

The Great Cloud of Unknowing: From Naturalism to Nihilism Through Epistemology

July 02, 2002 by Doug Groothuis

Can we actually “know” the universe? My God, it’s hard enough finding your way around Chinatown. The point, however, is: Is there anything out there? And why? And must they be so noisy?—Woody Allen.¹

In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world—John 1:1-3, 9.

Immateriality of the soul. When philosophers have subdued their passions, what material substance has managed to achieve this?’Blaise Pascal.²

James Sire argues in *The Universe Next Door* that Naturalism leads to Nihilism when consistently pressed to the logic of its presuppositions. One of the “bridges from Naturalism to Nihilism” is “the great cloud of unknowing.”³ The basic argument concerns the justification of knowledge (or epistemology) in light of one’s worldview. Sire and others (see below) argue that humans would have no reason to trust their reasoning or observations should the universe be merely an impersonal product of purposeless matter that functions according to natural law without a Law Giver.

This can be argued in several ways. The most basic argument, as given by Sire, is that if human faculties are evolved only through natural selection (which is nonrational and random), there is no rational foundation for our knowing. We may assume our capacity to know, but can we justify this assumption according to our worldview? The argument could be put this way:

The Epistemological Argument Against Naturalism

1. Humans are the result of impersonal, nonrational, and nonpurposive forces operating in a closed system of cause and effect. As C. S. Lewis describes Naturalism, “Nature has no doors.” Or consider Nietzsche’s statement:

Rationality—How did rationality arrive in the world? Irrationally, as might be expected: by a chance accident. If we want to know what that chance accident was we shall have to guess it, as one guesses the answer to a riddle,—Friedrich Nietzsche. ⁴

2. Humanity's rational and observational faculties have emerged only on the basis of natural selection. That is, species endure and evolve according to their biological fitness.

3. We have no certainty that this natural, nonrational process should evolve capacities to know truth. Natural selection pertains to the utility of survival traits, not knowledge of reality. Consider the atheist, Anthony Flew's comments:

The dangers of Darwin's pointedly paradoxical expression 'natural selection'—and this danger has often been realized—is that it may mislead people to overlook that this sort of selection is blind and non-rational; precisely this is the point. ⁵

J. P. Moreland expands on this:

Our capacities to accurately sense and think about the world cannot be explained by saying that they evolved over time because of their survival value. For one thing, it is not clear that the ability to know truth from falsity is necessary to survive. As long as the organism interacts consistently with its environment it need not interact accurately. For example, if an organism always saw blue things as though they were red and vice versa, or large things as small and vice versa, that organism and its offspring would adapt to its environment. It is hard to believe that an amoeba grasps the way the world is, but it does interact with the world consistently. ⁶

4. Therefore, if naturalism is true, we have no basis to trust our reasoning or observations as veridical (truth-ensuring). Our beliefs might be veridical (that is, by a cosmic fluke whereby nonrational forces create an entity that can accurately reflect reality) but we would have no reason to hold these beliefs. So if the materialist theory is true, we would have no reason to believe it to be true. ⁷

5. Therefore, we must either:

a. deny our intuition that some truth can be known and become epistemological Nihilists or

b. embrace a worldview that makes truth possible.

6. But few people will take the Nihilistic step off the cliff. It contradicts common sense and would destroy scientific methods as truth-seeking procedures.

7. Therefore, a more adequate worldview is required to serve as the justification or foundation of our epistemology.

8. Christianity provides this justification with its doctrines of God, creation, and humanity. God, the rational Creator of all things, created humans in his image and likeness. This involves rationality, among other things. God created the world as an intelligible realm for humans to thrive in, through dependence on Him and the use of their rational faculties. Even after the fall, knowledge is possible because God ensures it. C. S. Lewis puts it like this:

The Theist is not committed to the view that reason is a comparatively recent development moulded by a process of selection which can select only the biologically useful. For him, reason—the reason of God—is older than Nature, and from it the orderliness of Nature, which alone enables us to know her, is derived. For him the human mind in the act of knowing is illuminated by the Divine Reason. It is set free, in the measure required, from the huge nexus of nonrational causation; free from this to be determined by the truth known.
8

Qualification 1: This argument, though, is also compatible with non-Christian monotheisms, such as Islam and Judaism, which also claim that a transcendent God created humans with the ability to know Him and the universe. So, the enterprising apologist may need to augment this argument with other kinds of arguments concerning the reality and uniqueness of Christ as God's ultimate and final revelation (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

Qualification 2: This argument also assumes that the Naturalist will appeal to some form of Darwinian evolution (natural selection). However, some modern Naturalists are abandoning or severing modifying (mutating?) Darwinism in light of the theory's rather embarrassing shortcomings.⁹ Nevertheless, any evolutionary theory that remains naturalistic will have to affirm that reason somehow evolved from the nonrational world by chance according to a purely material mechanism or mechanisms. So the epistemological argument still applies even to a modified (nonDarwinian) theory of naturalistic evolution.

