

A Beginner's Guide to the Theistic Argument from Desire

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The theistic “argument from desire” (AFD) is a family of arguments that move from an analysis of human desire to the conclusion that God exists (or that something like “eternal life in relationship with God” is the true human *telos*, goal or purpose). This argument was popularized in the twentieth century by C.S. Lewis, who sought to understand an “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction,” a mystical experience to which he gave the technical label “Joy”¹ (and which writers in the German Romantic tradition called *Sehnsucht*): the bitter-sweet experience of feeling drawn to a transcendent and innately desirable “something more” beyond one’s worldly grasp. This experience is *occasioned but not satisfied* by various worldly “triggers” that are somewhat person-relative, but often have to do with beauty and/or natural grandeur (i.e. what the Romantics called “the sublime”).

Lewis produced the pre-eminent literary engagement with *Sehnsucht* in English, contemplating “Joy” in works of allegory, apologetics, autobiography and theology, and evoking “Joy” in his fiction. He wasn’t the first to explore this theme, which can be found in the Jewish scriptures (Psalm 42 opens with the declaration that: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” *Ecclesiastes* can be read as a meditation upon this theme²). Nor was he the first to make a theistic AFD – something done by Boëthius, Pascal, Thomas Chalmers and G.K. Chesterton before him. Nor was he the only scholar of his era to do so (contemporaries who defended the AFD included C.E.M. Joad, Jacques Maritain and Leslie D. Weatherhead). However, it’s *primarily* due to Lewis’ wide-ranging discussion of the AFD that many contemporary scholars have become interested in exploring, critiquing and/or defending a variety of arguments from desire, with attention paid to the argument by Gregory Bassham, Todd Buras, Michael Cantrell, Winfried Corduan, C. Stephen Evans, Norman L. Geisler, John Haldane, Robert Hoyler, Peter Kreeft, Alister McGrath, Thomas V. Morris, Alvin Plantinga, Joe Puckett Jr., Richard Purtill, Victor Reppert, Erik Wielenberg, etc.

A Cumulative AFD

The AFD is best thought of as a cumulative argument composed of a variety of sub-arguments with different logical formulations.³ I only have space to sketch some of these arguments here:

Prima Facie AFD

Samuel Alexander’s *Space, Time and Deity* (1916-1918) introduced C.S. Lewis to the distinction between “Enjoyment” and “Contemplation,” a distinction Lewis would later illustrate in terms of looking *at* or looking *along* a beam of light. To take the experience of “Joy” at face value means looking *along* it towards an innately desirable “transcendent other.” Now, as Lewis points out: “As soon as you have grasped this simple distinction [between looking at and looking along], it raises a question. You get one experience of a

thing when you look along it and another when you look at it. Which is the ‘true’ or ‘valid’ experience”?⁴ Lewis observes:

It has . . . come to be taken for granted that the external account of a thing somehow refutes or “debunks” the account given from inside. “All these moral ideas which look so transcendental and beautiful from inside,” says the wiseacre, “are really only a mass of biological instincts and inherited taboos.” And no one plays the game the other way round by replying, “If you will only step inside, the things that look to you like instincts and taboos will suddenly reveal their real and transcendental nature”.⁵

Lewis argues that this reductive impulse must be resisted on at least some occasions because its generalization is incoherent: “you can step outside one experience only by stepping inside another. Therefore, if all inside experiences are misleading, we are always misled”.⁶

Moreover, Lewis’ example of discovering that “the inside vision of the savage’s dance to Nyonga may be found deceptive because we find reason to believe that crops and babies are not really affected by it”⁷ illustrates the *presumption of innocence* conferred in the absence of sufficient reason for doubt upon enjoyed (i.e. looked along) experiences. Lewis concludes “we must take each case on its merits.”⁸

Contemporary epistemology is well disposed to playing the game “the other way round”. For example, consider the “reformed epistemology” of Alvin Plantinga, who argues for the *properly basic* status of theistic belief evoked by desire.⁹

To further motivate taking “Joy” at face value, one can appeal to the epistemic principle “that we ought to believe that things are as they seem to be (in the epistemic sense) unless and until we have evidence that we are mistaken”.¹⁰ This basic principle of rationality puts the burden of proof upon the shoulders of the sceptic who claims that, despite appearances, to look along a Joy is to experience a delusion rather than the insight into the nature of reality it seems to be from the inside.

