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Book Review: Agents Under Fire: Materialism And The Rationality Of Science

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BOOK REVIEWS

Agents Under Fire: Materialism and the Rationality of Science, by Angus Menuge. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004. Pp. 233. \$37.50 (cloth).

C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason, by Victor Reppert. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003. Pp. 132. \$14.00 (paper).

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Philosophical naturalism often threatens to eliminate theism as an unnecessary and undesirable hypothesis. The mind and its irreducible features were once considered a stronghold against such naturalistic elimination and reduction. Recently, naturalism has swept this area of philosophy, substituting naturalistic “cranes” for theistic “skyhooks,” to use Daniel Dennett’s terminology, pressing the point once again that theism is an unnecessary hypothesis. Many theists have been content to let naturalism occupy this territory. Some, however, have begun to reclaim the metaphysics of mind and rationality from naturalism. Two recent books that take this route are Victor Reppert’s *C. S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea (CSLDI)* and Angus Menuge’s *Agents Under Fire (AUF)*. In their own ways, Reppert and Menuge argue that when it comes to some aspects of the mind, it is preferable, perhaps indispensable, to explain it by means of a metaphysical “skyhook” rather than a mechanistic “crane.” Since both texts largely overlap in concentration, it is apropos to review them together. The main focus of Reppert’s book seeks to highlight and explicate C. S. Lewis’s argument from reason (AFR), an argument that contends that naturalism undermines rationality. In addition, there is excellent historical material about Lewis that we unfortunately will not be discussing in this review. Menuge’s larger (but more tightly focused) book deals with certain denominations of naturalism more specifically. As the title suggests, Menuge is especially concerned with the philosophical consequences of naturalism for rationality, intentionality, and the theoretical framework of science. Both books intersect on the subject of naturalism’s perceived detrimental effects for rational thought. Reppert and Menuge both claim that the assumptions of naturalism undermine rational thought and thus



undermine naturalism itself, whereas theism provides a more consistent alternative for science and rationality.

Case Against Naturalism

Reppert and Menuge both offer critical arguments against naturalism by appealing to the philosophy of mind. Reppert's criticisms are aimed broadly at naturalism with little distinction among its various denominations. In chapter 4 of *CSLDI*, this is made explicit by six different applications of *modus tollens* each of which take the following form:

- (1) If naturalism is true, then not-*X*.
- (2) *X*.

Therefore,

- (3) Naturalism is false.

The six aspects of mind and rationality that Reppert substitutes for *X* are: intentional states of mind exist; thoughts and beliefs can be true or false; a mental event can cause another event by virtue of its propositional content; logical laws exist and are relevant to reasoning; a single, metaphysically unified entity exists, which acts rationally; human cognitive faculties can be trusted to confer knowledge reliably. These six variations fall under the rubric of the AFR because in each case Reppert maintains that acknowledging the existence of rational inference implies the truth of the premise (p. 2). To abandon any one of the six substitution instances of *X* would in turn abandon rational inference itself. Consequently, naturalism is false because accepting naturalism entails the denial of rational inference, which is certainly more fundamental than naturalism itself.

Naturalists have two ways to block Reppert's multifaceted AFR. One option is to deny that each substitution instance of *X* is necessary for rational inference (as we know it) to exist. Essentially this strategy seeks to undermine the strength of the second premise of the AFR. Except in extreme forms of naturalism (e.g., eliminative materialism), most naturalists will likely not argue this way. The second, more promising route for naturalists, denies the first premise of the AFR. Indeed, many naturalists attempt to "naturalize" many, if not all, of the aspects of rational inference that Reppert believes are incompatible with naturalism. While many naturalists hope to provide a naturalistic account of intentionality, truth, logical laws, and other aspects of rational inference, this approach saddles the naturalist with a tall order of *prima facie* non-natural entities to naturalize.

