C. S. Lewis was obsessed with Naturalism, at least until 1948. What happened on February 2, 1948 arguably adjusted the timbre of Lewis’ apologetic efforts. But it did not fundamentally change the nature of his concern. For throughout his life, Lewis understood the cost of Naturalism’s soteriology. For the naturalist, to be ‘saved’ means not being “taken in.” The naturalist is nobody’s fool. She has what she believes to be a clear-headed grasp of the unforgiving, brute facts about reality, that Nature is all there is. Yet Lewis saw that the intellectual liberation that purportedly attends such insight is ultimately empty. It destroys all that is worth loving. Thus, Lewis carried lifelong burden to articulate Naturalism’s destructive telos.

Strikingly, this obsession began before Lewis became a Christian. Prior to his conversion to Christianity in 1931, Lewis struggled to come to terms with what he then took to be the reality of a “materialistic universe” – one he would later described as an “empty space, completely dark and unimaginably cold,” an existence in which “all stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter.”

Lewis’ struggle to make peace with this naturalistic view of reality was rooted in the tension between two competing aspects
of his experience. On the one hand, Lewis believed, perhaps partly as a result of his intellectual formation by his beloved, though atheist, tutor, William T. Kirkpatrick (whom Lewis called, “the Great Knock”), that the “one great, negative attraction” offered by Naturalism was the space it afforded to be one’s own god. As Lewis would later reflect, “that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, ‘This is my business and mine only’.” Such was the rational or intellectual appeal of a universe in which “nothing exists except Nature.” In such a universe, there was no threat of what Lewis most feared, a “transcendental Interferer.”

Yet, on the other hand, Lewis recognized that the cost of such freedom required one to “look out on a meaningless dance of atoms . . . to realize that all apparent beauty was a subjective phosphorescence, and to relegate everything one valued to the world of mirage.” What Lewis valued was that transcendent dimension of his experience that was connected with longing or Joy, “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.” In his first, post-conversion work, The Pilgrim’s Regress, Lewis would characterize this unsatisfied desire in terms of a musical call, a sound “very sweet and very short, as if it were one plucking of a string or one note of a bell, and after it a full, clear voice – and it sounded so high and strange that [it seemed] . . . very far away, further than a star.”

Lewis desperately wanted to respond to the call of that full, clear voice. But prior to his conversion, he was equally desperate in his desire to avoid being “taken in.” Thus, he found himself locked in a psychological struggle that he described in terms of the “two hemispheres of my mind”: the imagination and the intellect. “On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow ‘rationalism’. Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”

Lewis’ first published poetry manifests these early existential struggles with Naturalism. He began writing the poems of Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics as a teenager in 1915. Eventually published
in 1919, the set expresses the anxiety induced by a cosmic order that is indifferent to the misery of the human condition and explores the prospects for hope in the absence of an immanent, loving God. This tension is found in “Ode For A New Year’s Day,” where Lewis writes:

For Nature will not pity, nor the red God lend an ear.
Yet I too have been mad in the hour of bitter paining
And lifted up my voice to God, thinking that he could hear
The curse wherewith I cursed Him because the Good was dead.

Even before he was a Christian, Lewis apprehended that a universe of mere matter-in-motion is one that is bereft of transcendent meaning, of beauty and goodness (“the Good was dead”). In such a universe, despair is the great temptation. Thus, Lewis begins “De Profundis” with an adolescent rage; honest, but not aesthetically sublime:

Come let us curse our Master ere we die,
For all our hopes in endless ruin lie.
The good is dead. Let us curse God most High.

Yet, for all his railing, Lewis, the young, noble pagan, could not bring himself to make peace with the “endless ruin” that his logically-penetrating mind recognized as being entailed by the naturalistic worldview he embraced. His imagination or perhaps his romanticism got the better of him. Consequently, he continued to long for what, in his poem “Dungeon Grates,” he called “. . . the strange power / Of unsought Beauty in some casual hour.” This only, Lewis believed, could “. . . build a bridge of light or sound or form / To lead you out of all this strife and storm.”

As devotees of “Jack” know, Lewis eventually found that “unsought Beauty” in the person of Jesus Christ. What Lewis longed for all his life, a longing symbolized in his writing by images of mountains and islands, was ultimately fulfilled as he would later write:
Not in Nature, not even in Man, but in one
Particular Man, with a date, so tall, weighing
So much, talking Aramaic, having learned a trade;

Not in all food, not in all bread and wine
(Not, I mean, as my littleness requires)
But this wine, this bread . . . no beauty we could desire

While his own conversion to Christianity eventually achieved a reconciliation between his own reason and imagination, Lewis never lost sight of Naturalism’s destructive tendencies. Consequently, it is not surprising that in his early years as a Christian apologist, Lewis devoted a great deal of intellectual energy to refuting Naturalism as a worldview. Interestingly, Lewis’ early apologetic efforts were largely (though not exclusively) rational, as opposed to imaginative. Perhaps this is partly because Lewis’ own conversion to Christianity began as an intellectual one.

