

## WHAT LEWIS REALLY DID TO *MIRACLES*

A philosophical layman's attempt to  
understand the Anscombe affair

**Arend Smilde**

**ABSTRACT** – An examination of Elizabeth Anscombe's critique of C. S. Lewis's *Miracles* (1947), chapter 3, and of the changes introduced in the book's revised edition (1960) shows that Lewis fully maintained his original position, apparently using Anscombe's attack chiefly to improve his own argument. The present essay leads up to a proposal for a very brief summary of the whole exchange, followed by a brief consideration of Anscombe's final appreciation and further critique (1981), and concludes by arguing that neither party to the debate won, while both gained.

### 1

C. S. Lewis's philosophical debate with Elizabeth Anscombe on 2 February 1948 is well known to be well-known. But is it known well? The standard picture of a clear and painful public defeat suffered by Lewis at the hands of Anscombe is remarkable chiefly for the fact-free manner in which it has often been presented – if by the facts of a debate we mean verifiable details about its topic, about the actual exchange of ideas, and about the way it affected the debaters' further thought on the subject. Whenever the encounter is mentioned in books or articles about Lewis, the chances are, first, that one or two quotes are given from a small fund of testimonies illustrating Lewis's unhappiness in the aftermath of the debate; and second, that the reader is left wondering exactly which turn or |<sub>10</sub> episode in the exchange may have troubled Lewis – and why this obviously crucial element is given such scant treatment, if any.

As an avid reader of almost everything Lewis wrote, and long intrigued by this debate, but without philosophical training, I welcomed the publication of Victor Reppert's *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument of Reason* in 2003. Here at last was someone properly schooled in philosophy and

evidently interested in the issue, taking the trouble to expound it for the general reader with special reference to the debate between Lewis and Anscombe. Reppert in fact did provide me with an important distinction (new to me) that helped me see what actually happened there, as will appear below. Yet the book left me still unsatisfied. Perhaps predictably in view of its title, and perhaps inevitably from Reppert's point of view, his account of the actual debate and its aftermath soon gets entwined with, and before long is eclipsed by, his own further development of the subject, with reference not to the 1948 debate but to recent academic fashions. Nor did I find here what I further (perhaps naively) hoped to find: a very brief yet perfectly adequate summary, epigram-like if possible, capturing the essence and meaning of this episode in Lewis's public career. Ideally, this would provide future writers about him with a new, fuller and probably more interesting standard view.

In the end the best thing Reppert's book did for me was to send me to the sources. I have attempted my own scrutiny of the few most obviously and directly relevant published writings of the two contenders. The point is that Lewis has millions of readers, most of them philosophical laymen, and 'it often happens', as he once explained while embarking on a bit of Old Testament study without knowing Hebrew, 'that two schoolboys can solve difficulties in their work for one another better than the master can'.<sup>1</sup> What follows is an account and analysis of my findings, leading up to my proposal for a very brief and widely useful summary of the Anscombe affair. The documents discussed are presented as an online appendix to [|11](http://www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendix.pdf) this essay at [www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendix.pdf](http://www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendix.pdf). It appeared to be the thing to do if this affair is ever to get really well known.

## 2

In her 'Reply to Mr. C. S. Lewis's Argument that "Naturalism" is Self-Refuting',<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe<sup>3</sup> specifically criticized chapter III of Lewis's then

---

<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), opening paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> First published in *The Socratic Digest* Nr. 4 (1948), pp. 7-15; later in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. II, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1981), 224-232, with the relevant part of her preface on pp. ix-x. Page references are to the latter edition.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Midgley, a friend and fellow student of Elizabeth Anscombe's at Oxford from about 1940 onward (both were born in 1919), has reflected in her autobiography that during their undergraduate days 'her [Anscombe's] approach was as far as possible from the standard triumphant "But what could that possibly mean?" which was the parrot cry of brisk young men who had picked up enough logical positivism to be sure already that it couldn't mean anything. She could see that it did mean something ... but it was still very hard to say just what'. Never-

recent book *Miracles*. Published in May 1947 by Geoffrey Bles, this book was, among other things, the culmination of much anti-naturalist thought as developed and variously expressed by Lewis in the course of at least a decade. In chapter III, ‘The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist’, he discussed the validity of rational thought in a universe where – as the naturalist asserts or implies – all events without exception are in the last resort determined by ‘irrational causes’. Lewis concluded that in  $\omega$  such a universe rational thought cannot be valid since it, too, must be a product of irrational causes; or else, if any rational thought *is* valid, we must recognize that there is after all something more to the universe than irrational causes, i.e. more than just nature.

