

# A Response to Nicholas Tattersall's "A Critique of *Miracles* by C. S. Lewis"

Darek Barefoot

Nicholas Tattersall quickly makes it clear that "[A Critique of 'Miracles' by C. S. Lewis](#)" is not for him a critical review but a search-and-destroy mission. When Lewis writes that naturalism entails the view that the ultimate reality, what we can't "go behind," is the natural system itself, I think the average reader understands the point he is making. It is the view that Carl Sagan espoused when he called the cosmos "all that is or ever was or ever will be." But for Tattersall, Lewis's language in this case is "totally ambiguous." Really?

How does Tattersall's own language hold up under this kind of mincing scrutiny? He claims early on that "there have been countless alleged miracles throughout history," and that "many of these alleged miracles have been shown beyond all dispute to be due to natural causes, while few or none of them have been shown beyond all dispute to be due to supernatural causes." How is Tattersall here defining "miracle," a word capable of various interpretations, especially in the context of events "throughout history"? And does this mean biblical history, Middle Eastern history, ancient history generally or all of human history? Since Tattersall has not been specific about what he means, it is hardly possible to evaluate his claims about "many" miracles having been proven "beyond all dispute to be due to natural causes." What is included under "natural causes"? Is anything ever "beyond all dispute" whatsoever? What means exist to know with such overwhelming certainty the precise character of "many" events from "throughout history" which someone somewhere might consider somehow to be miraculous? If Tattersall expects us to make reasonable assumptions here, it is more than he himself is willing to do in the case of Lewis's statements.

Next Tattersall claims that Lewis's argument is invalid because it equates "naturalism" with "determinism," accompanying this criticism with sweeping statements about naturalistic philosophers rejecting determinism. Anyone who has read Lewis's book with fair-minded attention will see that determinism per se is not the issue. Lewis analyzes the point of view that all of reality as we know it may be reduced to "natural causes," as opposed to some combination of natural and supernatural ones. This is the same distinction Tattersall himself expects us to have no trouble making when he speaks about "natural causes" as opposed to "supernatural causes" for miracles which allegedly have occurred "throughout history." Further, Lewis notes that these causes are seen as interlinked throughout the natural world. In this regard, an essay here by Richard Carrier refers to the universe functioning "coldly and mechanically and deterministically" ("[Ten Things Wrong with Cosmological Creationism](#)"). I am sure Carrier and other nontheists who use such language do not expect to be taken to task for defending classical determinism. [editorial note--Richard Carrier actually *is* a determinist, but the failure of this one example should not detract from the general point]

Tattersall further claims that by acknowledging that quantum theory is difficult to square with what we understand as the operation of cause and effect in general, Lewis comes close to seeing that "something has gone seriously wrong" with his argument. Here again Tattersall's tedious quest to find something--anything--to dispute turns up another non-issue. Quantum theory is foreign to everyone's expectation. Einstein is famous for having found it too strange to believe. To Lewis however, strange as it may be it is not in the least incompatible with a supernatural side of reality or damaging to his argument:

It would be, indeed, too great a shock to our habits to describe them [quantum events] as supernatural. I think we should have to call them sub-natural. But all our confidence that Nature has no doors, and no reality outside herself for doors to open on, would have disappeared. There is apparently something outside her, the Subnatural; it is indeed from this Subnatural that all all

events and all 'bodies' are, as it were, fed into her. And clearly if she thus has a back door opening on the Subnatural, it is quite on the cards that she may also have a front door opening on the Supernatural--and events might be fed into her from that door too. [*Miracles*, 13, cf. 27]

Tattersall then attacks Lewis's central premise, not by refuting it, but by refusing to comprehend it. After alleging again, incorrectly, that Lewis' argument is strictly with determinism, Tattersall then claims that it boils down to the proposition that "if every human's thoughts were completely determined by antecedent events then no human would be able to make rational inferences." Tattersall then rejects the proposition, saying with apparent sincerity that "there is no inconsistency in human reasoning being deterministic but rational." He uses the illustration of a computer program, observing that whether the program operates on "deterministic" and "materialistic" hardware (as if another kind existed) will not tell us whether it can "reliably" process information and yield "true statements." This misses Lewis's point by a mile. A slide rule or a dictionary can yield true responses in the same blind way a computer does. The question is whether a mechanism in which only blind natural processes are occurring can reason, can understand *why* a statement is true or false. None of the mechanisms man makes does that, nor can any mechanism in which only blind natural events occur be conceived of as doing so. Mechanisms do not "know" things, they merely "do" things. In computers, microcircuits and areas of magnetization of storage media are made to represent binary digits, which in turn are seen as representing other information; but it is the human mind, not the circuits themselves, which understands that information is being represented.