Reppert's critical arguments against naturalism show much promise, though they provide only a skeleton of a case against naturalism that will require further detail in argumentation to substantiate. Often (but, importantly, not always) Reppert's substantiation of the first premise in an AFR appeals to extreme materialist views such as eliminative materialism to make his point. Most contemporary naturalists, however, do not hold to these extreme views. For example, Reppert uses quotations from Paul and Patricia Churchland to establish that if naturalism is true, then thoughts

and beliefs cannot be true or false (*CSLDI*, pp. 76–78). Reppert may be correct to maintain that naturalism is incompatible with thoughts and beliefs having a determinate truth-value, but this would certainly come as news to many naturalists who are not eliminativists. Reppert's arguments could be strengthened by demonstrating how the first premise of each AFR applies to naturalism generally, rather than only to certain extreme forms of materialism. Nonetheless, even when his case is not made explicit against, say, physical non-reductive mind-body functionalism, a little reflection on the line of argument provided by Reppert in defense of the premise in question can elucidate the difficulty inherent for any account of naturalism to account for the issue in question.

Reppert's arguments, if nothing else, place the burden of proof on naturalists to explain how naturalism coheres with the existence of rational inference. Like Reppert, we believe that naturalism is impoverished to meet such a tall order. Yet, this opinion is not shared among everyone (especially among the naturalists!), so there is room for more work to be done on the AFR. Most importantly, more arguments need to be brought to bear on the incompatibility of naturalism with the realities implied by the existence of rational inference. Reppert's work in *CSLDI* is the first step of a much larger project, if the AFR is going to succeed at refuting the most sophisticated forms of naturalism.

Menuge's criticisms of naturalism take a different approach than Reppert's sweeping AFR that is aimed at all forms of naturalism. Menuge distinguishes between "Strong Agent Reduction" (SAR) and "Weak Agent Reduction" (WAR), and levels specific criticisms against the best representatives of each materialist theory. SAR is best represented by philosophers who eliminate personal agency. This has most notably been undertaken by the eliminativist program in the work of Paul and Patricia Churchland. WAR is the more common form of naturalism found in approaches like functionalism and Daniel Dennett's intentional stance.

In chapter 2 of *AUF*, Menuge raises four objections to SAR. First is the "abstraction problem," which aims to show that a complete neurophysiological explanation of human actions is inadequate because it lacks the abstraction of human folk psychological states to explain the human behavior. Interestingly, Menuge employs arguments by Dennett to make this point against SAR. The second argument against SAR notes the ineliminable subjective point of view, which cannot be captured or reduced in a scientific, third-person perspective. Menuge calls this the "subjectivity problem." On this point, Menuge relies heavily on arguments made by John Searle and Thomas Nagel, both of whom are noted as thoroughgoing naturalists. The subjectivity problem is self-refuting for advocates of SAR because they cannot peel away the subjective point of view by which they attain scientific knowledge. "[Paul] Churchland's whole mistake," writes Menuge, "is that he thinks that the viewpoint of scientific theory can be used to establish conclusions independently of the presuppositions of adopting that viewpoint" (p. 40).

The third objection Menuge dubs "the ontological robustness problem," which shows how SAR, if true, would entail the elimination of an ontology—including logical, empirical, and theoretical postulates—that makes science possible. The fourth objection revisits the traditional problem of

incoherence for advocates of SAR. SAR seems incoherent because it eliminates folk psychology, part of which includes the framework of beliefs and rationality. If the language of beliefs and reasons must be eliminated with folk psychology, then it seems one cannot assert the truth of eliminativism on the grounds of having true beliefs and sound reasons. The standard response given by the Churchlands is to point out that this objection assumes the very paradigm SAR intends to disprove. In other words, to object to SAR on the grounds that it fails to meet what is reasonable according to folk psychology is question-begging. Menuge extends the incoherence objection to a new level by using the Gentzen logical system to illustrate what is incoherent about SAR. The point is not merely that it is incoherent according to a folk psychological analysis. Rather, it is that there is no rational ground left to stand on once one goes the route of SAR. Menuge notes, "No one will be persuaded to gouge out one's intellectual eyes without a proven replacement that will restore something resembling mental vision" (pp. 48–49).