Basically, Anscombe agreed with Lewis that naturalism (in this sense) is untenable. But she considered his ‘argument from reason’<sup>4</sup> a faulty way to attack it. For one thing, she criticized the way Lewis had been using the word ‘irrational’. He had suggested, she pointed out, that all natural causes are ‘irrational’; but he ought to have distinguished the large and highly relevant category of *non-rational* causes, which is the kind of causes really at work in nature. Let rational thought be produced by natural, non-rational causes, said Anscombe: there is no need at all on that account to doubt its ‘validity’; such doubt is only in place when we know that there has been some particular cause at work which is a notorious producer of unreasonable beliefs. Lewis’s use of the words ‘valid’ and ‘validity’ was in fact another thing she criticized; ‘Isn’t this question about the validity of reasoning a question about the validity of *valid* reasoning?’<sup>5</sup>

These two criticisms are worth mentioning if only because Lewis explicitly allowed their justness. He did so (without further allowances) in a brief note appended to Anscombe’s paper when it was published in the *Socratic Digest* for 1948. Also appended was an excerpt from the Socratic Club’s minute-book about the discussion that took place after the paper had been read. Many years later, in 1981, Anscombe included her critique of Lewis – with the

---

theless, Anscombe ‘was sometimes fractious, intolerant and unreasonable’ and ‘her devils were a good deal less active in those early days than they became later [i.e. from 1942 on] after she moved to Cambridge and came under Wittgenstein’s influence’ (Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir*, 2005, p. 115). During the academic year 1946-47, Anscombe was back in Oxford but still attending tutorials with Wittgenstein in Cambridge on the philosophy of religion. She became good friends with Wittgenstein, who named her as one of his three literary executors. She was a devout and sometimes militant Catholic from her early undergraduate days till the end of her life. She married the philosopher Peter Geach in December 1941, but remained ‘Miss Anscombe’ for everyone including her husband. They had seven children, one of whom also became a philosopher and married one.

<sup>4</sup> A term not employed by either Lewis or Anscombe and perhaps not yet current in their day. I have found the term to involve a risk for its users to neglect the question what the argument argues *for*.

<sup>5</sup> Anscombe, *o.c.*, 226. Two further fragments from this part of her attack are worth quoting: ‘What do you mean by “really valid”?’ and ‘What *can* you mean by “valid” beyond what would be indicated by the explanation you would give for distinguishing between valid and invalid ...?’

two appendices – in the second volume of her *Collected Philosophical Papers*. It is the last item of the book's third section, <sup>13</sup> 'Causality and Time', and as such the last piece in the book, which contains twenty-one papers in all. Remarkably, more than a third of Anscombe's 3½-page general introduction to the volume is about the 'Reply to Lewis', which, as she points out, was her 'earliest purely philosophical writing which was published'.<sup>6</sup>

Lewis's appended note is useful as an approach to the affair since Anscombe's critique is, as Walter Hooper has called it, 'complex'.<sup>7</sup> Less charitably but more to the point, it might be called a rather weak performance in exposition. To be sure, Lewis had himself not been at his best in chapter III of *Miracles*, as we shall see. Yet perhaps few readers coming straight from the engaging general liveliness and clarity of his writing will make it to the end when trying to read Anscombe's 'Reply', or will make it and at one sitting have a clear sense of main and side issues, or an idea of exactly what is good and what is no good. It is therefore fortunate that we have Lewis's note telling us at least what he made of it – followed by the important testimony of what he actually did to *Miracles* many years later.

