The Argument from Reason Revisited

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Abstract Arguments against naturalism and materialism have a long history, from Plato to Plantinga. The paper has three parts: First, I reconstruct an argument from reason found in Plato's the Phaedo. Second I consider whether the argument is relevant to contemporary forms of naturalism. I argue that the argument does constitute a serious objection to some forms of naturalism. I then defend the argument against objections from GEM Anscombe, Graham Oppy, and Peter van Inwagen.

Keywords abstract objects; explanations; naturalism; Platonism; reason

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Forum Philosophicum 30 (2025) no. 2, 37–48
ISSN 1426-1898 e-ISSN 2353-7043
Subm. 7 November 2024 Acc. 30 December 2024
DOI: 10.35765/forphil.2025.3002.02

What is often called "the argument from reason" has been deployed against various forms of materialism and naturalism. One can find different forms of this line of reasoning in work by Plato, Augustine, Anselm, Kant, and more recently in work by A.E. Taylor, E.J. Lowe, William Hasker, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga. Like virtually all interesting arguments in philosophy, it has is critics. Is some version of the argument sound or is it deserving of the kind of contempt C.D. Broad had for some of the British idealists who "seem to start from no discoverable premises; to proceed by means of puns, metaphors, and ambiguities; and to resemble in their literary style glue thickened with sawdust"?[1] I hope to show that a version of the argument from reason is nothing of the sort.

In this essay, I explore an argument from reason to be found in Plato's dialogue the *Phaedo*. I defend the argument in the context of what I suggest is a plausible Platonic metaphysics. In a second section, I contend that the argument from reason is relevant to contemporary naturalism. The argument raises a deep challenge, especially to scientific naturalism. A third section defends the argument against three critics: Elizabeth Anscombe, Graham Oppy, and Peter van Inwagen.

Platonic Reasoning

The *Phaedo* depicts Socrates (d. 399 BCE) in dialogue with his companions on the day of his execution. It is a goldmine of philosophical reflection on the practice of philosophy itself, pleasure, the nature of dying and death, and on the soul and body.

The dialogue contains many arguments and objections, including a plea that persons should not fall prey to misology, the hatred of argument and reason. Socrates tells us: "No greater misfortune could happen to anyone than that of developing a dislike for argument" (89d). He likens the plight of becoming misologic to becoming misanthropic. One may meet many people who seem, on the surface, to be good, but turn out otherwise, and forget that, while there are many bad people, the majority of people are a mixture of good and bad. Similarly, there are some poor arguments, or cases of the misuse of reason, but this should not lead us to despair about attaining good arguments and reason.

> We must not let it enter our minds that there may be no validity in argument. On the contrary we should recognize that we ourselves are still intellectual

1. Broad cited by A.C. Ewing (1934, 9).

> invalids, but that we must brace ourselves and do our best to become healthy—you and the others. (Phaedo 88c-91c)

We are told by the narrator that Socrates was drawn to a work by Anaxagoras that proposes that the cause of all things is mind.

> Then one day I heard a man reading from a book, as he said, by Anaxagoras, that it is the mind that arranges and causes all things. I was pleased with this theory of cause, and it seemed to me to be somehow right that the mind should be the cause of all things, and I thought, 'If this is so, the mind in arranging things arranges everything and establishes each thing as it is best for it to be. So if anyone wishes to find the cause of the generation or destruction or existence of a particular thing, he must find out what sort of existence, or passive state of any kind, or activity is best for it. And therefore in respect to that particular thing, and other things too, a man need examine nothing but what is best and most excellent; for then he will necessarily know also what is inferior, since the science of both is the same. (97c-97e)

This aligns intentional or mindful causal explanations and axiological realism; a mindful explanation is one that is aimed at what is good, best or excellent. The intelligibility of such an explanation is not argued for. It seems, rather, to be advanced as an evident phenomena, known to be true in our own self-aware acts. That confidence in the nature and causal role of the mind becomes apparent in Socrates's objection to Anaxagoras going on to explain intelligence or mind in terms of what is not mind or intentional.

