

**“MADE FOR ANOTHER WORLD”:
C. S. Lewis’s Argument from Desire Revisited**

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Though C. S. Lewis is perhaps better known for the Trilemma, the Moral Argument, and the Argument from Reason, his most characteristic argument may actually be the Argument from Desire. As one might expect, there have been varying views on how persuasive an argument it is. The recent *status quaestionis* discussion by Peter S. Williams and Gregory Bassham¹ gives us an excellent opportunity for a fresh look at that question.²

The Argument from Desire played an interesting supporting role in Lewis’s own conversion that makes it unsurprising to find that it had a place in his apologetic. It was after all the experience of *sehnsucht*, or “joy,” the intense longing aroused by inexplicable beauty, that drove Lewis to his conversion in such a way that he calls it “the central story of my life.”³ He called “joy” an unsatisfied desire better than any other having.⁴ He did not so much conclude directly from the experience of having this desire that God exists and that Jesus is His Son; rather, it was what kept him from being comfortable in Atheism until other arguments, such as Chesterton’s and Tolkien’s that Christ is the fulfillment of human mythology, led to his conversion.⁵ His atheism was never able successfully to explain the fullness of his aesthetic and emotional life. As he wrote to Arthur Greeves while still in his atheist period,

Faeries must be in the woods
Or the satyr’s merry broods,

¹ Gregory Bassham, ed., *C. S. Lewis’s Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2015), 27-74.

² Other recent treatments include, positively, Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart’s Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989); J. P. Moreland, *The God Question: An Invitation to a Life of Meaning* (Eugene, Or.: Harvest House, 2009), pp. 94-5; and Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Life of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014); and, negatively, John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, rev. ed. (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007) and Erik Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason* (N.Y.: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2008).

³ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁵ Donald T. Williams, “G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*,” *C. S. Lewis’s List: The Ten Books that Influenced Him Most*, ed. David Werther and Susan Werther. (N.Y.: Bloomsbury, 2015), 34-6.

Tritons in the summer sea,
Else how could the dead things be
Half so lovely as they are? . . .

Atoms dead could never thus
Move the human heart of us,
Unless the beauty that we see
Part of endless beauty be.⁶

Joy or sweet desire kept Lewis from being comfortable as an atheist, but it did not in itself lead him to theism or to Christ. He tells us quite explicitly that his conversion was not the direct result of his unfulfilled desires: for all he knew, “the total rejection” of what he called joy might have been “one of the demands” of his new faith.⁷ Once he had come to faith, though, he went back and thought through the implications of his experience to be able to articulate more clearly how it functions as one of the “signposts” he had come to understand it to be by the end of his quest.⁸ The fruit of that articulation is what we call the Argument from Desire. It is given in its simplest form in *Mere Christianity*:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.⁹

Though Peter S. Williams and Gregory Bassham discuss several versions of the argument—deductive, inductive, abductive, *reductio*¹⁰—it is clear from Lewis’s language that his argument is not a deductive proof but an argument to the best explanation (i.e., abductive).

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 3 vols., ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2004), 1:373.

⁷ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, op. cit., 230.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (NY: MacMillan, 1960), 120.

¹⁰ In Gregory Bassham, ed., *C. S. Lewis’s Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2015), 27-74.

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines abduction as “The type of reasoning that yields from a given set of facts an explanatory hypothesis for them.”¹¹ That is an exact description of what Lewis attempted in the paragraph from *Mere Christianity* cited above. Lewis calls his conclusion “the most probable explanation” of the pattern in the phenomena of desire and fulfillment he had noted in babies, ducklings, and men. What needs explanation is the unexpected and anomalous occurrence of this one apparently unsatisfiable desire. It needs explanation because all other natural desires we encounter do seem to have appropriate objects. Lewis was not the only person to have noticed this pattern. Philosopher of science Michael Polanyi wrote that “Our heuristic cravings imply, like our bodily appetites, the existence of something which has the properties required to satisfy us.”¹² Why would this one craving be an exception? Lewis asks, in effect, what if it is not? Well, if it is not, then the Christian view of the next life makes sense.

The argument assumes two states of affairs that could themselves be questioned. First, is the existence of a desire in fact evidence for the existence of the object of that desire? Lewis answers that being hungry doesn’t prove you will be fed, but it does prove that you have a body that needs nourishment and that presumably therefore some kind of food exists. Therefore, the desire for Paradise does not prove that you are going to go there, but it does seem to indicate that such a thing exists.¹³ I think Lewis’s response so far is adequate, if in fact it can be established that people have a desire for paradise. And that leads to the other question.

Second, do people actually experience a real desire that no finite temporal thing can satisfy? Lewis thinks they do. Suppose your experience of desire is awakened by the beauty of the hillside you see in the distance. What will happen if you go there? “An easy experiment will show that by going to the far hillside you will get either nothing, or else a recurrence of the same desire which sent you thither.”¹⁴ Enough repetitions of this experiment might convince us that either the desire is an illusion or its fulfillment must be found elsewhere than in the finite world.

Yet many people deny that they experience any unsatisfiable desire. Either they think they have found satisfactions that are good enough, or they are confident that if they just keep

¹¹ A. Boruch, “Logical Terms, Glossary of,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1967), 5:57.

¹² Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (N. Y.: Harper & Row, 1964), 129.

¹³ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980), 32-3.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress: an Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 9.

looking they will do so. They may have repressed the desire, or they may still be trying to satisfy it with available objects: What is over the next hill, or the next woman, they tell themselves, will be what they are really looking for. They think the satisfaction is simply deferred. How do we know they are wrong? John Beversluis thinks they may not be: People may have the experience Lewis describes, but Beversluis thinks it is too nebulous to be accurately called a *desire*.