Even before he was a Christian, Lewis grasped what he would later call the “cardinal difficulty” of Naturalism. In 1924, Lewis commented in his diary about reading “A Free Man’s Worship,” an essay by the atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell. In his essay, Russell echoes the ancient Stoics in arguing that human hope can only be built “on the firm foundation of unyielding despair,” of recognizing that all of our experiences “are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.” Lewis thought that Russell had offered a “very clear and noble statement of what I myself believed a few years ago.” But Lewis thought that Russell had not faced “the real difficulty – that our ideals are after all a natural product, facts with a relation to all other facts, and cannot survive the condemnation of the fact as a whole. The Promethean attitude would be tenable only if we were really members of some other whole outside of the real whole: wh[i]ch we’re not.”

While it is only suggestive, this early, pre-conversion diary entry contains the seed of what in the 1940s would become Lewis’ primary rational polemic against Naturalism. Although it took various forms, the structure of Lewis’ argument was simple, elegant,
and profound. Lewis argued that if Naturalism were true (i.e., if Nature is all there is), then all of our thoughts (indeed reason itself) are merely the product of the accidental forces of matter-in-motion. But if all our thoughts are merely the product of the random motion of atoms, then we have no grounds for regarding our thoughts as being true or even rational. After all, nothing about Naturalism assures us, in advance, that the physical movements of the molecules that simply happen to comprise my brain will, in fact, generate reasonable thoughts, much less true ones. Therefore, Lewis argued, the truth of Naturalism would undermine reason itself.

Lewis delivered an early version of this argument to the Oxford Socratic Club on November 6, 1944 in a talk called, “Is Theology Poetry?” But by far, the most (in)famous incident surrounding Lewis’ use of this argument was his February 2, 1948 Oxford Socratic Club debate with the Catholic philosopher, Elizabeth Anscombe. By this time, Lewis had already published a first edition of Miracles: A Preliminary Study (1947). This included a chapter devoted to Lewis’ argument against Naturalism entitled, “The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist.” Anscombe offered penetrating philosophical criticisms of Lewis’ argument. As a result, Lewis made significant changes to the relevant chapter in a revised edition of Miracles (1960).

In the aftermath of the Lewis-Anscombe debate, it is tempting to think that Lewis let go of his youthful and early-Christian obsession with the dangers of Naturalism. This temptation is fueled partly by Lewis’ own sense that Anscombe had “obliterated me as an Apologist,” and by Lewis’ obvious subsequent retreat from strident, rationalist polemics against Naturalism. Nevertheless, the temptation should be resisted. For, although Lewis adjusted the timbre of his apologetic efforts, he never lost sight of the existential dangers of Naturalism that he felt in his youth. To see this, one must recognize the manner in which Lewis would have understood a worldview like Naturalism and see its connection to his later (post-Anscombe debate) writings.

The former is captured beautifully in a diary entry from 1922. Commenting on his interaction with a contemporary from his
student days at Oxford, Lewis wrote that his friend was “once more proof how little purely intellectual powers avail to make a big man. I thought that he had not lived a single one of his theories: he had worked them with his brain but not with his blood.” Even before he was a Christian, Lewis did not think of worldviews like Naturalism in merely academic or intellectual terms. For Lewis, worldviews were intrinsically the sort of thing that one lived. Worldviews must not merely fulfill the rigors of mind; they must also satisfy the heart. Lewis’ own existential struggle with the naturalistic outlook of his youth illustrates that a significant part of his movement toward Christianity was the fact that he could not bring himself to live with the Naturalism that he tried so hard to believe. Thus, even when he came to the point, perhaps in the early 1920s, where he no longer found Naturalism believable, this was not merely a function of its rational or intellectual poverty as a worldview. Rather, it was equally a function of its existential emptiness. It could not be lived out in one’s blood and bones.

In light of this, the adjustments that Lewis made in his vocation as a Christian apologist after his debate with Anscombe should not be taken to imply that Lewis “came to feel that [the] method and manner” of his rationalistic polemic against Naturalism was “spurious.” Rather, in his inadequate attempts to deal with the philosophical sophistication of Anscombe’s arguments, Lewis simply came to a deeper realization (perhaps even a remembrance) of something that was already true of his own life: man is not moved by mind alone. Rather, as the embodied – blood-and-bones – creatures that we are, we are also moved by that which we inhabit, that in which we “live and move and have our being.”

For Lewis, a worldview like Naturalism was not merely a collection of ideas to be hammered out in the dialectical machinery of the ivory tower. Rather, Naturalism was a competing narrative to Christianity – an alternative story of reality. Like all narratives, whether Naturalism is believable depends partly upon whether it is habitable. Truth is not assured by mere logical consistency; it is primarily disclosed in livability. Thus, after his debate with Anscombe, it is not surprising that Lewis wisely turned his apologetic
powers toward the imaginative. In doing so, Lewis attempted to capture the contrast between habitability of the Christian story and unlivable narrative of Naturalism.