It was in fact more than a decade later, when *Miracles* was scheduled to be re-issued as a Fontana Books paperback, that Lewis seized the opportunity to re-write and expand chapter III. 'I was by no means in the vein', he wrote as he submitted the result to his publisher on 8 August 1959, 'and the job was itself very ticklish and the weather very hot – so you're lucky it took no longer'. The change was considerable. The original chapter as a whole had sixteen paragraphs; in the revised version the first six of these (1,184 words) were kept unchanged, but the remaining ten paragraphs (1,759 words) were replaced by a wholly new section of twenty- <sup>14</sup> five paragraphs (3,698 words); the total number of words went up from 2,943 to 4,882. The chapter title was changed to 'The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism'. A few dozen small improvements were made elsewhere in the book,<sup>8</sup> and the new edition of *Miracles* came out in May 1960.

---

<sup>6</sup> Anscombe, *o.c.*, ix.

<sup>7</sup> 'Oxford's Bonny Fighter', chapter 16 in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table* (ed. James T. Como, new edition, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego etc. 1992; re-issued by Ignatius Press, San Francisco in 2005 as *Remembering C. S. Lewis*), 162. The chapter is a brief history of the Oxford University Socratic Club during its first thirteen years (1942-54) when Lewis was the Club's president and presented a paper of his own there about once a year.

<sup>8</sup> In a letter of 4 December 1959 to his publisher Lewis suggests a cover text or trade information for the paperback *Miracles*: 'This is neither an abridgement nor a reprint but a new edition. The author has re-written a large part of Chapter ? [*sic*] and corrected all errors that he could find elsewhere' (*Collected Letters* III, p. 1103) For a full survey of all the changes outside the re-written chapter see [www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendices.pdf](http://www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendices.pdf). Some of the additional changes are clearly relevant to the Anscombe affair, such as the one in ch. II and the first one in ch. XIV.

About his use of ‘valid’ Lewis had said, in his note of 1948, ‘I admit that [this] was a bad word for what I meant; *veridical* (or *verific* or *veriferous*) would have been better’.<sup>9</sup> In other words, he welcomed the idea of an increased emphasis on the claim of reasoning to be truth-telling, or truth-making, or truth-bearing. However, when revising the chapter in 1959 he made no changes to the way he used ‘valid’ (or ‘validity’) – when he still used it at all. But he did so a good deal less now. The word had occurred eighteen times in the original chapter, but in the revised version it makes only six appearances, with just two of them in the new section of twenty-five paragraphs; which is to say that there had been fourteen instances in the discarded section of ten paragraphs. None of the alternative words proposed in 1948 (‘veridical’ etc.) were actually used. The word ‘irrational’, however, was consistently banished from chapter III. The word never appeared in the six-paragraph section that was retained in the new edition; but it had made twelve highly emphatic appearances in the rest of the original chapter.<sup>10</sup> In the revised chapter – that is, in the long new section – ‘non-rational’ has clearly taken the place of ‘irrational’ but at the same time, in line with the fate of ‘valid’, takes an altogether humbler place than its predecessor ‘irrational’ did in the old edition. ‘Non-rational’ makes only four appearances in the revised chapter, to which we may perhaps add two instances of ‘not rational’.<sup>11</sup>

While it is not strictly true to say that ‘non-rational’ *took the place of* ‘irrational’ in chapter III, this replacement is quite precisely the change that was made to chapter IV. The impression usually given in discussions of the Anscombe affair is that Lewis revised chapter III and left it at that. But in fact there is this further change – among a few others – in chapter IV; all instances of ‘irrational’ were consistently changed to ‘non-rational’.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Anscombe, *o.c.*, 231. Lewis’s ‘Note’ and the excerpt from the Socratic minute-book have also been published as appendices to his own paper ‘Religion without Dogma?’ (1946), reprinted in several collections. This 1946 paper, part of a long and intermittent discussion with the Oxford philosopher H. H. Price, includes a brief version of Lewis’s ‘argument from Reason’ and was originally published in the same *Socratic Digest* as Anscombe’s paper (cf. note 2 above).

<sup>10</sup> Bles edition 1947, ch. III, paragraphs 8 through 12.

<sup>11</sup> Fontana edition 1960, pp. 23, 27, 28, resp. 22, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the first (Geoffrey Bles) edition’s pp. 33, 34, 35, 39 with Fontana pp. 29, 30, 31, 34. The other changes in chapter IV are: (1) a considerable expansion of the first sentence; (2) three cases of ‘Rational’ changed to ‘rational’, one case of ‘Reason’ and one of ‘a Reason’ both changed to ‘reason’; (3) the deletion of one sentence, perhaps considered to be redundant, in the fifth paragraph.