In chapter 3 of *AUF*, Menuge focuses his criticisms on WAR. First, he criticizes functionalism, raising standard criticisms such as the Chinese Room Argument and the disjunction problem. Menuge spends most of his criticisms in this chapter on Dennett's intentional stance. Menuge finesses the abstraction, subjectivity, and incoherence problems he has already raised against SAR to apply to Dennett's version of WAR. Then Menuge raises an original criticism to Dennett's WAR, which he calls the "sufficiency problem." The sufficiency problem highlights Dennett's ambiguous faltering between "Minimalist Mother Nature" and "Hagiographical Mother Nature" to explain human intentionality. Minimalist Mother Nature is a barebones account of naturalism that relies only on survival of the fittest and the laws of nature to account for biological life. According to Menuge, Dennett depicts Hagiographical Mother Nature as a natural process that has foresight and purpose to design biological life to specific ends. If Dennett relies on Minimalist Mother Nature to give humans the intentional stance, then he is appealing to an insufficient source for human intentionality. On the other hand, if Dennett appeals to Hagiographical Mother Nature, then he is proposing an intentional cause that needs just as much explaining as human intentionality. Here, Menuge elucidates a powerful and original objection against Dennett's version of WAR. It is noteworthy that this sort of ambiguous invocation of "mother nature" to supply design and teleology frequently arises in the literature by naturalists, and Menuge's argument may have further uses than criticizing Dennett's intentional stance.

The strength of Menuge's approach is the specificity of his critical arguments. *AUF* advances the debate on critical points of eliminative materialism and Dennett's intentional stance. By probing the details of specific theories, the reader walks away with a clear grasp of some of the fundamental problems with trying to account for agency via SAR and WAR. The weakness of this approach is that the scope of materialist accounts of agency, especially of WAR, cannot be fully considered. Even though Menuge notes that most materialists account for agency with functionalism, his criticisms of functionalism are fairly standard ones to which most functionalists have initial responses. This is not to say that

his criticisms of functionalism are worthless. Rather, this shows that the sweep of Menuge's arguments against naturalism is only partial, even if it is substantial.

From here it is clear why *AUF* and *CSLDI* should be paired together. *CSDLI* sketches a basic program against naturalistic theories of the mind, while *AUF* exemplifies some of the specific criticisms of naturalized theories of mind that need to be addressed in order for the AFR to succeed. In this way, *CSLDI* and *AUF* can combine their strengths, while offsetting their weaknesses.

The Case for Theism

Reppert and Menuge are not content with only giving critical arguments against naturalism, though. Both proceed to give alternative answers that make better sense of rationality and science. Reppert calls the next stage in his argument 'explanatory dualism.' By this he means that while some events in nature can be explained in terms of purely mechanistic causes, the elements of rational inference cannot. Chapter 5 of *CSLDI* focuses upon three of these elements that he claims a 'consistent' naturalism fails to account for without undermining itself. If all of these elements are true, then "human beings possess rational powers that are impossible for beings whose actions are grounded entirely by the laws of physics" (p. 87).

Naturalists may try to rebut the AFR by claiming that evolution would select rationality over irrationality in order to give a species a better chance of survival. It seems plausible to believe that a species with a greater ratio of true beliefs would outlive a species with a lesser ratio. But Reppert rightly notes, "if a physical realm is causally closed, then it looks on the face of things as if it will go on its merry way regardless of what mental states exists, and if this is the case, then mental states simply do not matter with respect to what events are caused in the physical world" (p. 89). For instance, a species might have a better chance to survive by not knowing the truth. Certain falsehoods might be more conducive to survival. Reppert contends that a consistent physicalism leads to the conclusion that there are no mental states with propositional contents. The naturalist response usually tries to redefine intentionality with a dispositional account of what it is for a thought to be about something else. But Reppert notes that the naturalist is then committed to epiphenomenalism, the burden of explaining the causal efficacy of these dispositions by purely mechanistic laws.

