

Nature or Natures or Natural Laws? Some Comments on C. S. Lewis's Use of the Concept of Nature in *Miracles, A Preliminary Study*

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Most discussion of the argument of C. S. Lewis's *Miracles* has focused on chapter 3 of that book, the chapter which Elizabeth Anscombe singled out for her criticisms, criticisms which Lewis himself took seriously enough to cause him to rewrite that chapter.¹ But I am interested here in another aspect of his argument, one which involves the meaning of the term *nature*, a term which appears throughout the book and is arguably the concept most fundamental to its entire argument.

After a preliminary chapter designed to clear away certain possible confusions, Lewis begins his argument proper with chapter 2. In the very first sentence of that chapter he writes, "I use the word *Miracle* to mean an

¹ Chapter 3 was originally titled "The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist." In the revised edition (London: Fontana, 1960) this was changed to "The Cardinal Difficulty of the Naturalist." The relevant documents, including Anscombe's critique, are set forth in "Appendices to 'What Lewis really did to *Miracles*,'" in *Journal of Inklings Studies*, 1:2 (2011). This is available online at www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendices.pdf, accessed 25 May 2018. Some of the material is also available in C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 144-46.

interference with Nature by supernatural power."² In the next paragraph he notes the need for "an agreed definition both of Nature and of Supernature." On the next page he considers various usages of the adjective *natural* as a way to define the noun, and concludes that the "Natural is what springs up, or comes forth, or arrives, or goes on, *of its own accord*: the given, what is there already: the spontaneous, the unintended, the unsolicited." After this he continues, "What the Naturalist believes is that the ultimate Fact, the thing you can't go behind, is a vast process in space and time which is *going on of its own accord*." It is a "total system" of "every particular event" that has or that will happen.³ It is chiefly this notion of a "vast process in space and time" which is used throughout the book to mean nature. Moreover, this "whole system" is conceived by naturalists as "completely interlocked,"⁴ inaccessible to outside actions, which can affect its causal series.⁵

Now, although Lewis, of course, did not think that nature was a closed system inaccessible to any action from outside it, and in fact, his entire book was written to argue the opposite point of view, I hope to show that this continual usage of nature as "total system" prejudices the argument against miracles, at least subconsciously, by suggesting that nature is a closed system, or at least a system which ordinarily is blocked to outside entry or interference. Thus, David Hume's unfortunately classic definition—"A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature . . ."⁶—is premised on this understanding of a total system ruled by strict causal laws. I will posit a different way of looking at nature based on a critical distinction made by St. Thomas Aquinas, which, I will argue, can help us make a more effective argument for the possibility of miracles. Before we do this, however, it will be necessary first to revisit briefly the philosophical origins of the concept, and then examine the varying, but related, meanings which nature has.

² C. S. Lewis, *Miracles, A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 10. Although I have used the first or unrevised edition throughout, I have compared my citations with the text of the revised edition as required.

³ Lewis, *Miracles*, 11.

⁴ Lewis, *Miracles*, 12.

⁵ There are numerous other passages which state or assume this concept of nature as "total system." For example, on 17, two references to nature as "Total System," and to "the whole interlocked system," and on 18, 25, 30, 31, 44-5, 61, 108, 128, 175-6, and elsewhere.

⁶ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955 [1748]), 122. I will consider below the possible significance of Hume's use of "laws of nature" as opposed to simply *nature*.

As in so many other areas, the European philosophical tradition begins any rigorous discussion of the idea of nature with Aristotle. According to Aristotle each thing which exists by nature "has *within itself* a principle of motion and of stationariness (in respect of place, or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration)." Thus "a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort, *qua* receiving these designations—i.e., in so far as they are products of art—have no innate impulse to change. But in so far as they happen to be composed of stone or of earth . . . , they do have such an impulse, and just to that extent. . . ." From this example we can see what Aristotle meant when he said something existed "by nature." Anything possessing an inherent principle whether of growth or even of downward or upward movement, exists by nature. Although it is true that a bed or any other product of art normally exhibits such a downward tendency, this is in virtue of the material out of which the bed is made, e.g., wood or metal. And if a wooden bed decays or burns, this is by virtue of the wood, not of its being shaped into a bed. The bed as such has no principle of movement or decay, only the natural material out of which it is made has such a principle. The fact that the wood or metal has been shaped into a bed is accidental and external to the wood or metal. Aristotle sums up this discussion with the definition "that *nature is a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself. . . .*"⁷

