THE PHILOSOPHY OF MEANING · STUDY 3

Can You Trust a Thought Made of Chemistry?

Reason, and where it comes from.

Just Atoms?

You may have heard someone say it, maybe in a video or a science class: you are just atoms. Your love is chemicals. Your choices are neurons firing. Your sense that life means something is a trick your brain plays to keep you alive long enough to have kids.

It sounds brave and scientific. It sounds like the grown-up thing to believe. C. S. Lewis believed something close to it for years. Then he noticed a crack in it that he could not stop seeing.

THINK IT THROUGH

Where have you heard the "just atoms" idea? Did it seem freeing to you, or heavy, or something else?

The Saw That Cuts Its Own Branch

Picture someone sitting on a tree branch, sawing through it. The harder they work, the closer they come to falling. Lewis thought the “just atoms” view did something like that to itself.

Here is why. If every thought you have is nothing but chemistry, caused entirely by atoms bumping into atoms, then your thoughts happen for chemical reasons, not because they are true. And that includes the thought “everything is just chemistry.” The claim saws off the branch it is sitting on.

THINK IT THROUGH

Put the saw-and-branch picture in your own words. Does it seem like a real problem, or a word trick?

Causes and Reasons

Lewis pointed to two different kinds of “because.” One is a cause: the glass broke because it hit the floor. The other is a reason: you know the answer is 12 because 7 plus 5 is 12. A cause pushes things around. A reason shows that something is true.

When you solve a math problem, you hope your answer comes out of the reasons, not just the causes. If your answer came out only because a chemical happened to fire, it might be right by luck. Lewis’s question was this: if nature is only causes, all the way down, where do reasons come in?

THINK IT THROUGH

Think of something you believe for a good reason. How would it change things if you found out you believed it only because of a chemical?

Darwin's Horrid Doubt

Lewis was not the first to feel this. Late in his life, Charles Darwin wrote to a friend that he had a "horrid doubt." If the human mind grew out of the minds of animals, he wondered, could its convictions be trusted at all? A biologist, J. B. S. Haldane, made a similar point in 1927: if his thinking was only atoms moving in his brain, he had no reason to think his beliefs were true, including his beliefs about atoms.

Neither man was attacking science. They were asking what science itself depends on: a mind that can actually know things.

THINK IT THROUGH

Why do you think Darwin, of all people, worried about this? What does it say that he took the doubt seriously?

The Best Answer Against

A fair study gives the other side its strongest form. Here it is. Evolution, many thinkers say, would favor brains that track the truth. An animal that thinks the lion is a bush gets eaten. So over millions of years, minds that see the world accurately would win out. Chemistry, shaped by survival, could produce minds you can trust.

That is a serious answer, and many careful people hold it. But some philosophers reply that survival rewards beliefs that are useful, not beliefs that are true. A false belief that keeps you running from lions works just as well. And it is hard to see how survival would shape minds that can do calculus or wonder about the stars.

THINK IT THROUGH

Which side seems stronger to you right now? What would you need to know to decide?

Lewis Changed His Mind, a Little

In 1948, a young philosopher named Elizabeth Anscombe stood up at a debating club in Oxford and pushed hard on Lewis's argument. She showed that he had blurred some words and that his first version had real holes. People still argue about how badly the night went for him.

What Lewis did next matters. He didn't sulk or quit. He went back to the chapter and rewrote it, making the argument more careful for a new edition in 1960. Good thinkers change their minds when someone shows them a better way to say what's true.

THINK IT THROUGH

When someone shows you a hole in your thinking, what do you usually do? What would it look like to respond the way Lewis did?

Reason From Reason

So where did Lewis land? He thought the best explanation for minds that can know the truth is a deeper Mind behind nature. Reason doesn't come from un-reason. Our little lights of thought, he suggested, are lit from a greater Light.

A psalm says it simply: "in your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). If that's true, then trusting your mind isn't a lucky accident. It's what minds were made for. And the atoms are still real. They are just not the whole story.

THINK IT THROUGH

If your ability to think is a gift from a greater Mind, what might that say about how you use it?

More Than Your Chemistry

This matters for more than arguments. If you are only chemistry, then your love is only chemistry, your sense of right and wrong is only chemistry, and your hope is only chemistry. Nothing about them would be true, just useful or not.

But if reason is real, maybe love is real too. Your brain is a wonder, and science can teach you a lot about it. Lewis's point is that the one doing the learning, you, is more than what is being studied.

THINK IT THROUGH

What else in your life would you hope is more than chemistry? Why does that one matter to you?

Look Back

Here's the path we walked. The "just atoms" view seems tough-minded. Lewis saw that if all thought is only chemical cause, then that view can't be trusted either. Causes push; reasons show. Darwin and Haldane felt the same doubt. The best reply is evolution, and the reply to that is that survival rewards usefulness, not truth. Anscombe pushed back on Lewis, and he made his argument better. His conclusion: reason comes from Reason.

Questions like these are better talked through than chewed on alone. Bring this to someone who likes to think: a science teacher, a pastor, a parent, a friend who argues well. Ask them what they think a mind is.

THINK IT THROUGH

Who do you know who would enjoy arguing about this with you? What question would you ask them first?

Sources

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; chapter 3 revised for the 1960 edition), chapter 3, “The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism” (causes and reasons; reason from Reason).

Charles Darwin, letter to William Graham, 3 July 1881 (“horrid doubt”).

J. B. S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds* (1927), “When I Am Dead.” Lewis quotes this passage in *Miracles*.

G. E. M. Anscombe, “A Reply to Mr C. S. Lewis’s Argument that ‘Naturalism’ is Self-refuting,” Oxford Socratic Club, 2 February 1948.

The reply that survival rewards useful beliefs rather than true ones is argued today by the philosopher Alvin Plantinga, among others; the saw-and-branch picture is ours.

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