The laws of logic are another element of rationality that Reppert claims the consistent naturalist cannot hold as true. For instance, positivists claimed that necessary truths must be strictly about the relation of ideas to one another. For if our knowledge of necessary truths were about the world, then it would be an utter mystery how we knew these truths. But if knowledge is only based upon experience, how can we have knowledge of something that is true in all possible worlds? Reppert answers, if God knows these necessary truths, and if he has created us, then he could have constructed us in such a way as to know these sorts of truth.

Reppert finds a third line of argument in the reliability of our rational faculties. We seem to expect the world to follow some sort of rational

order. At the very minimum, we seem to follow some sort of principles in our building of knowledge. Yet we cannot be so sure that the world 'out there' corresponds to these convictions if our faculties are only the result of naturalistic evolution. But theism, responds Reppert, makes perfect sense of this phenomenon. For if our faculties have been designed by God, then they should correspond to the world that he has made.

Reppert claims, "All of these lines of argument support the idea of a dualism of fundamental explanations, that is the idea that we cannot expunge purposes from the basic level of explanation without radically undermining the very scientific enterprise that provides the primary foundation for philosophical naturalism" (p. 101). Unfortunately this conclusion is overstated. Reppert has shown naturalism to be insufficient, but teleology does not follow as a result. He does temper this conclusion by admitting that 'explanatory dualism' is consistent with idealism or pantheism as well.

Menuge covers much of the same sorts of arguments as Reppert, but in more explicit form. In chapter 6 of *AUF* Menuge argues in favor of two theses originally advanced by Alvin Plantinga. One, already pointed out by Reppert, is that evolutionary naturalism leads to epiphenomenalism. Menuge goes about defending this first thesis with two arguments from C. S. Lewis as well. The first argument Menuge calls the empirical argument. This argument grants that a creature's (or computer's) responses can be improved indefinitely. Yet this can be done without acquiring one rational thought. Menuge rightly wonders how one can simply add thought to an unthinking mechanism. The second argument he calls the conceptual argument. The idea is that "natural selection is conceptually incapable of generating rational thought as a result of major contrasts between the process of natural selection and the process of reasoning" (p. 158). In other words, natural selection does not explain how we see inferences as correct. Nor does it even begin to explain our grasp of something like deductively valid reasoning. Both of these arguments lead Menuge to the conclusion that if epiphenomenalism is true, there is good reason to expect that our cognitive mechanisms are unreliable.

His second thesis is even stronger: even if epiphenomenalism can be overcome, it is still unlikely that our cognitive mechanisms are reliable. As discussed in Reppert, natural selection could have given us faculties that latch onto false beliefs, especially if these had better survival value. Menuge refers to this as psychological instrumentalism, the view that our beliefs can be useful without being true. And he argues that this is a far more probable state of affairs on a purely naturalistic account than psychological realism, the view that our beliefs are (normally) useful because they are true. Furthermore, Menuge argues that psychological instrumentalism implies theoretical instrumentalism, the view that scientific theories are merely useful computational devices, which gives strong warrant that theories may be nothing more than useful fictions. The consequence for naturalism should be obvious.

Menuge puts forth that these self-defeating problems make theism a compelling and reasonable alternative. For instance, in theism reason is conceptualized as prior to nature. Our rationality is seen as an imperfect participation in divine rationality. Also, mathematical and logical

concepts can be endorsed as platonic entities. Theism also extends to our theory choices. Symmetry, simplicity, and beauty are recognized as indicators of truth since they are characteristics of the Creator. The universe simply exemplifies these marks. In addition, theism gives a better general explanation of the reliability of cognitive mechanisms. If we are made in the image of a rational God who knows all truth, then psychological realism is a much more plausible thesis than psychological instrumentalism. Menuge, like Reppert, correctly admits that the inadequacy of scientific materialism does not make theism the only alternative.

Chapter 7 of *AUF* gives a strong case for the legitimacy of design as a respectable scientific conception. Menuge has two main arguments here. One, granted that concepts (in themselves) exist, intentionality and design cannot be fictional concepts since their legitimacy is established by the very nature of concepts and their connection to the world. Worst case scenario, to be confused is to have fictional concepts that are intentional mental entities. To deny this is to deny concepts exist. Furthermore, Menuge contends that the existence of human preconceptions establishes the reality of design. Since we plan to do things and follow through on them, this gives strong evidence that design is a causally efficacious category and thus something which science cannot ignore.

