde, Appendices, p.14.

¹⁹ Smilde, Appendices, p.10.

²⁰ Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*. (London: Harper Collins, 1960), p.24.

²¹ Lewis, *Miracles*, p.30.

²² Ward, *Planet Narnia*, p.221.

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in defending Christianity.²³ Within Narnia, the Pevensies learn about Aslan through experiencing him, not through hearing apologetic arguments. When the children first hear Aslan's name 'everyone felt quite different' as one might feel if something 'has enormous meaning.'²⁴ Theology is not absent here; the phrase 'at the name of Aslan' mirrors the biblical emphasis on the power of God's spoken name (as in Philippians 2:10; 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,' and Mark 16:17; 'in my name shall they cast out devils').²⁵ The children's response to Aslan, however, does not derive from understanding the concept of the spoken name, but from hearing it and experiencing its effect.

However, Lewis does maintain his apologetic arguments in subtle ways throughout the Narnia books, notably through using the Witch to represent naturalism and its implausibility, as he discusses in *Miracles*. In *Miracles*, Lewis states 'by the 'laws of Nature' such a man means, I think, the observed course of Nature.'²⁶ However, Lewis argues that a miracle (e.g. the virgin birth) is not an exception to these laws, but that 'the laws at once take it over.' God, as creator of the universe, created the laws; therefore, when He intervenes within nature, the law itself 'takes over.'²⁷ It must consequently be significant that, during the Witch's reign, nature (literally) freezes. By transitioning into fantasy, a genre where the expected 'natural order' is inherently broken down, Lewis has already undone the concept of predictable natural laws, as the reader is removed from their own world and cannot expect a certain picture of nature. However, even within Narnia, the eternal winter is not how nature should function. Tumnus says 'it is [the Witch] who has got all Narnia under her thumb...It's she who makes it always winter. Always winter and never Christmas.'²⁸ Under the Witch, nature is trapped in winter. Significantly, despite being a powerful, supernatural being, the Witch, Aslan states, was not in existence 'before Time dawned;' she is a part of Aslan's creation.²⁹ In *Miracles*, Lewis argues that the naturalist world view can contain supernatural beings, including the gods of ancient Greece, because they 'were not really supernatural...They were products of the total system of things and included within it.'³⁰ Within Narnia, when the Witch, a created being, takes control, the natural order and predictability of the seasons disintegrates. This echoes Lewis' statement in *Miracles* that the naturalistic world cannot be rational and ordered because it is caused by random processes.³¹ Equally, Lewis writes in his revised version of *Miracles* (in response to Anscombe distinguishing between ground and cause explanations), that naturalism depends on observed regularities always staying the same within a causal chain of events; under the Witch, Narnia is in a regular unchanging state of winter.³² It is upon this state of paralysis, that the Witch's influence depends.

²³ Brazier, P.H. 'C.S. Lewis and the Anscombe Debate: From Analogia Entis to Analogia Fidei.' *Journal of Inklings Studies* 1.2 (2011), 69-123, p.104.

²⁴ Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. (London: Harper Collins, 1950), p.76.

²⁵ Lewis, LWW, p.77; *The King James Bible*. Project Gutenberg, [The King James Bible - Free Ebook \(gutenberg.org\)](http://www.gutenberg.org), [Accessed: 22/12/2022].

²⁶ Lewis, *Miracles*, p.72. References to *Miracles* from outside 'Chapter Three' are taken from the revised edition, since this edition is more accessible and the content remains largely unchanged from the first version.

²⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, p.94.

²⁸ Lewis, LWW, p.25.

²⁹ Lewis, LWW, p.176.

³⁰ Lewis, *Miracles*, p.10.

³¹ Smilde, Appendices, p.4.

³² Lewis, *Miracles*, p.30.

Notably, the first Narnian Lucy meets is the faun Tumnus. Tumnus is seen carrying ‘an umbrella, white with snow.’³³ Fauns, in classical mythology, are typically associated with spring and fertility. They are also connected with Pan. Robichaud describes Pan as an ‘irrational power;’ a creature sometimes identified with Christ (Pan as the dying god); but also, in the 20th century, with an absence of God during the World Wars; ‘God went out...and Pan came in.’³⁴ Most importantly, the name ‘Pan’ means ‘all’ and often symbolises nature itself.³⁵ The opening scene in Narnia is of a creature associated with spring and fertility but positioned in the middle of winter. The creature that can symbolise nature is out of place; associated with the non-rational; and goes morally erroneous when he attempts to betray Lucy to the White Witch. Nature itself, under the Witch’s rule, is out of place and has gone wrong. Significantly, it is only with the return of Aslan that the seasons are restored (‘we shall have spring again’).³⁶ Lewis shows nature’s order to be dependent on the divine power that made it. It is the Witch’s naturalistic force that disrupts it.