The possibility of describing and accounting for such a state of mind as a *desire* in any minimally coherent sense depends on the person in that state of mind eventually discovering an object that not only *satisfies* her desire but which she also *recognizes* as the object she has been pursuing all along.¹⁵

Lewis would have had no problem with Beversluis's criterion; he would have said that he had satisfied it in finding Christ. Whether he had or not is not a question a person outside that experience of encounter with Christ is in a position to evaluate. That is because the faith component in committing one's life to Christ cannot be eliminated: The argument from desire cannot be fully evaluated except experientially. Only when a person in honesty reckons with the fact that this final finding is just not going to happen in this world is he ready to consider the conclusion Lewis reached:

If a man followed this desire, pursuing all the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. . . . And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist.¹⁶

How strong is the Argument from Desire? Even if the initial dismissals and questionings of it above are rejected, it still has a couple of weaknesses. First, for people who deny having

¹⁵ John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007), 52.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*, op. cit., 10.

had the relevant experience, it is simply beside the point. It is possible that some of them may have had that experience and do not recognize it; others may be in denial about the impossibility of satisfying their deepest desires with temporal objects. But it would not be possible to prove that this is true of all of them; that would involve proving a negative. And even for those who have had the experience but deny it, the argument will have neither interest nor force. Even if the Argument from Desire is valid, it will tend to compel the attention only of people who have not only had, but who *recognize* themselves as having had, the relevant experience.

Second, as Bassham correctly points out, from the mere existence of unsatisfied desire it does not strictly follow that the object which supposedly exists for it is a god of any kind, much less the Christian God. One could equally spin the same facts to support the Buddhist notion that desire is the source of suffering and that therefore the wise course is to follow the Eightfold Path to its elimination. Bassham is right to point out that connecting the argument specifically to God as the postulated object “requires a further and perhaps more difficult argument . . . that Lewis does not provide.”¹⁷ At least, he does not provide it as part of the Argument from Desire itself. But surely Lewis could have responded that when the argument is made in *Mere Christianity* it is in a context that already has the Moral Argument and the Trilemma in the background. The further arguments Bassham wants are ones that Lewis does in fact provide.

I would argue, then, that the Argument from Desire can contribute to a cumulative case for Christian theism in spite of these weaknesses, especially if we view it in the context of Lewis’s other arguments. Lewis was too wise ever to claim that in itself it proves the existence of the Christian God. Recall his language: “most probable explanation” . . . “pretty good indication.” But it does do what an abductive argument is supposed to do: It makes sense of a common human experience and points to the likely existence of *something* that is *compatible* with Christian theism and Christian fulfillment as expounded in the Bible and Christian theology, and which is very difficult to explain apart from that Christian account. Such desire is, in other words, one more aspect of human experience that makes perfectly good sense if Christianity is true and presents a very difficult problem if it is not.

For those who recognize in themselves the experience Lewis is describing, then, the Argument from Desire can help to turn that experience into a signpost, into, at the very least, one more reason to follow the arrow to see where the sign might be pointing. The argument from

¹⁷Bassham, *op cit.*, 51.

desire does not prove the existence of God by itself, but then it does not claim to. But it does help to confirm the many other arguments to the best explanation that point to the same conclusion—at least for some people. Even Bassham admits that the abductive form of the argument is the strongest and that it might offer “some confirming evidence for theism,” but does not think this “anything to write home about.”¹⁸ I suppose it depends on whom one is writing to at home. There are certainly some people for whom that letter might be very significant indeed.

One conclusion might be that the argument from desire just doesn't work with a certain type of person. Perhaps some of us are just too emotionally undeveloped—or jaded—to be susceptible. But I would suggest that we make a mistake by taking such people's statements denying transcendent desire at face value, certainly by accepting them as representative of the human race as a whole. Solomon tells us that "God has set eternity in their hearts" (Eccl. 3:11, NASB). Either Scripture is wrong about this, then, or the denial of transcendent desire is a smokescreen, a defense mechanism designed to protect atheists from reality—like the Narnian dwarfs of *The Last Battle* who insist that Aslan's country is a dirty stable and that violets are stable litter, too afraid of being taken in to be taken out of the prisons of their own limited thinking.¹⁹

If Solomon was right, human beings are not in fact fully satisfied by the temporal and physical, however hard they may try to convince themselves that they are. But one probably can't argue them out of their claim that they are. One can only try to arouse the desire, to fan it to the point where they cannot ignore it any more. And the best way to do that might be to talk about the foretastes of fulfillment we have already been granted in Christ, or just to live a life of transcendent openness to Joy before them. If we can get them to read Thomas Traherne's *Five Centuries of Meditation*, it wouldn't hurt.

Things unknown have a secret influence on the soul, and like the center of the earth unseen violently attract it. We love we know not what, and therefore everything allures us. . . . Do you not feel yourself drawn by the expectation of some Great Thing? . . . You never enjoy the world aright till you see how a [grain of] sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God. . . . You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your

¹⁸ Ibid., 55

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956; N.Y.: HarperTrophy, 1986), 185-6.

veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars. . . . Infinite wants satisfied produce infinite joys. . . . You must want like a God that you may be satisfied like God. Were you not made in his image?²⁰

Lewis learned the argument from desire from Augustine's Trinity-shaped vacuum and his heart that was "restless until it rests in Thee," as developed by Traherne, George Herbert, and George MacDonald. The argument will legitimately have a certain existential force for those in whose hearts Desire has been sufficiently aroused. The best service those earlier writers—and Lewis himself—can do us is perhaps just to fan that flame.

In us, let it burn.

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²⁰ Qtd. in Alexander M Witherspoon. and Frank J. Warnke, *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry*, 2nd ed. (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 694, 696, 698.

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