After chapter IV, the original book had nine more instances of ‘irrational’. Somewhat surprisingly, none of these were altered in the revised edition.<sup>13</sup> The reason why Lewis made no further changes from ‘irrational’ to ‘non-rational’ after chapter IV may well have been simple inadvertency. The need for this change is indeed debatable or simply absent in some cases; but in chapter XIV, where he is referring back to chapter III, and also in chapter XIII, Lewis clearly ought to have made the same change as in chapter 16 IV.<sup>14</sup> As we saw, Lewis called it a ‘ticklish’ job, done in hot weather; the rewritten part of his revised chapter actually contains a little memento of that famously hot summer of ’59.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the first edition had its own three instances of ‘non-rational’. They all appeared in chapter V and, interestingly, each of them in conjunction with ‘non-moral’.<sup>16</sup> Lewis twice uses the phrase ‘non-moral and non-rational cause(s)’ (p. 44), and once the phrase ‘non-moral, non-rational Nature’ (p. 48). Of particular note, however, is one further juxtaposition of absent rationality and absent morality on page 44, because here we catch Lewis, as it were, in the act of overstating his case and so inviting Anscombe’s attack: *non-rational* here becomes *irrational*. Instead of calling natural causes ‘non-moral and non-rational’, Lewis for once reverses the order of the two epithets – and subtly modifies the one now coming first. The resulting phrase is ‘irrational and non-moral’. In the context of the present enquiry, this shading of *non-rational* into *irrational* must not go unnoticed. It is as if Lewis, in shifting his main concern ever so slightly from the non-moral to the non-rational character of nature, is led into the temptation of discrediting this non-rationality and dubbing it *irrational*. And, as we have seen, when revising the book he failed to change this instance of ‘irrational’ along with all 17 further instances from this chapter onward.

To sum up, while the revision on this crucial point of vocabulary was not carried out quite meticulously throughout the book, yet chapters III and IV, where the intervention was most in order, were effectively purged of their stress on the ‘irrationality’ of nature-according-to-naturalism.

---

<sup>13</sup> Compare Bles pp. 44, 46, 91, 125, 126, 127, 152 with Fontana pp. 38-39, 41, 79, 108, 109, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Bles p. 152 and Fontana p. 130; Bles p. 127 and Fontana p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Fontana p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> In chapter V the argument from Reason is receiving its usual Lewisian support and parallel in what may be called the argument from Ethics. A concise example of the two key arguments in conjunction is in Lewis’s 1942 essay ‘Miracles’ (published both in the American 1970 and the British 1979 volume called *God in the Dock*), which as a whole prefigures the book: ‘In order to think we must claim for our own reasoning a validity which is not credible if our thought is merely a function of our brain, and our brains a by-product of irrational physical processes. In order to act, above the level of mere impulse, we must claim a similar validity for our judgements of good and evil. In both cases we get the same disquieting result. The concept of nature itself is one we have reached only tacitly by claiming a sort of *super-natural* status for ourselves’. Lewis’s use of ‘valid’ and ‘irrational’ in this piece is, of course, pre-Anscomb-

The change appears to be related to a decision of Lewis not to press the claim he had made, in chapter III, at the end of the six-paragraph opening section that survived the revision. He did maintain, but would no longer unduly press, his point that naturalism is ‘a proof that there are no such things as proofs – which is nonsense’.<sup>17</sup>

In the old edition he certainly had tried to press that point. It was, in that edition, in the course of this project that he had begun using the word ‘irrational’ and used it more frequently than in any later chapter. He soon reached what he called ‘a rule’, printed in italics, ‘that *no thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes*’.<sup>18</sup> Four paragraphs further on, however, he had not really made any progress as he stated: ‘every theory of the universe which makes the human mind a result of irrational causes is inadmissible, for it would be a proof that there are no such things as proofs. Which is nonsense’.<sup>19</sup> This repetition sounds tired; there is nothing to make it the effective *ostinato* of a healthy rhetoric.