It might appear from this definition that nature was simply something like a quality or a property present in a thing, but this is not in fact the case. For when Aristotle says "nature is a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest," he means a thing's own nature is such a cause. A little later (193a-b) he says, "Another account is that 'nature' is the shape or form which is specified in the definition of the thing. . . . Thus in the second sense of 'nature' it would be the shape or form . . . of things which have in themselves a source of motion." It is, then, the "shape or form" of a thing, its whatness, that we call its nature, but only for those things which exist "by nature." And therefore the natural whatness of "a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort" lies in its original material. The rearrangement of material accomplished by human art is external to its natural being. A bed does not cease to behave as wood because it has been shaped into a bed.

⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 1 (192b), Oxford translation. Emphasis in source. Also in *Metaphysics* V, 4.

If we look at these two complementary definitions, we can see that it is the natural thing itself, the individual substance, which is its own "source or cause of being moved and of being at rest." In other words, the "source or cause" is the thing's own whatness or nature, which manifests itself in how it moves, grows, or alters, according to the scholastic maxim, *agere sequitur esse*, action follows being.⁸

How do we go from Aristotle's understanding of nature as an internal principle in natural objects to the idea of nature as a vast system, whether it is all that exists or merely a part? Lewis himself discusses this point in his book *Studies in Words*,⁹ in which he devoted some fifty pages to the varying meanings of the concept, in Greek, Latin, and English.

After recounting Aristotle's understanding of nature, Lewis notes that

before Aristotle wrote, *phusis* [= nature in Greek] had taken on, in addition to the meaning 'sort', a new and quite astonishing sense. The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers had had the idea of taking all the things they knew or believed in . . . and impounding them under a single name. . . . And for some reason the name they chose for it was *phusis*. . . . Why they chose the name *phusis* is a question to which I can give no confident answer.¹⁰

Lewis discusses the ramifications of this meaning of *phusis*, both in Greek and Latin, and notes that later writers arrived at the point where "they believed in realities of a quite different order from any that their predecessors took account of. They expressed this not in the form '*phusis* contains more than our ancestors supposed', but in the form . . . 'there is something else besides *phusis*.'" ¹¹ The "three principal movements" that posited other realities besides the natural were, as Lewis notes, the Platonic, the Aristotelian and the Christian.¹² And from positing that "there is something else besides *phusis*" there arises the theoretical possibility of miracles, of something from beyond nature entering into or influencing

⁸ Of course, this does not imply that each single individual substance has its own unique nature. A nature is shared with all other examples of the same kind of thing: thus, all the animals which we call horses participate in or share the same equine nature. But any discussion of the question of universals is outside the scope of this paper.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: University Press, 2d ed. 1967). See 24-74 for his discussion of the various meanings of nature.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 35.

¹¹ Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 37.

¹² Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 38-9.

or interfering with nature. For if *phusis* is all that exists, then obviously a miracle, understood as something whose cause is outside *phusis*, could not occur.

With this background we will be better situated to understand the importance of the distinction which Thomas Aquinas makes. In a discussion of whether angels can perform miracles,¹³ Thomas distinguishes between something which is "beyond the order of some particular nature"¹⁴ and something which is "beyond the order of created nature as a whole."¹⁵ He writes:

I answer that a miracle properly said is when something is done beyond the order of nature. But it does not suffice for the essence [rationem] of a miracle if something is done beyond the order of some particular nature [*praeter ordinem naturae alicujus particularis*]; because if so, when someone threw a rock upwards he would perform a miracle, since this is beyond the order of the nature of a rock. Thus something is said to be a miracle which is done beyond the order of created nature as a whole [*praeter ordinem totius naturae creatae*].

If we recall Aristotle's second account of nature as "the shape or form . . . of things which have in themselves a source of motion," whenever anything acts, or is made to act, beyond the possibilities of its peculiar complex of aptitudes and powers, then that thing acts, or is made to act, beyond its nature, as in Thomas's example of someone throwing a rock into the air, since upward motion is beyond a rock's natural powers, and such movement depends upon someone or something else moving the rock. That which is "beyond the order of created nature as a whole," on the other hand, is something beyond the natural powers of the whole system of created natures.¹⁶

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 110, art. 4.

¹⁴ All quotations from St. Thomas are my own translations from the Marietti edition, Turin, 1885.

¹⁵ In q. 115, art. 3, he also speaks in the same sense of "*tota natura*."