Tattersall's computer analogy nevertheless can be helpful if we pursue it. How, in fact, *can* we verify if we need to that the output of a computer is reliable? We could check some of its processed data against that from another computer, but that only puts the question off. What if we were in some doubt every computer we had access to? In that case, checking the responses of one computer with those of another would get us nowhere. The only way to be sure would be to check the output of the computer against human reason, which has the ability to "see" whether or not the computer's responses are logical. The trouble is that if our brains operate purely through non-rational events such as molecules combining and electrical currents flowing, then they operate in principle the same way a computer does. If that were the case, then our attempt to check the output of a computer would simply mean comparing the response of one mechanism, the computer, with the response of another mechanism, the human brain, without genuine "reason" to act as referee.

When Lewis tries to make this very point, that if grounds exist for distrusting our reason then we have no basis for "thinking" at all, Tattersall again finds the concept opaque:

In the paragraph above Lewis claims that 'inference itself is on trial' and also that 'There can be no question either of attacking or defending it.' If we cannot attack or defend the belief that rational inferences are possible, how can that belief be on trial or in doubt? There is little more than confusion and contradiction in what Lewis says here.

Actually, in the paragraph referred to Lewis observes that adopting a supposedly reasoned point of view which has the effect of putting our reason on trial is self-defeating, since it is illogical either to attack or defend reason by means of reason itself. If we are to use reasoning at all, then we must reject any belief--such as the belief that only blind natural processes occur in our brains--which has the effect of calling reason into question. Lewis is describing a contradiction, not falling prey to one.

Tattersall also says Lewis blunders in failing to acknowledge that we can believe even that which we understand imperfectly. We may not understand why the grass is green, but we don't on that basis question that it is green. Tattersall here confuses logical absurdity with phenomena incompletely known. To learn why grass is green simply involves gathering more information. To learn how non-rational processes give rise to rational thought is like learning how a three-dimensional object can be created by arranging lines on a two-dimensional surface. We need not draw lines all day long in every geometric pattern imaginable to realize that the task is impossible. It is true that by means of perspective drawing we can usefully represent a three-dimensional shape, such as a cube, in two dimensions, just as human reason can be represented and communicated usefully by computer programs and even by humbler devices such as

multiplication charts and slide rules. Nevertheless, we can identify a set of lines in two dimensions as representing a cube only because we occupy three-dimensional space, and similarly we can appreciate that the blind functions of a computer have been so arranged as to accomplish a rational purpose only because, unlike the computer, we possess genuine rationality.

A different way of looking at Lewis's point is to observe that the reason-based categories of "truth" and "falsehood" are not naturalistic or phenomenal, yet they are indispensable for understanding reality. Therefore all of reality cannot be phenomenal, that is, it cannot consist solely of patterns of matter and energy. Consider a statement such as a mathematical equation written on a piece of paper. No phenomenal property of the paper will reveal whether the equation on it is true or false or even that it is indeed an equation. Scientists can study the chemical composition of the paper and ink in minute detail without determining anything about the truth content of the statement. The reason has to do with the fact that ink marks on paper cannot *be* an equation or mathematical statement, they may only be used to *represent* a statement, just as a numeral represents a number without actually being a number.

No material object is "true" or "false." Nor is any arrangement of objects or series of events in itself either true or false. The carpet on the floor, the fly on the wall and the rings of Saturn are all composite objects with phenomenal characteristics. Such objects have in common that they may be large or small, hot or cold, positively or negatively charged, dense or diffuse, in one location as opposed to another, but they are neither "true" nor "false." In those special cases where we use those terms of phenomena we invariably mean them in the sense of "real" as opposed to "imaginary" or "natural" instead of "artificial," not in the sense in which we use them about statements, propositions or conclusions.

Clearly, on one level the human brain is a kind of biological computer driven by electrochemical interactions between neurons. But is it nothing more than that? Are the brain and its thought processes strictly "phenomenal"? If they are, then thoughts following one after the other in the brain are configurations of objects consisting of molecules, ions and free electrons occurring at intervals as brain functions proceed. The configurations are astoundingly complex, of course, but not so complex that they transcend their definition as phenomena and cease to be arrangements of objects. And here is where the problem arises, because "conclusions" about reality occur in the form of thoughts during the reasoning process. If the conclusions we reach are actually configurations of objects in the brain, in other words, phenomena, then they can no more be put into the categories of "true" or "false" than can any other arrangement of objects, events or circumstances. As Lewis observes, "Acts of thinking are no doubt events; but they are a very special sort of events. They are 'about' something other than themselves and can be true or false. Events in general are not 'about' anything and cannot be true or false" (17).