Elaboration: Interactive Dualism Not Physicalism

The epistemological argument against Naturalism is also developed in J. P. Moreland's *Scaling the Secular City* (chapter three); especially pages 90-96). Moreland's argument is more sophisticated than Sire's and appeals to the philosophical problems of physicalism (Materialism) in explaining our mental states and

their potential veridicality. He argues that since physicalism reduces to or logically entails determinism, there would be no reason to think that a materially necessitated brain would know truth—which involves intellectual assessment and rational deliberation not allowed of determined mechanisms. Thought would be reduced to a mere reflex action on the order of a muscle twinge. But can glorified muscle twinges weigh evidence and reach warranted conclusions?

C. S. Lewis argues in a similar, but less developed, fashion in *Miracles* where he distinguishes between clauses for phenomena and reasons for holding beliefs. The former are nonrational while the latter demand an ability to have insight into truth. Consider how we use the word “because.” If we say “X moved because it was propelled by Y” we are using “because” in a causal fashion. Yet if we say “I believe X on the basis of Y” we are using “because” not in a causal fashion but with respect to reasons or grounds for believing X. Lewis argues that if Naturalism is true we could never grant reasons for holding beliefs since all our brain states would be rigorously determined in a materialistically caused fashion. Both Lewis and Moreland are arguing not only for a rational God to ensure that knowledge is possible, but that we require a mind distinct but related to our bodies (interactive dualism) in order to know truth. They also argue that mind is best explained by the Christian worldview. Sire’s version of the epistemological argument does not mention the need for an immaterial mind, but proceeds on more general grounds concerning the nature of the universe and humans according to the Naturalistic worldview.

More on the Epistemological Argument

Beverluis, John. *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985). The author is very critical of Lewis’s epistemological argument against Naturalism and of many other of his other arguments.

Jaki, Stanley. *The Absolute Beneath the Relative and Other Essays* (Langham, MD: University Press of America, 1988). See the chapters “Brain, Mind, and Computers” which argues against physicalism and “Monkeys and Machine Guns: Evolutionism, Darwinism, and Christianity.”

Meynell, Hugo. “An Attack on C. S. Lewis,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 8:3 (July 1991), 305-316. The author interacts with Beverluis’s arguments against Lewis’s apologetics and defends Lewis’s epistemological argument against Naturalism.

Plantinga, Alvin. "An Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism," *Logos: Philosophic Issues in Christian Perspective* 12, 1991, 27-49. A very carefully developed epistemological argument against Naturalism by a world-renowned Christian philosopher. Plantinga also develops this argument in his *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 12.

Purtill, Richard. *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 38-47. A treatment very sympathetic to Lewis' argument in *Miracles*.

Endnotes

¹ Woody Allen, *Getting Even* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 22.

² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by A. J. Krailshaimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 115/349. See also 108/339b.

³ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 82-86.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 125. Nietzsche should have rather said that reason came forth non-rationally instead of ir-rationally, since only rational beings can be irrational. Mindless, purposeless nature cannot be irrational, only nonrational. Nevertheless, Nietzsche uses the antithesis of rational-irrational to good dramatic and philosophical effect in this suggestive fragment. His philosophy has been rightly described as an incessant struggle against Nihilism—a struggle I believe he ultimately lost.

⁵ Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 17. Flew's comment was made in connection with deriving ethical principles from natural selection; he was not discussing epistemology per se. Nevertheless, the observation still holds for the epistemological realm (even if Flew does not mention it): rationality rests on blind and nonrational foundations.

⁶ J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), 50; see also pages 49-50. One of the original sources for this line of argument is Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 4th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1992), 112-115.

⁷ See Richard Purtill, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 38-47.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1978), 22-23.

⁹ See Philip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).