Abductive AFD

Alister McGrath notes that “Lewis’s reflections on desire focus on two themes . . . a general sense of longing for something . . . and a Christian affirmation that God alone is the heart’s true desire . . .”¹¹ For McGrath, these themes form the two prongs of an *abductive* argument for the Judeo-Christian explanation of “Joy”:

Lewis saw this line of thought as demonstrating the correlation of faith with experience, exploring the “empirical adequacy” of the Christian way of seeing reality with what we experience within ourselves . . . Christianity . . . tells us that this sense of longing for God is exactly what we should expect, since we are created to relate to God. It fits in with a Christian way of thinking, thus providing indirect confirmation of its reliability.¹²

Victor Reppert likewise formulates the AFD as an *abductive* argument:

On Christian theism God’s intention in creating humans is to fit them for eternity in God’s presence. As such, it stands to reason that we should find ourselves dissatisfied with worldly satisfactions. Let’s put the likelihood that we should long for the infinite given theism at 0.9 . . . I wouldn’t say that such desires couldn’t possibly arise in an atheistic world . . . But how likely would they arise in such a world? So long as the answer is “less likely than in a theistic world,” the presence of these desires confirms

theism. Let's say that, if we don't know whether theism is true or not, the likelihood that these desires should arise is 0.7. Plugging these values into Bayes' theorem, we go from 0.5 likelihood that theism is true to a 0.643 likelihood that theism is true. Thus . . . the argument from desire confirms theism.¹³

Atheist Erik Wielenberg tries to explain away "Joy" in terms of naturalistic evolutionary psychology (NEP).¹⁴ Wielenberg's NEP hypothesis, which only engages with "two features of Joy—the restlessness it induces and the nebulousness of its object,"¹⁵ and thereby lacks explanatory scope, suggests that the former feature "might" be advantageous *if Joy arose*: "Early humans favored with a chronic, ill-defined restlessness of heart might have outcompeted other humans who were naturally more sedentary and complacent." However, we might think that early humans afflicted with "a chronic, ill-defined restlessness of heart" would be out-competed by humans free from such existential ennui! Again, Wielenberg suggests the somewhat nebulous nature of Joy "might" be advantageous *if Joy arose*: "Joy's . . . lack of a clear intentional object, might have led early humans down Lewisian 'false paths,' such as the pursuit of sex, power, and adventure, that did have direct fitness advantages".¹⁶ Wielenberg's use of "might" doesn't inspire confidence in either case, indicating that his hypothesis has a low degree of explanatory power.

Finally, Wielenberg offers *no explanation for the appearance of "Joy" in our gene-pool*, only for its selection *should it appear*. As Reppert argues:

natural desires that are unfulfillable on earth is precisely what you should expect . . . from the point of view of theism. I seriously doubt that we can do this from the point of view of naturalism, even if a half-way-decent-looking evolutionary explanation of how such desires could arise were forthcoming . . .¹⁷

Inductive AFD

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis frames the AFD *inferentially*:

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 . . . 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.¹⁸

Trent Dougherty likewise presents the AFD as "a defeasible inference [wherein] the premises could be true and the conclusion yet false, but they bear *prima facie* support for the conclusion"¹⁹:

- 1) Humans have by nature a desire for the transcendent
- 2) Most natural desires are such that there exists some object capable of satisfying them
- 3) There is probably something transcendent

Aristotelian AFD

In the preface to the third edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis offered a *deductive* AFD:

if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come at last to the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given . . . in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur's castle—the chair in which only one could sit. And *if nature makes nothing in vain*, the One who can sit in this chair must exist.²⁰

Here Lewis assumes Aristotle's (controversial) dictum that "nature makes nothing in vain"²¹:

- 1) Nature makes nothing in vain.
- 2) Humans have a natural desire, Joy, that would be vain unless some object that is never fully given in our present mode of existence is obtainable by humans in some future mode of existence.
- 3) Therefore, the object of Joy must exist and be obtainable in some future mode of human existence.

One can set to one side the *universality* of Aristotle's dictum whilst still giving a *deductive* argument based upon a *restricted application of Aristotle's dictum to innate human desires*:

- 1) Nature makes no type of innate human desire in vain
- 2) Humans have innate desires that would be vain if God doesn't exist
- 3) Therefore, God exists

Inductive Aristotelian arguments from desire can be mounted upon the premises that "most types of things in nature are not made in vain" or that "the majority of innate human desires are not made in vain".