> As I went on with my reading I saw that the man made no use of intelligence, and did not assign any real causes for the ordering of things, but mentioned as causes air and ether and water and many other absurdities. And it seemed to me it was very much as if one should say that Socrates does with intelligence whatever he does, and then, in trying to give the causes of the particular thing I do, should say first that I am now sitting here because my body is composed of bones and sinews, and the bones are hard and have joints which divide them and the sinews can be contracted and relaxed and, with the flesh and the skin which contains them all, are laid about the bones; and so, as the bones are hung loose in their ligaments, the sinews, by relaxing and contracting, make me able to bend my limbs now, and that is the cause of my sitting here with my legs bent. Or as if in the same way he should give voice and air and hearing and countless other things of the sort as causes for our talking

> with each other, and should fail to mention the real causes, which are, that the Athenians decided that it was best to condemn me, and therefore I have decided that it was best for me to sit here and that it is right for me to stay and undergo whatever penalty they order. (98b-98c)

Essentially, Plato's Socrates is asserting that a proper account of his activities must make an essential role to his intelligence, his choices, and reasons.[2] Granted, there must be a vital explanatory role for the body, but while such bodily, material factors are necessary, they are not sufficient to account for what is evidently the case.

I propose that this Socratic reasoning is sound. Our own experience of acting for reasons conflicts with causal accounts that make no reference to acting for reasons. An account of our dialogue with each other must give a primary ineliminable role to reasons, in this case judicial reasons and the prisoner's decision that it is best to suffer the punishment decreed. If some label is necessary, we may describe this as a phenomenological argument, objecting to a position based on what is phenomenologically evident.

The dialogue includes two other elements to highlight. I do so to sketch a Platonic version of the argument from reason, one that I believe to be plausible and of current interest in addressing naturalism today.

First, there is a case that persons or the soul is a substantial being rather than a mode of the body. Socrates contends (perhaps on phenomenological grounds) that a person is not a mode of a substance, the way musical sounds are the mode or result of an instrument. I believe this receives some support from our experience. I myself endure over time. My body may change while I remain the same. Moreover, at death, it seems natural to think that I have ceased to be (or am no longer biologically embodied or present) while my body is still existing.

Second, the dialogue advances a case for recognizing that there are forms. I offer a variation of Platonism by asserting that there are abstract objects we may call states of affairs (SOAs). A SOA (like there being philosophers or there being unicorns) is a way things may be; the SOA there being philosophers obtains while there being unicorns does not obtain. Using

2. A reviewer of an earlier version of this paper, points out that Socrates is not just concerned with cognition, but the forms, such as goodness and beauty. While my focus is on cognition, I agree fully that the Socratic stress on the mind is meant to complement and bring to the fore what are the objects of our mental reflection (Phaedo 65c). I go on to propose in this essay that we have reason to think our intentional attitudes are directed on states of affairs, as these are conceived of as abstract objects in the Platonic tradition.

the language (or metaphysics of SOAs), the Athenians believed the SOA Socrates deserves death due to impiety and corrupting the young obtains, whereas Socrates and his disciples believe that it does not obtain.

There is neither time nor space for making an all-out case for SOAs here. I have done so elsewhere, arguing that recognizing SOAs can account for the intersubjectivity of intentional attitudes (you and I can believe or doubt, hope or fear) the same thing and it provides a sound framework for a theory of truth. In my view, truth and falsehood are also best accounted for in terms of the obtaining or not obtaining of SOAs rather than sentential or epistemic accounts of truth and falsehood. Presumably, most of us want an account of truth that does not rest on human language-users (there are truths about reality prior to language) and there may be truths that are not epistemically accessible to humans.[3]

A summary of this Platonic outlook: Reasoning is based on the apprehension of SOAs and intentional action is carried out by substantial persons on the basis of their pursuit or aversion to SOAs that are believed to obtain or not to obtain. This is not to claim that all agents believe in a metaphysics of SOAs or to deny that intentional action can be (as it were) *de re* –directed on the things, persons or events in one's presence.