¹⁶ When I say that upward motion on the part of a rock is beyond the nature of a rock, I am not committing myself to the Aristotelian idea that heavy objects move toward the center of the earth because that is their natural place, and thus downward motion only is natural to such objects, while upward motion is unnatural. I am simply pointing out that, as ordinary experience shows, each sort of thing has capacities and powers proper to or inherent in it, and at the same time, can sometimes be moved or manipulated so as to exceed those capacities and powers. On the question of the role of external forces, of so-called natural laws, see note 31.

From this distinction I think we can draw two important conclusions. In the first place, we can look at nature slightly differently. We can note that the *ordo totius naturae creatae* is made up of many individual natures, each of which has its own capacities and powers. Instead of a vaguely defined thing or mass or process called simply "nature,"—"the framework of space and time and the procession of systematically connected events which fill them"¹⁷—we have an order made up of distinct individual natures, of different kinds of things, each with its own capabilities. Secondly, we can note that human beings, as well as other created beings, including even brute animals or water or wind, have the ability to interfere with the natural course of things, to interfere with some of the powers of the individual natures which, taken together, constitute nature as a whole order or system.¹⁸

What does this have to do with Lewis's argument? Whenever we speak about *nature* in the singular, or nature as simply a system, there is a suggestion or implication, I think, that that system is closed to action from the outside. Many writers, including even Lewis, capitalize the word as Nature. Even in his book devoted to showing that nature is *not* a closed system, I think it was hard for him to avoid the suggestion, at least on a subconscious level, that nature is in some way a closed system. For example, he speaks of a "rift in Nature,"¹⁹ an "invasion of Nature,"²⁰ and so on. But we have seen that it is in fact common for created beings to interfere with the order of any particular nature.²¹ If this is so, how much easier must it be for God himself to intrude (as it were) into the workings of individual natures, which even we are permitted to do on a limited basis, as well as to interfere with the workings of the order of nature as a whole?

¹⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 14.

¹⁸ Of course, natural things, such as heavy objects, can be made to exceed their ordinary natural capacities only because of other aspects of their natures, such as their susceptibility to being moved by external forces of a certain strength. See note 31 for more on the question of external forces and their relations with a thing's own nature.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 29.

²⁰ Lewis, *Miracles*, 49.

²¹ In a few passages Lewis does look at nature more as a collection of natures than as merely a system. For example, when discussing our Lord's quieting of the storm in the Gospel account (Matthew 14:32), he comments, "I myself can still a storm in a room by shutting the window." *Miracles*, 147. And elsewhere he notes the same possibility of discrete interference with natural processes. See "Religion and Science," in *God in the Dock*, 72-75. See also *Miracles*, 57-9, where he suggests this same argument.

Constant reference to Nature or nature as a whole seems to prejudice the discussion by suggesting the notion of a closed system. But if we speak of natures in the plural (or of an order of natures), then perhaps the question of miracles will be more easily understood. For if a human being can manipulate a natural object *praeter naturam*, such as throwing a rock into the air, or even a squirrel can pick up and carry around a nut, then surely God can do the same with regard to the entire order of created natures. If we speak in this way and attend to the existence of many individual natures, we will avoid creating the impression that there is some vast and tightly interlocked system called nature which even God himself may not have access to, so tightly interlocked that to tinker with one part means to disarrange the whole. Rather we have many specific kinds of things, each with its own nature, its own "source or cause of being moved and of being at rest." Since in some cases these natural objects can be made to act beyond their natural powers even by another created nature, surely this can be done by the omnipotence of God. If we look at nature as a collection of natures, of so many individual things, it is perhaps easier to understand that just as we can throw stones into the air, so God can produce an effect beyond the normal powers of any created nature or beyond the powers of the entire order of created things.

Most modern discussions of nature or of miracles focus on nature as a system rather than as a collection of individual natures. This not only represents a removal of our focus from individual things or sorts of things to the entire system or collectivity, but it constitutes a kind of abstraction from the many types of created things we observe in the world to a more general level, that is, to the system as a whole, and has prejudiced the modern mind against the very possibility of miracles. But there is a further point which we must consider, one that constitutes an even greater level of abstraction, and which removes us even further from *things* and encourages us to conceive of nature as the sum total of forces and stresses and pressures, abstracted from any real objects. This is the notion of the laws of nature.