The culmination of this effort was Lewis’ 1956 masterpiece, Till We Have Faces, a reimagined version of the classic myth of Cupid and Psyche. In Lewis’ version, sisters Orual and Psyche are raised as daughters of a king in an ancient, mythical city called Glome. Their childhood tutor, a Greek slave they call “the Fox,” attempts to inculcate in them a naturalistic outlook on the world. With the elder sister Orual, the Fox is successful; with younger Psyche, he is not. For much like Lewis himself, the latter feels too deeply the call of “the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from.” Much to Orual’s jealous dismay, Psyche eventually finds herself taken to live with the god of the Mountain, to be his bride. Orual plots to rescue her sister from the ‘god’ whose existence she disbelieves. Ever the naturalist, Orual is no fool. She will not be “taken in” by Psyche’s religious delusions. Thus, she conspires to have Psyche disobey her make-believe, divine bridegroom, which, to Orual’s shock, results in Psyche’s actual banishment.

Most of the remainder of Orual’s earthly life might be characterized as a kind of entrenchment in the bloodless, rational Naturalism of her youth. She succeeds her father to become a highly successful Queen of Glome. But as she nears the end of her life she cannot escape the meaninglessness of all her achievements. “I did and I did and I did,” Orual muses, “and what does it matter what I did?” At the end of her days, (indeed, at the end of one’s life in a naturalistic universe) Orual simply goes “to my own chamber to be alone with myself – that is, with a nothingness.” Orual is eventually rescued from the despair entailed by her naturalistic commitments through, among other things, a trip to the underworld where she reunites with the Fox, meets the gods face to face, and must confront herself. Touchingly, the Fox is genuinely repentant for the “trim sentences” of his intellectual arguments. He begs the gods not to hold Orual accountable for making her “think that a prattle of maxims would do, all thin and clear as water.” For after his death, the Fox comes to realize that the “easy knowledge” of his
philosophical “words” pales in comparison to the narrative embodied in the religious practices of the pagan Priest who “knew at least that there must be sacrifices . . . dark and strong and costly as blood.”

What Lewis, perhaps tacitly, recognized as a result of his exchange with Anscombe was precisely what he had grappled with earlier in his life while still in the rationalist grip of his atheist tutor, Kirkpatrick. As valuable as they are in dialectic, the “trim sentences” of Greek wisdom are not life-giving, especially in the face of a universe that is indifferent to existence. Lewis ached to live. And his tacit understanding that “the life of the flesh is in the blood,” not the brains, eventually led to his salvation. It not only saved him from the despair of Naturalism itself, it also saved him from reducing the Christian faith which he so ably defended to “a prattle of maxims . . . all thin and clear as water.” Instead, Lewis’ lifelong obsession with Naturalism ultimately led to him to attack the heart of its destructive tendencies, namely, its destruction of the heart.

Of course, in defending the life-giving narrative of Christianity as against bloodless Naturalism, Lewis never lost sight of the deeply paradoxical manner in which the Christian faith preserves and protects the life of the heart. For both as a matter of his own experience, and as a teaching of Christian dogma, Lewis understood that in the Christian narrative, the path to life is the surrender (i.e., death) of one’s heart. Whereas the whole thrust of Naturalism is the protection of one’s heart by one’s mind, Christian faith teaches the renewal of mind by the submission of one’s heart.

This is why Lewis’ two-pronged assault on Naturalism, both rational and imaginative, is vital to a fully-orbed understanding of the life of the mind. What Lewis showed in his obsessive engagement with Naturalism over the course of his life was this. The only life worth living is one that protects and preserves the life of the heart. Yet, only a heart fully-surrendered to its Life-Giver will live. Moreover, the heart that seeks the self-protection of its own mind will die; thus, killing the mind whose lifeblood it supplies. Consequently, because it has no heart, Christians should expect, as Lewis
clearly did in his early, rational polemics, that Naturalism cannot sustain the life of the mind. At the same time, Christians should recognize, as perhaps Lewis eventually did, that Naturalism’s failure to provide adequate grounds for reason is a secondary effect; it is a consequence of Naturalism’s principal problem. Specifically, if nothing exists except Nature, there’s ultimately no reason to live at all.

If Lewis is right, then the practical consequence both for Christian apologetics and for the life of the mind, in general, is a significant one. The priority for both must be the restoration of the Christian narrative as the habitable landscape in which the intellect lives and moves and has its being. Mere disputation or intellection, divorced from the lived, livable, and living Christian story, will be an ineffectual witness to dying minds – to brains without blood. Christians today must begin where Lewis ended, by restoring imaginative wonder to its rightful place as the beginning of wisdom. Apart from this, Christians risk a kind of functional Naturalism, in which the “trim sentences” that constitute the “easy knowledge” of our intellectual life will be “thin and clear as water.” Only surrendered hearts have enough lifeblood to save minds.

Justin Barnard is Associate Dean, Institute for Intellectual Discipleship and Associate Professor of Philosophy, Honors Community at Union University.