The appeal of this Platonic depiction of reasoning (which bears a very close resemblance to the philosophy of Roderick Chisholm) is based on what appears to be the case, an epistemic stance evident among many philosophers from Thomas Reid to G.E. Moore, Thomas Nagel, and Chisholm.

Contemporary Naturalism and Reason

There are different versions of naturalism. Some versions are referred to as scientific or strict naturalism, others have been called broad, liberal or expansive naturalism. The version I am focusing on in this paper is one that subordinates (or eliminates) intentional, mental causal accounts (accounts such as the Platonic version just sketched) to non-intentional, non-mental causal explanations.

Here are some passages describing such a form of naturalism. Daniel Dennett writes:

> There is only one sort of stuff, namely matter—the physical stuff of physics and chemistry, and physiology—and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short: the mind is the brain . . . . We can (in principle) account for every mental phenomenon using the same physical principle,

3. See, for example, (Chisholm 1977). See also (Taliaferro 2015).

> laws and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition and growth. (Dennett 1992, 33)

Note that accounts of radioactivity, continental drift, and so on, do not make any reference to explanations in terms of beliefs and reason. Dennett claims:

> Psychology must not of course be question-begging. It must not explain intelligence in terms of intelligence, for instance by assigning responsibility for the existence of intelligence in creatures to the munificence of an intelligent Creator, or by putting clever homunculi at the control panels of the nervous system. If that were the best psychology could do, then psychology could not do the job assigned it. (1976, 171)

Dennett explains the appeal of Darwinian theory on the grounds that

> Darwin explains a world of final causes and teleological laws with a principle that is . . . entirely independent of "meaning" or "purpose." It assumes a world that is absurd in the existentialist's sense of the term: not ludicrous or pointless, and this assumption is a necessary condition of any non-question-begging account of purpose. (1976, 171–72)

Similar claims are advanced by George Rey, Alex Rosenberg, and others. Rosenberg is quite explicit about an error theory when it comes to reasoning and our self-awareness of ourselves as agents. In all such cases, the Platonic argument from reason constitutes an important challenge or objection. Indeed, from the standpoint of the argument from reason, at least Rosenberg seems to entirely undermine his own reasoning and writing.

> Our conscious thoughts are very crude indicators of what is going on in our brain. We fool ourselves into treating these conscious markers as thoughts about what we want and about how to achieve it, about plans and purposes. We are even tricked into thinking they bring about behavior. We are mistaken about all these things . . . . You cannot treat the interpretation of behavior in terms of purposes and meaning as conveying real understanding . . . . What individuals do, alone or together, over a moment or a month or a lifetime, is really just the product of the process of blind variation and environmental filtration operating on neural circuits in their heads. (Rosenberg 2011, 210–55)

A naturalist that is more difficult to assess is David Papineau. On the one hand, he endorses the causal closure of the physical world and embraces the truth of a complete physics. By his lights, a complete physics excludes psychological properties. Arguably, this is countered by the Platonic argument from reason. Reasoning is a matter of mental, intentional causation in light of entertaining states of affairs, and SOAs are not part of the physical world. Still, Papineau seems to acknowledge the veracity of psychological explanations. He writes:

> When I say that a complete physics excludes psychology, and that psychological antecedents are therefore never needed to explain physical effects, the emphasis here is on 'needed.' I am quite happy to allow that psychological categories can be used to explain physical effects, as when I tell you that my arm rose because I wanted to lift it. My claim is only that in all such cases an alternative specification of a sufficient antecedent, which does not mention psychological categories, will also be available. (Papineau 1993, 81)

The notion that a psychological explanation is intelligible and acceptable, but not needed is curious. By "not needed" I assume he means dispensable and when he refers to a physical explanation being "available" I assume he means more than a mere possibility. We might believe there are all kinds of available explanations of my writing this paper (perhaps Watson's crude behaviorism is logically possible) but absurd and not to be taken seriously. No, Papineau seems to be banking on the primacy (or preferred) physical account, with no psychology.