Notably, the Witch’s perspective of Narnia poses a challenge to Anscombe’s arguments against Lewis. Through the Witch, Lewis shows ground explanations to be unreliable when justifying a thought as valid, since they do not always align with true causal explanations. The Witch, as a representation of the naturalistic perspective, does not perceive these true causal explanations in relation to her understanding of the patterns of nature. For example, she does not fully understand the ‘deep divine’ magic where ‘death itself would start working backwards.’³⁷ Her limited perspective as a creature of creation only understands the laws which always demand blood for a traitor- ‘[Edmund’s] blood is my property’- and she does not realise the exception to this when a ‘willing’ innocent victim dies for a traitor.³⁸ Like the ‘always winter’ she traps Narnia in, she only sees what has ‘always’ happened in the past when handling a traitor; the naturalistic observed regularities dominate her perspective over Aslan’s divine laws.³⁹ Her ground explanations are also misled, and they further neglect true causal explanations. She describes Narnia as ‘my dominions.’⁴⁰ Lucy says ‘she drives about on a sledge...with her wand in her hand,’ and ‘calls herself the Queen of Narnia.’ The Witch sees Narnia’s eternal winter as an image of her own power (ground explanation), misunderstanding the true reason for the snow. However, the prophecies say ‘when [Aslan] bares his teeth winter meets its death, and when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.’⁴¹ Here the seasons are connected to the absence and coming of the divine (causal explanation). This positions the Witch as merely a symptom of Narnia’s spiritual decline which has caused the winter, hence when the divine returns, spring is restored. When she and Aslan are seen together, Lewis contrasts ‘the golden face and the dead white face;’ spiritual life and death are analogised.⁴² Equally, while the Witch’s dwarf connects ‘your winter’ [the Witch’s] with ‘Aslan’s doing,’ the Witch refuses to acknowledge Aslan at all, stating ‘if either of you mention that name again...he shall instantly be killed.’⁴³ Her inability to see the power and significance of Aslan (causal), is further

³³ Lewis, *LWW*, p.16.

³⁴ Robichaud, P. *Pan: The Great God’s Modern Return*. (London, Reaktion), pp.210, 50, 150.

³⁵ Robichaud, *Pan*, p.12.

³⁶ Lewis, *LWW*, p.88.

³⁷ Lewis, *LWW*, p.176.

³⁸ Lewis, *LWW*, p.153.

³⁹ Lewis, *LWW*, p.25.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *LWW*, p.40.

⁴¹ Lewis, *LWW*, p.88

⁴² Lewis, *LWW*, p.152.

⁴³ Lewis, *LWW*, p.133.

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demonstrated in her blunt refusal to accept defeat when Aslan arrives- 'have I not still got my wand?' (even her dwarf says 'what difference would that [wand] make now that he is here?').⁴⁴ She also insists 'how if only three [children] were filled? That would not fulfil the prophecy.'⁴⁵ The Witch only sees a ground explanation (the prophecy of the four children) for her dwindling power, not connecting it to the cause which is rooted in Aslan. Hence the beavers say 'it is [Aslan], not [the children], who will save Mr Tumnus.'⁴⁶

The Beavers also state that the Witch 'bases her claim to be queen' on her lineage, purporting to be part 'human.'⁴⁷ However, the Witch still has a physical bloodline, whereas Aslan, though also a physical being, is timeless; Mr Beaver says Aslan is from beyond 'my time.'⁴⁸ The Witch certainly believes in Aslan, but her naturalistic perspective does not recognise this divinity. The Witch's ground explanation (observing winter and her bloodline and only perceiving her power) exists but it does not align with the spiritual death and absence of Aslan, that causes her influence. Lewis' key criticism of Anscombe was rooted in this idea that the ground explanation cannot prove rationality if the causal demonstrates something different.⁴⁹