Another sign that Lewis was on a wrong track here is the way he followed up a promise implied on page 26 of the old edition, three lines into the section that was later to be discarded: ‘...we can believe in the validity of thought only under certain conditions’. Readers hoping to hear these conditions spelled out had to be quite <sup>18</sup> patiently attentive. Lewis went on and on amplifying the negative insight expressed in italics on page 27 – the ‘rule’ quoted above. It is not until the end of page 29 that valid thought comes back into focus and invalid thought is left alone. Turning yet another page, we arrive at last where Lewis must have hoped to get us when he proposed to think out the conditions. ‘The validity of thought is central: all other things have to be fitted in round it as best they can’. The conditions are – in fact, the one great condition for validity is – that this validity be *central*. The idea is expressed well enough with this term, even if Lewis expressed it differently elsewhere, e.g. as ‘self-evident’ or ‘axiomatic’. It is an important idea, and it is clearly the point Lewis had to make and wished to make in this chapter; he was to defend it to the end of his days. But, brief as the chapter is, he had spent most of it telling us what is wrong, not what is right. He had failed to see that, for the job at hand, the negative approach pretty soon ceased to be an obvious way to success.

---

ian. What I called the ‘argument from Ethics’ got its fullest Lewisian treatment in *The Abolition of Man* (1943).

<sup>17</sup> Bles p. 26; Fontana p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Bles p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Bles p. 28.

Now to go yet a little deeper into this, the improvement brought by the revision is visible when we compare these long-deferred ‘conditions’ with their counterpart in the revised chapter. That counterpart is in the ‘terms’ mentioned at the bottom of page 21 in the revised Fontana edition, where we read: ‘the act of inference [can be] the real insight that it claims to be ... only on certain terms’. The thing to note is that this comes, now, not three lines but almost three pages after the end of the retained section – Lewis having first taken time to tell us what he positively means by acts of inference, that is, by the essential thing in valid thought. Acts of inference (or acts of thought, or acts of knowing) are ‘a very special sort of events’ in that ‘they are “about” something other than themselves and can be true or false’. It is only after this passage, which has no parallel in the first edition, that Lewis submits that there are ‘terms’ attached to this curious faculty of being either true or false. And then without delay, as the first underlinable thing on the next page: ‘the act of knowing[’s] ... positive character must be determined by the truth it knows’. Briefly stating that this is impossible in a <sub>19</sub> universe as defined by naturalism, he then spends several pages examining three counter-arguments to this claim, i.e. arguments attempting to preserve a naturalistic face for rationality. Rational thought might perhaps be a product of natural selection; or of experience; or of daily practice. In other words, we are now almost constantly thinking about terms on which thought *can* be valid.

All this is much better than the earlier insistence on naturalism-as-a-proof-that-there-are-no-proofs. Meanwhile, the possible successor Lewis temporarily allows – naturalism as an attempted proof that there *are* proofs – fares no better. It too is shown to fail; and its failure produces the discovery that ‘reason is our starting point’. This conclusion is, of course, simply a rephrasing of the old one, ‘the validity of thought is central’, or axiomatic. The new way to reach the old conclusion, however, is both more inviting and more compelling. It is a more natural road to nature’s ‘frontier’ – the subject of chapter IV.

The improvement is, I think, the one recommended by Victor Reppert. If the Argument from Reason is to be kept flying, we do well to frame it not as a ‘skeptical-threat argument’ but as a ‘best-explanation argument’.<sup>20</sup> A move from the former to the latter mode appears to be the essence of Lewis’s revision of *Miracles*, chapter III. Lewis decided to bother less about the somewhat unreal problem that Reason might not work: any opponent in any real debate is constantly attesting his or her belief that Reason *does* work. Instead, he spent more

---

<sup>20</sup> Reppert, *CSL’s Dangerous Idea*, 59-60. A fuller name for ‘best-explanation argument’ is ‘inference to the best explanation’, as I learned later and elsewhere. I confess that, as a philosophical layman and a non-native reader of English, I was nonplussed for a while by Reppert’s – and his publisher’s – failure to provide the hyphen in ‘best-explanation argument’ and ‘skeptical-threat argument’.

time treating rationality – best of all his naturalistic opponent’s employment of it – as a fact in search of explanation.