We could interpret Aristotle's dictum as a *heuristic principle*.²² A principle such as "We should assume that no [type of] natural thing exists in vain until and unless we are shown otherwise" could serve as a premise in a *deductive heuristic* AFD:

- 1) Humans have natural desires that would be in vain if God doesn't exist
- 2) We should assume that no [type of] natural thing exists in vain until and unless we are shown otherwise
- 3) Therefore (until and unless we are shown that the relevant natural desires exist in vain) we should assume that God exists

***Reductio* AFD**

In *Mere Christianity* (1952), Lewis framed the AFD as a *reductio*:

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. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove *that the universe is a fraud*. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.²³

Various *reductio* arguments from *existentially relevant human desires* and the denial of the existential claim that human life is “absurd” can be made. For example:

- 1) Given an instantiated kind K possessing innate existential desires, the existence of K would be absurd to the extent that it is impossible for any member of K to have those existential desires satisfied
- 2) Humans are an instantiated kind K with innate existential desires that are [probably] impossible to satisfy unless God exists
- 3) Therefore, unless God exists, the existence of K is [probably] absurd (at least to a substantial extent)
- 4) However, the existence of K is [probably] not absurd (at least, not to any substantial extent)
- 5) Therefore, God [probably] exists

I contend that premise 4 is an intuitively plausible belief that should be treated as innocent until proven guilty.

Conclusion

The argument from desire points to various existentially relevant desires the fulfilment of which plausibly require God’s existence. The arguments from these desires are mutually consistent, are more powerful when taken together, and most powerful when considered as part of the overall case for Christian theism.

Recommended Resources

Watch

YouTube Playlist, “The Argument from Desire”

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj3nK3TBydEVAFRtdqfrpW2

Listen

Kreeft, Peter. “Desire” www.peterkreeft.com/audio/23_desire.htm

Williams, Peter S. “Debate: Does God Exist? Peter S. Williams vs. Einar Bohn at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim”

http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/mf/feed/e5dvj8/Trondheim_2018_Debate.mp3arguments-from-desire/

Read

Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Book III. <http://christweedt.com/BoethiusConsolation3.pdf>.
christwvdt.com

Buras, Todd and Michael Cantrell. “C.S. Lewis’s Argument from Nostalgia: A New Argument from Desire.” Ed. Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty. *Two Dozen (Or so) Arguments For God* (Oxford University Press), 356-321.

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Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy* (Fount, 1998)

---. *Mere Christianity* (Fount, 1997)

---. *Pilgrim's Regress* (Fount, 1977)

---. "Meditation in a Toolshed" *First and Second Things* (Fount, 1985)

Puckett Jr., Joe. *The Apologetics of Joy: A Case for the Existence of God from C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire* (James Clarke and Co Ltd., 2013)

Reppert, Victor. "The Bayesian Argument from Desire" <http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2006/09/bayesian-argument-from-desire.html#comments>

Williams, Peter S. *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013)

---. "In Defence of Arguments from Desire" www.peterswilliams.com/2016/11/02/in-defence-of-arguments-from-desire/

---. *The Case for God* (Monarch, 1999)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fount, 1998), 12.

² See: John Walton, "Who Wrote Ecclesiastes and What Does It Mean?"

<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/who-wrote-ecclesiastes-and-what-does-it-mean/>; Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990).

³ See: Gregory Bassham, ed. *C.S. Lewis' Apologetics: Pro and Con* (Rodolpi-Brill, 2015) and Peter S. Williams, "In Defence of Arguments from Desire" www.peterswilliams.com/2016/11/02/in-defence-of-arguments-from-desire/

⁴ C.S. Lewis. "Meditation in a Toolshed" in *First and Second Things* (London: Fount, 1985), 51.

⁵ *ibid.*, 52.

⁶ *ibid.*, 54.

⁷ *ibid.*, 52.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000), 307.

¹⁰ Richard Swinburne, *Is There A God?* rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 115.

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 106.

¹² Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2012), 110-111.

¹³ Victor Reppert, "The Bayesian Argument from Desire" <http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2006/09/bayesian-argument-from-desire.html#comments>

¹⁴ See: Gregory Bassham ed., *C.S. Lewis' Apologetics: Pro and Con* (Rodolpi-Brill, 2015).

¹⁵ Wielenberg, qtd. in Bassham ed., *ibid.*

¹⁶ Bassham summarizing Wielenberg, *ibid.*, 116-117.

¹⁷ Reppert, *op cit.*

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount, 1997), 113.

¹⁹ Trent Dougherty, "Argument from Desire"

http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/archives/2005/11/argument_from_d.html

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*, third edition (Fount, 1977), 15, *my italics.*

²¹ Aristotle, *The Generation of Animals*, qtd. in Brodie, Sarah. "Aristotle's Elusive Summum Bonum".

<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/objects/files/2014/05/Broadie.pdf>

²² See Mariska Leunissen's reading of Aristotle in *Explanation and Teleology in Aristotle's Science of Nature* (2012).

²³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, *op cit.*, 113, *my italics.*