Can we perhaps say that that the configuration of objects which constitutes a thought is not itself a conclusion but rather represents a conclusion, just as we observed above that ink marks on a paper can represent a mathematical statement without in the strictest sense being the statement? A way out of the dilemma seems to lie in this direction until we appreciate that a set of objects which represents a statement must represent it to something other than itself. The paper with ink marks represents an equation, not to itself, but to a reasoning mind. When through the senses the mind views the ink marks on the paper an understanding, a thought, is generated, the thought being what the ink marks represent. But that thought, as we have seen, must consist of nothing more than a configuration of objects unless the brain's structure or processes somehow fall outside the phenomenal category. If there is nothing more to the mind/brain than objects in various states of interaction, then we can never hope to find anything of which a thought might consist other than phenomenal objects and events. What the set of objects consisting of paper and ink marks represents turns out to be nothing more than another set of objects in the brain, with neither set capable of qualifying as "true."

One set of objects coming into alignment with another is a process of registration, not comprehension. If we take a photograph of the paper with an equation written on it, a photochemical reaction causes the arrangement of molecules on the photographic film to correspond with the pattern of ink marks on the paper. The result is a secondary representation, but in no sense does the photographic film "understand" what is being represented simply by registering the physical image. The fact that some kind of registration

occurs in the brain is therefore of no help in establishing "truth" as a phenomenal category (see A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 1946, 91).

If "truth" has no meaning because reasoning, the process of arriving at truth, has no correlation with phenomena, then our intuitive notion that "truth" is real is merely a glitch in our mental programming. We cannot know anything to be "true," which is another way of saying we cannot know anything. Acts of "knowing" would be, to use Lewis's words, no more than "subjective events, items in somebody's psychological history," and all human knowledge would prove illusory. However, in the course of discrediting all knowledge, the knowledge of the mind/brain as purely phenomenal is discredited as well. Any reductionist theory which entails the conclusion that we cannot know anything ultimately refutes itself.

Even thinkers vociferously opposed to Lewis's theistic point of view have indirectly offered support to his line of argument. Rudolf Carnap, for example, in his book *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (1935), points out that language lacks logical content insofar as it simply expresses or is caused by the speaker's state of mind. Carnap puts exclamations and imperative commands in this category as well as lyrical poetry. Like a person's movements and demeanor, these constitute "symptoms from which we can infer something about his feelings or his character." He illustrates by citing the difference between laughing and saying "Now I am merry." We should sharply distinguish between the laughter and the statement, Carnap says. He continues, "This linguistic utterance asserts the merry mood, and therefore it is either true or false. The laughter does not assert the merry mood but expresses it. It is neither true nor false, because it does not assert anything, although it may be genuine or deceptive." Expressive utterances, Carnap insists, have "no assertional sense, no theoretical sense." An expressive utterance "does not contain knowledge" even though it may serve as an object of knowledge (Chap. 1).

A. J. Ayer, the widely read expositor of the "logical positivism" of Carnap and Viennese Circle, makes the same point in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, using the term "doubtful" to mean "potentially false" as opposed to "true":

Nor are we suggesting that our sensations are themselves doubtful. Indeed such a suggestion would be nonsensical. A sensation is not the sort of thing which can be doubtful or not doubtful. A sensation simply occurs. What are doubtful are the propositions which refer to our sensations...  
(93)

These observations are correct, of course, but neither Carnap nor Ayer proceeds to root out the implication as does Lewis. If the mind/brain is no more than a machine in which events cause other events, then every vocalization alike is no more than a "symptom," to use Carnap's term, meaning an outward evidence of a set of phenomenal circumstances in the brain at a point in time. The neurological events we call sensations "simply occur," as Ayer notes, and to entertain doubts about their trueness would be, as he rightly puts it, "nonsensical." However, it is common to all phenomenal events that they "simply occur," meaning that their occurrences may be described strictly in phenomenal terms; that is in fact what makes them "phenomenal."

Carnap stresses that assertions are uniquely representational: "these utterances represent a certain state of affairs; they tell us that something is so and so; they predicate something; they judge something" (loc. cit.). He does not and need not qualify what assertions he is referring to because all of them without exception are covered. They may be assertions about the concrete or the abstract, about physical entities or about other assertions. They may be about the "truth," intuitively understood, of a hypothesis or merely about its usefulness in predicting the results of future observations. They may be about certainty or about probability, about conformity to a detailed logical scheme or about simple consistency. Regardless of specific content every assertion is as Carnap says a type of conclusion, a judgment.

But a set of events or physical circumstances has no property of "judgment" relative to any other such set. To the extent that one set of circumstances has to do with another it is by occupying a position relative to the other in space and time, and perhaps by causing it or being caused by it. When and how is this strange judgment-claim invested in a set of circumstances which otherwise merely exists, from where does this

payload of "truth potential" come, since it certainly does not come from another set of circumstances which itself merely exists?