It is worth noting that while Papineau thinks there are no mental states as (in his words) "extra to the brain," he nonetheless acknowledges the intuitive appeal of some form of mind-body dualism.

> Indeed, I would say that there is a sense in which even professional philosophical physicalists, including myself, cannot fully free themselves from this intuition of distinctness. Of course, we deny dualism in our writings, and take the theoretical against it to be compelling, but when we aren't concentrating, we slip back into thinking of conscious feeling as something extra to the brain. (Papineau 2008, 57)

It appears that Papineau adopts some form of identity theory according to which all mental or conscious thinking is identical with physical, brain processes. He sees the ostensible difference between the mental and

physical as a difference in sense but not reference. The mental is a "mode of presentation"—presenting what may turn out to be non-mental.

I suggest that such a strategy is unsuccessful. It is implausible to think of the mental (whether this is a matter of thinking or of sensations) as a mere mode of presentation. Thinking is an activity carried out by a subject; thoughts and feelings are real, phenomenologically evident facts. When persons report they are thinking that 6 is the smallest perfect number (the smallest number equal to the sum of its devisors, including 1, but not including itself; 6 = 1+2+3) they are directing their attention to mathematical entailments. Any attempt to dispel this ostensibly evident relationship seems counter to all experience and reflection. Granted there are cases of when distinct terms have the same referent (water and H20), but such cases depend on composition or aspects (the robber and the masked man) that do not compare with identifying thinking with brain processes. Looking at the molecular composition of water establishes co-reference as would following the robber around until he drops his mask. But no amount of searching the brain reveals conscious thinking or reasoning or how the subject feels. Yes, we can correlate brain processes with thinking but correlation is not identity (Taliaferro 2018).

Objections from Anscombe, Oppy, and van Inwagen

Elizabeth Anscombe is well known in the mid-twentieth century for her critique of a version of the argument from reason advanced by C.S. Lewis. Some of the details of Lewis's version of the argument can be set aside. He uses the term "supernaturalism" to advance his non-naturalist account of reason. The Platonic argument in this paper does not reference the supernatural. (I prefer the term "theistic" as in a theistic understanding of God to avoid the link between supernatural and superstition.) Lewis employs the image of reason impacting the natural world in terms of making pockmarks; not a great analogy as it makes reason seem unnatural. Finally, Lewis uses the term irrational to refer to natural causes; he changed this reference to irrational. But what remains of Anscombe's critique relevant to this paper?

Anscombe claims that there is an important distinction between assessing whether reasoning is good and matters concerning its cause. Reasoning may be caused by any number of factors (the use of a typewriter or computer) while weighing its validity is another. This misses the mark of the Platonic argument from reason which appeals to the evident fact that, when a person reasons, they entertain SOAs and reach conclusions like "Socrates is being executed by the Athenian state" and 6 is the smallest

perfect number by grasping the reliability of beliefs, testimony, and mathematical entailments. There is no "confusion" about the difference between a cause and a reason, the Platonic argument appeals to the apparent experience of reasoning being causally efficacious. I suggest that the following point by Anscombe is based on a misconstrual of reasoning:

> It appears that if a man has reasons, and they are good reasons, and they are genuinely his reasons, for thinking something -then his thought is rational, whatever causal statement can be made about him. (Anscombe 1981, 229)

In reply, I propose that if a person reaches a conclusion (6) based on his reasoning that 6=1+2+3 then that is the causal explanation of the person thinking and saying 6. And if "whatever causal explanation" does not include the causal role of his reasoning, then that "explanation" is as incomplete as having Hamlet without the Prince.

In her reply to Lewis, Anscombe distinguishes different types of explanation (naturalistic, logical, psychological, and personal history), but none of these overshadow the force of the Platonic argument from reason.

Anscombe, perhaps under the influence of Wittgenstein, would later go on to defend increasingly counter-intuitive claims about intentional explanations involving no "actual mental processes"[4] and denying that the use of the first-person pronoun (as in "I object to your kicking me") refers to a substantial subject or person. Anscombe came to believe that to think that the use of the first-person "I" refers to a self is a "grammatical illusion" (Anscombe 1975, 65).