Menuge's second argument seeks to give reasons for thinking that undirected causes could not produce the capacity for directed causation. Since the causal nexus is not governed by norms of rationality, these norms cannot arise from it. Menuge claims several times throughout the book that the most promising naturalistic accounts of intentionality succeed only in displacing norms. They never really show how things arise from the non-normative in the first place. Menuge concludes, "the only coherent explanation of contingent intentionality is the existence of some necessary being, an agent from whom all other intentionality derives but who does not require further explanation" (p. 179). Menuge admits that though this may be a good philosophical reply, it will not stand the scrutiny of being called a scientific explanation.

So Menuge tries to bolster this philosophic explanation by dealing with a further objection. The idea of "conception" is considered antiquated by some naturalists. Some naturalists claim that everything we need to say about the mind can be done in terms of information-bearing states or messages. Menuge believes that such explanations are more examples of relocating the original problem. But a second line of response, and one that is a more scientific explanation for the legitimacy of design, is that the information theoretic complexity of human cognition points to design. In this carefully articulated section, Menuge gives an application of Dembski's recent work in complex specified information (CSI). Space disallows any depth here, but Menuge makes progress for the conclusion that CSI can only be accounted for by design. Either scientific materialism must accept its failure to explain intentionality and CSI, or it must explain them by abandoning materialism.

AUF's last chapter discusses the interaction of Christian theism with science. Rejecting Michael Ruse's reductionistic account, Menuge construes that science and religion will both prosper when both are practiced with humility and a greater openness to a diversity of ideas.

Again, it should be clear why *AUF* and *CSLDI* should be viewed in harmony. Whereas *CSLDI* gives several sorts of reductio arguments and thus a general case for 'explanatory dualism,' *AUF* gives the theistic alternative in more concise philosophical and scientific outlines. Both texts serve as excellent complements to one another.

Conclusion

We have noted numerous strengths to both *CSLDI* and *AUF*. Moreover, we wish to stress that these two books serve as excellent models for what will hopefully be a continued philosophical criticism of naturalism's ability to explain the mind. Despite these strengths, *CSLDI* and *AUF* only begin to scratch the surface of naturalistic accounts of the mind and rationality. In particular, if a case against naturalism is going to be made on the grounds of something like the AFR, theists need to evaluate the merits of many more naturalistic theories such as non-reductive functionalism, a view that receives very little attention in either book, even though it is most likely the predominant naturalistic account of the mind among contemporary analytic philosophers. We mention these shortcomings not because Reppert and Menuge have done inadequate work. Rather, we believe that their work is an invitation for more likeminded theists to explore the failures of naturalism to explain the metaphysics of the mind. Perhaps *CSLDI* and *AUF* will lead a renaissance of Christian scholarship that brings the explanatory force of theism to bear on rationality and the philosophy of mind, while demonstrating the weaknesses of naturalism in the process. Arguably, this renaissance is already underway in the writings of William Hasker, J. P. Moreland, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Charles Taliaferro, and others who argue that theism provides a unique and compelling explanation of the mind with which naturalism cannot contend. If nothing else, *CSLDI* and *AUF* make an initial case for theism, while placing a remarkable burden of proof on naturalists. We recommend both of these books not only for the information they convey, but also because we hope that more Christians will join in the project of reclaiming the philosophy of mind, which is modeled in *CSLDI* and *AUF*.

Mill on God: The Pervasiveness and Elusiveness of Mill's Religious Thought, by Alan P. F. Sell. Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004. Pp. 202, \$29.95

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I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country,
of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never
had it: I grew up in a negative state with regard to it.

J.S. Mill (cited by Sell, p. 6)

Alan Sell's *Mill on God* fills an important gap in scholarship on Mill's religious views. The fact that Sell brings with him Christian concerns and