At the same time, and in the same movement, the focus of what he meant by Reason (if there was a focus) appears to have shifted |<sub>20</sub> away from reasoning as a human faculty toward rationality as a set of eternal and unassailable relations. It may be doubted whether this latter distinction<sup>21</sup> in fact enjoyed all the attention it deserved from Lewis. The move was nevertheless a happy one, even if it was ‘a ticklish job’.<sup>22</sup>

## 5

Lewis began following the new course in the revised chapter of *Miracles* with an implicit nod to Anscombe. Shortly after beginning the long new section of the revised chapter, he invites the reader ‘to notice the two senses of the word *because*’. As we know from her later comments, Anscombe considered the revision a real improvement on the first version, and also an improvement on her own paper. The gain was in an increased ‘recognition of the depth of the problem’. But she still saw ‘much to criticize’.<sup>23</sup> And indeed, after the nod to Anscombe we find Lewis soon getting under his own steam again. What is worse for Anscombe, the conviction which was probably nearest to her heart in this matter appears to have produced, through her paper, the very opposite conviction in Lewis.

The word *because*, he points out, denotes either a Cause-and-Effect relation or a Ground-and-Consequent relation. This is pretty exactly the thing Anscombe had urged him to recognize. In her plea for better thinking about causes, she had warned him that *because* is a treacherous word.<sup>24</sup> Lewis heeds the warning and duly highlights the |<sub>21</sub> treachery. They are perfectly agreed now that nature is basically an affair, not of irrational, but of *non-rational*

---

<sup>21</sup> Kindly pointed out to me by Professor Marcel Sarot, Utrecht, while discussing an earlier version of this paper with me.

<sup>22</sup> Curiously in view of my interpretation of the change, a comparison of the revised chapter’s last sentence with that of the original chapter would in itself suggest a change in the opposite direction. This might further suggest that Lewis would not have characterized the change quite the way I do.

<sup>23</sup> Anscombe, *o.c.*, x.

<sup>24</sup> The pitfalls of the word *because* in the present context may have enjoyed some attention from Lewis well before Anscombe’s critique, as appears from a somewhat enigmatic remark in a letter to Dorothy Sayers of 20 May 1943: ‘Yes – there was going to be a note on the word *because*’ (*Collected Letters* II, p. 575). On 13 May, Sayers had complained to him about the lack of ‘any up-to-date books about *Miracles*’; on 17 May he had replied telling her ‘I’m starting a book on *Miracles*’ and sending her his 1942 essay on the subject (see note 16). It is not known what she wrote to him between 17 and 20 May 1943.

causes, and that non-rational causes are unconnected with any act of thought deserving of the name. But their conclusions from this are exactly opposed. Anscombe's argument is that we can't postulate non-natural causes for rationality since we can't postulate any causes for rationality at all; therefore this case for the existence of something outside nature falls to the ground. However, her stressing the non-existence of any causes for rationality only serves to strengthen Lewis's original conviction – that rationality is a non-natural thing.

To paraphrase the whole affair as briefly as possible, starting with Lewis's original proposition and ending with his final statement as implied in the revised *Miracles*:

- L. *If thoughts have only natural causes, then all thought must be irrational.*
- A. *But there is nothing irrational about causation.*
- L. *Ah, you're right there – but I'm afraid there is nothing rational to it either.*
- A. *Don't be afraid: rationality has no causes, and needs no causes.*
- L. *I daresay it doesn't. It's very special indeed. It's not caused by other things, nor causing them, but 'about' them. Nor would we humans have ever begun to distinguish reason from the rest if reason had not been there in the first place. Apparently causes are not everything: which is what I was saying.*

This, perhaps, may serve as the brief summary I hoped to distil from the sources. |<sub>22</sub>

What remains to be found out is exactly why Anscombe thought the revision of *Miracles* a considerable improvement and still saw much to criticize. Anscombe's own last words on the matter, in 1981, were that

he doesn't explore this idea of 'an act of knowing solely determined by what is known', which is obviously crucial ... I think we haven't yet an answer to the question I have quoted from him: 'What is the connection between grounds and the actual occurrence of the belief?'