Comparatively, Rozema argues that Lewis represents naturalism in *Perelandra* through 'the Empirical Bogey': 'the great myth of our century' wherein 'everything that can possibly hold significance for the mind becomes the mere by-product of essential disorder...mere bigness and loneliness overbore him.'⁵⁰ Naturalism is represented here with this same misunderstanding of the true significance of things. Instead, physical size consumes the disordered naturalistic forces. Similarly, the physical size of the Witch is emphasised at the opening of the novel: she is half-giant and 'taller than any woman that Edmund had ever seen.'⁵¹ However, her physical impressiveness is increasingly undermined once Aslan returns. On Aslan's arrival, the Witch is described as 'overshadowed with fir and yew trees.'⁵² Equally, when turned back from stone by Aslan, a proper giant humorously describes her as 'that dratted little witch...by my feet.'⁵³ Though her physical impressiveness is apparent from the start, the perspective on her size begins to shift and her smallness is increasingly emphasised throughout the novel, as Aslan's spiritual significance overshadows her.

This spiritual perspective that increasingly belittles her, remains unperceived by the Witch. Patterson argues that 'Narnia's winter lacks the Christmas gift of freedom, or to put it another way, the perspective of eternity...The White Witch is evil because she will not...allow the stately rotation of the year to proceed.'⁵⁴ While Father Christmas is content to move along with time and the seasons (as quickly as he came, he was soon 'out of sight before anyone realised'), she still humorously (and quite pathetically) insists upon using her

⁴⁴ Lewis, *LWW*, pp.146-7.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *LWW*, p.145.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *LWW*, p.88.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *LWW*, p.88.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *LWW*, p.88.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, p.24.

⁵⁰ Rozema, D. 'Naturalism.' *Theology Today*, 75:3 (2018), 330-46, p.345.

⁵¹ Lewis, *LWW*, pp.90, 37.

⁵² Lewis, *LWW*, p.145.

⁵³ Lewis, *LWW*, p.182.

⁵⁴ Patterson, N. 'Always Winter and Never Christmas Symbols of Time in Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia.' *Mythlore*, 18:1 (1991), 10-14, pp.12-13.

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sledge even when the snow has melted; 'sledge stuck so fast.'⁵⁵ Alongside her size, her actions become unimpressive. Furthermore, the veracity of the Witch's reasoning is also belittled here. After abandoning her sledge, she stumbles across some animals sat around a holly decorated table, eating 'plum pudding.'⁵⁶ This clearly resembles a Christmas feast, however, she still inquires (probably out of denial rather than ignorance); 'what is the meaning of this?'⁵⁷ Ironically, the first time she directly asks for the true meaning of something, the meaning could not be clearer. The ground explanation (the unmistakable image of the Christmas feast) is in clear correlation with the cause (Aslan has returned therefore time is moving forwards), however she refuses to acknowledge this. Once the animals have confirmed the reason for their feast, she is so desperate to divert the truth, she insists the animals 'say you have been lying.'⁵⁸ The Witch's blunt determination to deny any truth that does not align with her desired world view (that denies Aslan's ultimate divinity), shows this naturalistic perspective to be entirely misleading her. Reasoned thought is proven not just by recognising the presence of explained ground arguments (Anscombe contrarily asserts 'would it imply that you could no longer give the explanation you gave') but by contrasting the (false) naturalistic causal explanations with the (veridic) supernaturalistic.⁵⁹ Truth is increasingly revealed across the novel through the invalidation of the Witch as divine explanations are brought to light.

Anscombe's overall conclusion against Lewis is that the naturalist 'cannot be refuted as you try to refute him.'⁶⁰ However, using the Witch, Lewis continues to represent his refutations. Lewis maintains, through Narnia's winter, that naturalism's nature is disordered. Equally, the Witch's thought is discredited because her ground explanations contradict true causal explanations, following directly Lewis' criticism of Anscombe. Though Lewis places more emphasis on revelation over reason within Narnia than he did in his previous writings, Lewis still represents his arguments about naturalism found in *Miracles*, in *LWW*.

⁵⁵ Lewis, *LWW*, pp.120, 128.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *LWW*, p.125.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *LWW*, p.126.

⁵⁸ Lewis, *LWW*, p.126.

⁵⁹ Smilde, Appendices, p.9.

⁶⁰ Smilde, Appendices, p.13.

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