Lewis's initial definition of miracle was "an interference with Nature by supernatural power."²² About two centuries previous Hume had

²² Lewis, *Miracles*, 10.

characterized a miracle as "a violation of *the laws* of nature. . . ." ²³ How is the addition of the notion of *laws* important? Lewis seems to move seamlessly back and forth between speaking of nature and of the laws of nature. He writes at one point,

The question is whether Nature can be known to be of such a kind that supernatural interferences with her are impossible. She is already known to be, in general, regular: she behaves according to fixed laws, many of which have been discovered, and which interlock with one another. There is, in this discussion, no question of mere failure or inaccuracy to keep these laws on the part of Nature, no question of chancey or spontaneous variation. The only question is whether, granting the existence of a Power outside Nature, there is any intrinsic absurdity in the idea of its intervening to produce within Nature events which the regular "going on" of the whole natural system would never have produced. ²⁴

And in general, the idea of specifying the workings of the natural world as general laws does not seem to have been problematic to Lewis.

Our repugnance to disorder is derived from Nature's Creator and ours. The disorderly world which we cannot endure to believe in is the disorderly world He would not have endured to create. . . .

The sciences logically require a metaphysic of this sort. Our greatest natural philosopher thinks it is also the metaphysic out of which they originally grew. . . . Men became scientific because they expected Law in Nature, and they expected Law in Nature because they believed in a Legislator ²⁵

Lewis discusses three possible ways of understanding the laws of nature, either as "mere brute facts, known only by observation, with no discoverable rhyme or reason about them" or as "applications of the law of averages" or as "what we call 'necessary truths' like the truths of mathematics." ²⁶ But whichever one of these understandings we consider correct is not important here. The important point is not what we think

²³ Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 122. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ Lewis, *Miracles*, 56.

²⁵ Lewis, *Miracles*, 109.

²⁶ Lewis, *Miracles*, 56-7.

is the ontological status of such laws, but the fact that when we talk about nature we so quickly and easily begin to talk about the laws of nature, and in fact, to reduce nature to such laws.²⁷

When the medievals wrote that *agere sequitur esse*, action follows being, they were not thinking of how or whether all the individual potentialities of natural objects could be specified by a series of mathematical statements. They were thinking of the capabilities of each individual sort of thing, of each individual nature, which, while they might have quantitative aspects, in the end could only be qualitatively described. Of course, Thomas Aquinas and many medieval and later thinkers in the scholastic tradition spoke much of law, and in particular of the natural law. But their conception of natural law was something very different. "Natural law is the expression of the structural tendencies, or natural inclinations, inherent in and proper to human nature by which that nature is measured and ruled."²⁸ It exists at the level of the natural object as a whole, as a biological or even rational entity, and takes account of all of its capacities, which can hardly be reduced to whatever chemical or physical potentialities it possesses, and certainly could never be fully expressed quantitatively. When attention shifted to nature considered as an entire system, however, it became possible to forget the individual thing or nature and instead seek to generalize the powers of nature taken collectively. Eventually this resulted in the idea of the laws of nature as mathematically expressed laws, which were held to capture the powers and potentialities of nature as a whole.

Galileo observed that the pendulum behaved in a certain manner, and then formulated the law of the pendulum in terms of mathematics. Newton did not doubt that the heavens declare the glory of God; but

²⁷ Steven Lovell, in his dissertation, *Philosophical Themes from C. S. Lewis* (University of Sheffield, 2003), begins his discussion of miracles with an immediate turn to a discussion of natural laws. "I will approach the issue rather obliquely, first discussing two different theories of scientific laws, or as they are often called, laws of nature. These two theories will form the background against which alternative definitions of the miraculous will be discussed and in relation to which various arguments concerning the possibility of miracles will be assessed." Lovell appears to think that a discussion of nature can be encompassed entirely by a discussion of the laws of nature (35). Accessed online at etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/6054/1/398641.pdf on 25 May 2018.

²⁸ James P. Reilly, Jr., "Saint Thomas on Law," (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 6.

he was concerned to find out, by looking through a telescope and doing a sum in mathematics, precisely how they managed it²⁹

But we should note that laws expressed mathematically can capture the powers and potentialities of natural objects only by reducing them, ultimately, to their chemical and physical properties. The specific characteristics of biological entities, for example, are no longer important as such, but merely as they reveal what are seen as their underlying chemical and physical properties. Only in this way can what is called a natural law be expressed mathematically. In fact, such generalizations that result from this process of abstraction have brought us to the point where the realities studied are reduced to essentially mathematical objects. "The laws of physics are all equations specifying universal relations that hold at every time and place among mathematically specifiable quantities like force, mass, charge, distance, and velocity."³⁰ We have become twice removed from real individual natural objects, first by looking at nature exclusively as a system, then by reducing that system to a series of laws whose subject matter is no longer things in the ordinary sense, but "mathematically specifiable quantities like force, mass, charge, distance, and velocity."³¹

What resulted from thinking of nature in such a manner? As Lewis noted in another work,

What was fruitful in the thought of the new scientists was the bold use of mathematics in the construction of hypotheses, tested not by

²⁹ Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University, 1932), 57.