Graham Oppy objects to a version of the argument from reason developed by William Hasker. Unlike Lewis's version, it will not be necessary to distinguish Hasker's work from the Platonic version at hand. Oppy adopts an identity theory of the mental and physical. He contends that his physicalism can give a causal role to persons having "representational content" that can account for reasoning. He adopts the causal closure of the physical world (Oppy 2022).

Some of the difficulties with Oppy's position have been sketched in response to Papineau. The identity thesis faces numerous problems, as brought to the fore in versions of the knowledge argument and the principle of the indiscernability of identicals. If A is B, whatever is true of A is true of B. But this is not so in the case of the mental and the physical. One may observe and know all about s person's brain and bodily states without

4. Anscombe contra mental processes, cited by (Cumhaill and Wiseman 2023, 202).

knowing their thoughts and feelings / mental states. Moreover, if you adopt the causal closure of the physical, then it is the physical properties and events that are causally efficacious, not the mental (representational content) (see Hasker 2022).

Peter van Inwagen has objected to C.S. Lewis's version of the argument from reason. Van Inwagen's case against Lewis has been responded to by several philosophers, including Brandon Rickabaugh and Todd Buras and, Stewart Goetz (see Rickabaugh and Buras 2017; Goetz 2018). I will therefore focus on van Inwagen's objection to Hasker's version of the argument from reason, which is similar to the Platonic argument sketched earlier.

His principle objection is that when a causal explanation involves rational reflection employing a principle of rationality (for example, modus ponens; If A, then B.A. Therefore B) it involves a faulty metaphysics.

> A principle of rationality is a proposition or perhaps an imperative—in any case an abstract object of some sort. And if there is one thing abstract objects do not do, it's this: they don't exert influence on things. (Inwagen 2024, 265)

One may grant that the abstract object (the state of affairs or proposition that 6 is the smallest perfect number) does not itself exercise causal power, but it would be (in my view) profoundly mistaken to deny that my answering 6 when asked about identifying the smallest perfect number did not causally involve my grasping the relevant entailment relations. I suggest, as noted at the outset, that, as a matter of common sense, much of our reasoning involves contemplating states of affairs such as *Socrates is to be executed by the Athenian state* and their entailments. For a further defense of my proposal see my 2015 article "Abstract Objects and Causation; Bringing Causation Back into Contemporary Platonism" (Taliaferro 2015).[5]

To summarize: an argument from reason against at least one form of naturalism can be traced back to Plato in the fourth century BCE. I have bolstered this Platonic picture by affirming the evident reality of persons as thinking, enduring subjects who have intentional attitudes to SOAs. I have put on exhibit several claims by naturalists that shows the argument from reason is relevant today. I then defended a version of the argument from reason against objections by Anscombe, Oppy, and van Inwagen.

I add three further, brief points.

Because the argument from reason, as I have presented it, is basically phenological, it will not be effective with philosophers who treat first-person

5. For reasons why I oppose van Inwagen's modal skepticism, see (Taliaferro 2001; 1994).

phenomenology as spurious. However, like Richard Fumerton, I find such skepticism contrary to what is most evident in all experience.

Second, I have employed the argument from reason against scientific naturalism (as found in work by Dennett, Rey, and Rosenberg). One might develop a form of naturalism that allows for the emergence of persons who engage in mental reasoning and maintains that this is neither identical to, nor reducible to, non-mental processes.

A third point is rarely observed in print, but I think it bears noticing. Peter Van Inwagen offers the following reason for not adopting some form of dualism: "I should have to tear up most of my work in metaphysics and start over" (Van Inwagen 2024, 269). The topics of this paper has been reasoning and naturalism, not dualism per se, but Van Inwagen's concern is relevant when assessing philosophical positions and arguments contrary to one's own. While I think the vast amount of Van Inwagen's excellent metaphysics is compatible with dualism (and with the phenomenological data of mental reasoning), I think that a deep message from Socrates in the Phaedo is that we should relish the opportunity to revise our views in light of good reasons.

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