This could be rhetorical; the intended implication might be that we are certainly never going to have the answer. At the same time it is significant that she still seems prepared to think and talk about this 'connection' at all. It suggests that she was, perhaps, more willing now than she had previously been to suspect some sort of real competition between natural causes and unnatural ones; as if Lewis would have had a point if he had shown exactly how the grounds for a

belief result in someone's adopting that belief, or how the thing known determines the knowledge of it.<sup>25</sup>

|<sub>23</sub> But of course he could never have shown this in a way that would satisfy any real or acting defender of naturalism. This, in fact, had been his whole point, the very reason why he had brought up the matter in the first place – as Anscombe herself had helped him clarify. There is a thing which is *there* and yet is *not nature*. To explain the obstinately inscrutable 'connection' would presumably be to reduce that thing to nature and so to obviate Lewis's point. His point is that it can't be explained. If it were explained, there would have been no point, no argument from reason, and no Anscombe affair.

## 6

There are two further testimonies from the two contenders about their differences. These are briefer than the briefest formula we could have found. Lewis and Anscombe have both been reported to say 'I won'.<sup>26</sup> On the Anscombian view, there might be a way to accept both comments as 'full' yet compatible explanations of what happened. Each would then be perfectly true in its way – the one having causes, the other having grounds. There would be no end, however, to the succeeding debate about who had the grounds and who had the causes. If for no better reasons, it might therefore be safer to say that both lost.

---

<sup>25</sup> Another comment by Sarot (cf. note 21 above) was that it might be useful to include Anscombe's famous little book *Intention* (1957) in my enterprise and treat it as part of the debate. I haven't done so, partly because this might better be left to specialists, but also because there is nothing in the published Lewis corpus (including the *Collected Letters*) to suggest that Lewis ever read *Intention*. In fact the 1960 revision of *Miracles* itself makes no mention whatever of Anscombe. This may seem strange; but if Lewis remembered their 1948 debate essentially as Anscombe remembered it – as 'a sober discussion of certain quite definite criticisms', and if like her he would have tended to construe the more dramatic explanations of his own unhappiness after the debate as 'projection' (Anscombe, *o.c.*, x) – this would certainly help to explain why he just made the required corrections and in the process tried to reaffirm his original point without further ado. Meanwhile some of his observations such as the one about acts of thought being 'about' other things, and the unanswered question she quotes from him, may have been highly tantalizing for Anscombe and precisely therefore, in the end, disappointing, if still deserving attention. She may have had some hope that Lewis would help us find a grail she spent much of her life seeking. My speculation here appears to be at least compatible with Roger Teichmann's concluding remarks in his contribution to the present issue. Further light will perhaps be thrown on this when the transcript is published of a tape-recorded talk given by Anscombe to the Oxford CSL Society shortly before her death in 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Lancelyn Green & Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*. Fully revised & expanded edition (HarperCollins, London 2002), 290. 'Lewis told Walter Hooper in 1963 that he "won"; when Hooper met Miss Anscombe for the first time in 1964 she said, "I won."' The biography's first edition (Collins, London 1974, p. 228) has: 'Lewis told Walter Hooper he was not defeated, and Miss Anscombe told Hooper that he was.'

For if Anscombe was candid enough to recognize a real improvement in the revised chapter III of *Miracles*, she must have seen also that the revision was only an elaboration of Lewis's <sup>24</sup> original rejoinder during their Socratic exchange in February 1948, as summarized in the published 'Note' and minutes. Indeed, Lewis appears to have been quick to see his way out of the problem presented by Anscombe's attack. This is astonishing when we see the 'complexity' of the attack and see how it focused, if there was a focus, on the sceptical-threat mode of Lewis's argument; and further see how easily this might have lured him deeper into the trap of that mode, deeper than he had already gone; and then see how smoothly he avoided this and adopted the better mode instead. To get such a rejoinder to your attack as Anscombe got is perhaps not to lose but it can hardly be called to 'win'. On the other hand, Anscombe's criticisms were clearly justified if only because, as she noted with good justice, 'Lewis' rethinking and rewriting showed he thought [they] were accurate'.<sup>27</sup> A man who follows up an attack on something he has written by an extensive rewriting in partial recognition of the justness of that attack cannot be properly said to have 'won' either. Perhaps – if and when it comes to designating a winner – the best final evaluation of the affair is not that both parties won, but that both gained. Or is this what we call a win-win game after all? It seems the obvious conclusion from a closer look at what Lewis really did to *Miracles*.

[www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe](http://www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe)

---

<sup>27</sup> Anscombe, *o.c.*, x.