³⁰ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: University Press, 2012), 92.

³¹ In addition to reducing our fundamental knowledge of nature to a knowledge of what are called natural laws, such laws are held to supersede the idea that the natural motions of objects are the result of their individual natures, as was expressed in the maxim, *agere sequitur esse*. Instead, since Galileo the common understanding is that *all* motion is simply the result of external forces. Thus, there is no essential difference between the upward and the downward motion of a heavy object; both can be explained fully by taking into account the external forces which act upon the object. "[Galileo] formally stated the law of inertia, which holds changes of motion in direction and magnitude, to be entirely the fruit of outside forces. This view of things is more vividly put in his so-called parallelogram law . . . that the motion of a body is the algebraic sum of outer forces in their various quantities and directions." Vincent E. Smith, *Philosophical Physics* (New York: Harper, 1950), 140.

observation simply but by controlled observation of phenomena that could be precisely measured. . . . And on our thoughts and emotions . . . it was destined to have profound effects. By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe. . . . The result was dualism rather than materialism. The mind, on whose ideal constructions the whole method depended, stood over against its object in ever sharper dissimilarity³²

"The result was dualism rather than materialism." But a dualism that understood reality as something tightly bound by "fixed laws . . . which interlock with one another," which are expressed by mathematical equations, and for which the possibility of a miracle, of something that displaces or disarranges such equations, is rendered impossible or at least highly improbable. For is not a mathematical equation something determined solely by its own terms, "as with the laws of arithmetic,"³³ something which follows inexorably from beginning to end?³⁴

One of the speakers in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes, a defender of a kind of deistic natural theology, says of the world around us.

Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: you will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided

A complete discussion of this question and its implications goes to the roots of philosophical and scientific understandings of reality and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one can accept that nature is composed of many different individual things and kinds of things, each with its own capacities, and at the same time recognize that the attempt to reduce these capacities to mathematically expressible equations, while getting at some real aspects of their being, does so for the most part by ignoring their nature or whatness considered as a whole. For example, we can experimentally determine the point at which the human body will burn or melt, but in doing so we are not getting at any knowledge of human beings as such, as rational biological entities.

³² C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: University Press, 1954), 3-4.

³³ Lewis, *Miracles*, 59.

³⁴ Aside from an anomalous use by the Roman poet Ovid, the first recorded reference to the laws of nature was in a letter by Galileo written in 1615. Already here he avers that "nature is inexorable and immutable; she never transgresses the laws imposed on her." A few years later, in 1623, Francis Bacon wrote of the "immovable and inviolable laws and decrees of Nature." Quoted in Jacob Klein, "On the Nature of Nature," in *Lectures and Essays* (Annapolis, Maryland: St. John's College Press, 1985), 228.

into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them.³⁵

Carl Becker says of this passage, "Cleanthes . . . concludes that God *must* be an engineer because nature *is* a machine."³⁶ If we have, even subconsciously, an image of the natural world as a machine, is it any wonder that the notion of miracle is rendered suspect? Is it any wonder that, as Lewis said, "Any day you may hear a man (and not necessarily a disbeliever in God) say of some alleged miracle, 'No. Of course I don't believe that. We know it is contrary to the laws of Nature.'"³⁷

We have come a long way from human beings throwing stones into the air, as an example of the ease with which the properties of natural things are disarranged, to all of nature as a machine, run according to its own laws, which "are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them," and which not only can be expressed by means of mathematical formulas, but in the final analysis, *must* be expressed thus. The first perspective exhibits a universe of determinate natures, to be sure, but one open to numerous kinds of interventions. The second, while not perhaps altogether prohibiting interventions, offers us a model which, subconsciously at least, makes us think such interventions unlikely.