To those trying to refute Lewis's argument, it might be tempting to say that all talk of "reasoning" to "conclusions" which may be "true" or "false" is just that, talk, a word game we play among ourselves. What is real, they may insist, is human behavior, honed for survival by uncounted millennia of evolution, and that is all we can describe with confidence. Yet even this gambit is after all an assertion, a claim to some kind of knowledge. As Lewis says in summary:

The description we have to give of thought as an evolutionary phenomenon always makes a tacit exception in favour of the thinking which we ourselves perform at that moment... Our present act claims and must claim to be an act of insight, a knowledge sufficiently free from non-rational causation to be determined (positively) only by the truth it knows. But the imagined [behaviorally defined] thinking we put into the picture [of nature or phenomena] depends--because our whole idea of Nature depends--on the thinking we are actually doing, not *vice versa*. This is the prime reality, on which the attribution of reality to anything else rests. If it won't fit into Nature [or, phenomena], we can't help it. We will certainly not, on that account, give it up. If we do, we should be giving up Nature too. (23-24)

Lewis says that we have no choice but to conclude that reason, the process of arriving at truth, is "supernatural." But supernatural here does not mean ghostly or "spooky," but merely incapable of being included in any phenomenal picture of nature. There is a side to reality which we somehow have access to by means of thinking process and which is not explainable in phenomenal terms, and yet it affects phenomena or nature to the extent that our reasoning process motivates bodily actions.

Perhaps the most far-fetched evasion of this part of Lewis's case is offered by Tattersall in a footnote: "Even if this argument were sound, it would only show that it is impossible to rationally believe materialism to be true. It would not show materialism to be false." This strategy also invokes a self-refuting fallacy. We cannot speculate as Tattersall does that a proposition might be true in spite of its being immune to rational belief without admitting in the process of doing so that it is not, in fact, immune to rational belief. Definitionally truth cannot be irreconcilable with rationality.

A corollary to Lewis's conclusion is that natural selection, if it is a purely phenomenal process, could never have endowed the brain with the transphenomenal ability to reason. Put simply, nature selects for what animals *do*, not for what they *know*, and therefore by itself it can only yield external responses, not internal knowledge. Tattersall takes Lewis to task on this secondary point:

It is unclear as to how organisms are to feel delight about what is useful or gain aversions to what is dangerous when in complex situations without ever making any rational inferences. For his suggestion to have any force, Lewis needed to provide a detailed account of how this mechanism might work, how it might evolve and why it would have been preferred by natural selection.

It seems likely that Lewis avoided such detail because of the incidental nature of the point, but in any case examples are so plentiful and self-evident that Tattersall's objection rings hollow. Colony-forming insects build structures such as anthills and beehives with advanced engineering features, and carry on complex activities such as agriculture and organized self-defense entirely without the aid of reason. Bees do not "reason" that the six-sided cavities of a honeycomb represent the ideal compromise between strength and space efficiency, but it is obvious why nature selects those bees which build according that design. A ten pound salmon does not consciously solve the problem of how to navigate hundreds of miles of continental rivers, then thousands of miles of trackless ocean in order to feed, and then return to within feet of where it started in order to spawn. Bees, ants, salmon and other unreasoning creatures accomplish such feats instinctively, unthinkingly, in "programmed" fashion. Even as thoroughgoing a proponent of naturalism as Carl Sagan was able to make the distinction between behavior and knowledge:

[A chimpanzee] positions the hard-shelled fruit on the log and smashes it open--using a stone tool procured for the purpose. Hammer and anvil. No light bulb goes off above her head. There's no chin to fist, no hint of insight struggling to emerge, no moment of revelation, no strains from Also Sprach Zarathustra. It's just another routine, humdrum thing that chimps do. Only humans, who know where tools can lead, find it remarkable." [*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1992 ), 391]

Even at that, a good deal of human behavior as well falls into the "programmed" category. Ordinarily we do not need to reason that we must eat, drink and breathe in order to keep living. We are content to let instinct in the form of natural urges regulate those functions automatically. Just as there is no theoretical limit on the complexity of the programming of a computer, in theory there is no limit to the degree of complexity of biologically programmed, "instinctive" behavior. Instead of existing as ultra-sophisticated automatons, however, we human beings have a strange power of "understanding" the "whys" of phenomena around us, a power which Lewis says we blithely take for granted without coming to grips with what it tells us about reality. Naturally, Lewis sees it as pointing toward the existence of an undergirding Intelligence which we call God, but that is yet another part of his argument in *Miracles*.

There is more to Tattersall's review, as there is to C. S. Lewis's book, but the inadequacy of Tattersall's opening criticisms should lead thoughtful readers to consult *Miracles* for themselves before making up their minds.

4/17/2001