Lewis, of course, did not believe that nature, even when expressed by mathematical formulas, was impervious to outside interference. But the point of this article has been to argue that our habitual way of thinking and talking about nature tends to prejudice the argument beforehand. Constant reference to nature as a system, with hardly any advertence to the fact that nature in its original and primary meaning refers to the natures of different kinds of individual objects, and that in many cases there is no difficulty about interfering with many of the natural powers of the various natures,

³⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in Edwin A. Burt, ed., *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill* (New York: Modern Library, 1939), 701.

³⁶ Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, 56.

³⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 46.

subconsciously affects our consideration of the question. Add to this the reduction of nature to a series of mathematically expressed laws, and it seems hardly surprising that nature is often seen as a tightly closed system, impervious to outside effects, even on the part of its Creator.

But, one might wonder, if Lewis had proffered a different and more Aristotelian conception of nature at the outset, would his naturalist opponents have cried foul, would they have protested that he was creating a straw man, so to speak, biasing the argument by using a concept of nature that was especially compatible with a Christian outlook? Did Lewis, therefore, perhaps select a particular conception of nature because of his apologetic intent, in order to meet his naturalist opponents on their own ground?

Two things may be said regarding this. In the first place, Lewis seems to posit his definition not simply as a strategic point in an argument, but as a description of something real that exists.

Some people believe that nothing exists except Nature; I call these people *Naturalists*. Others think, that, besides Nature, there exists something else; I call them *Supernaturalists*. Our first question, therefore, is whether the Naturalists or the Supernaturalists are right.³⁸

He never denies the "vast process in space and time" which we call nature, but he simply wishes to investigate whether this "vast process" is "the ultimate Fact, the thing you can't go behind," all of reality.³⁹ He does not appear to indicate any hesitation about the concept as he defines it; rather, the disagreement lies in whether or not nature is all that there is. Hence I think it unlikely that Lewis is offering a purely heuristic definition instead of one that he himself would affirm.⁴⁰

Secondly, it is true that generally in a controversy we should meet our opponents on common ground. One way to do this is to employ terms as

³⁸ Lewis, *Miracles*, 10. Emphases in source.

³⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 11.

⁴⁰ When he does use a strategic definition he frankly informs his readers of this. This is in his definition of the very term miracle. He defines it as "an interference with Nature by supernatural power," and notes that, although "crude and 'popular,' [this definition] enables me most easily to treat those questions which 'the common reader' probably has in mind when he takes up a book on *Miracles*." *Miracles*, 10.

they are ordinarily used. Few, certainly, would deny that there is something that may rightly be called nature. The question is, what is it? A strict philosophical naturalism has a ready answer. It is "a vast process in space and time which is *going on of its own accord*," the "total system" containing "every particular event" that exists or occurs. But it is interesting to note that contemporary discourse does not seem entirely comfortable with such a naturalistic understanding of nature. For example, in ordinary speech, say in discussions of the environment, nature is often contrasted with man, or with products made by man, whereas strict philosophical naturalists would insist that human beings, including human cultures and technology, are all parts of nature, equally with wild animals or plants. But ordinary language does seem uneasy with this conception. In this I think we see some residual survival of Aristotle's understanding of nature as that which "has *within itself* a principle of motion and of stationariness," so that "a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort," are not natural objects, *as such*, but only the raw materials out of which they are made can be said to be natural.⁴¹ Hence Lewis had available to him more than one conception of nature as he began his book, each of which could find some support in ordinary speech, and any of which he could have used without opening himself to the charge that he had prejudiced the argument at the outset by defining nature in a sense peculiar to Christian believers.

The New Atheism which has arisen in the Anglo-American world in recent years is almost entirely scientific, that is, wedded to a conception of science that sees it as not only the only method of obtaining certain truth but as inculcating in addition the crudest materialism. While any intellectual response to this atheism must be conducted on many levels by more than one kind of argument, it is not useless, it seems to me, to challenge at the outset its understanding of nature, surely one of the most basic concepts in any discussion about reality. If we insist on the distinction that Aquinas made and point out the openness of natural objects to

⁴¹ There is some recognition of this dichotomy of things in their natural state as against things made or altered by man in *Miracles* itself. When in chapter 2 Lewis is working toward a definition of nature, he contrasts certain things and activities, including natural with false teeth, and landscapes that have been worked over by human activity, "tilled lands and metalled roads," with land in its original state. This distinction points to the man vs. nature contrast and suggests possible meanings of nature besides that of a "total system" (*Miracles*, 11).

manipulations beyond their individual natures, this may subconsciously help to uproot the fixed notion that nature is the tightly closed system it is assumed to be and that it can adequately be conceived as "nothing but one great machine."