

Re-Defending Arguments from Desire: A Second Response to Gregory Bassham

Peter S. Williams (September 2016)

In [*C.S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con* \(Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015\)](#), Gregory Bassham and I debated the argument from desire (AFD). As with all of the debates in this volume (which Dr Bassham also edited), the two round debate structure left Bassham with the final, contrary word. This paper continues where things were left, defending the arguments from desire against objections made by Bassham in his "Reply to Peter Williams".

The *Prima Facie* Argument from Desire

Samuel Alexander's Gifford Lectures on *Space, Time and Deity* introduced C.S. Lewis to the distinction between "Enjoyment" and "Contemplation," a distinction Lewis would later illustrate in terms of the difference between looking at and looking along a beam of light. To take the phenomenology of Joy at face value is to look *along* it towards an innately desirable 'transcendent other.' To motivate taking "Joy" at face value, I appealed to Richard Swinburne's 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".¹ Bassham avers: "it is not clear that the principle of credulity is true." Against such scepticism, Richard Swinburne argues that:

If you say the contrary – never trust appearances until it is proved that they are reliable – you will never have any beliefs at all. For what would show that appearances are reliable, except more appearances? And, if you cannot trust appearances as such, you cannot trust these new ones either.²

I think this argument for the principle of credulity (PC) is a strong one. Unfortunately, Bassham doesn't interact with it.

Instead, Bassham observes that some people adopt false beliefs by being overly credulous: "People often think that some mysterious entity is present (for example, ghosts, extra-terrestrials, inner voices, and evil spirits) when, in fact, there is no sound reason to draw such a conclusion." Actually, the PC *would be* such a reason, *absent sufficient counter-evidence*. The reason some of us don't believe in extra-terrestrials, for example, is that we think there's sufficient counter-evidence to defeat the *prima facie* evidence provided by the available testimony on this score.³ But as Swinburne points out, the reason we are rational in accepting the appearances that constitute that counter-evidence *is the truth of the principle of credulity!*

Bassham also observes that: "religious experiences are quite diverse. Some people, for example, experience God as a personal being, while others experience the divine

¹ Richard Swinburne, *Does God Exist?* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 115.

² *ibid.*

³ cf. Donald Brownlee & Peter Ward, *Rare Earth* (New York: Copernicus, 2000); Gonzalo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *Privileged Planet* (Washington: Regnery, 2004); YouTube Playlist: "The Rare Earth Hypothesis" www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWiLU4H5kBr2JzSAzfllTRst.

as wholly impersonal. Both sorts of experience cannot be veridical.” Diversity in religious experience is a well known and much discussed issue within the philosophy of religion.⁴ As with everyday sensory perception, the general reliability of religious experience is compatible with a degree of experiential disagreement, especially in matters of secondary detail. Hence Charles Taliaferro suggests that: “broad theism is sufficiently extensive to describe or accommodate much of the central reported religious experiences in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and theistic traditions within Hinduism, Buddhism, African religions, Sikhism, aboriginal or primary religions, theistic Confucianism, and other religions.”⁵ While there may be experiential agreement “about certain general features of the divine”⁶, this agreement may be obscured by the fact that these features “will be articulated in very different terms depending upon one’s social, cultural, religious context.”⁷

But what should we make of so-called “mystical” religious experiences that blur the distinction between the creator and the created, or between personal and impersonal? I think we are apt to be led astray by our use of language here, for there’s a significant difference between a) not experiencing the transcendent as being personal, and b) experiencing the transcendent as being impersonal. The former is simply the lack of a positive experience of the transcendent as personal, while the latter claims to be just as much a positive experience as is the experience of the transcendent as personal. The former claim doesn’t contradict theistic religious experience, while the latter claim does:

When a theistic mystic who supposes God to be an objective reality reports an experience of an undifferentiated unity, she is best construed not as denying the existence of any real distinctions, for example, between herself and God, but as simply reporting that she is aware of no such distinctions, or of any other, at the time.⁸

Moreover, the pantheistic interpretation of such a mystical experience involves an individual making the self-contradictory claim to have personally experienced the non-reality of personal, individual experience. Since there can be no contradiction without differentiation, we should recognize that “If Vedanta or Yoga mystics report that they are aware of an undifferentiated unity, that attribution in itself is not incompatible with characterizing the same being as a personal agent, unless a denial of the latter is read into the former.”⁹ To read a denial of the latter (positive experience) into the former is to reject the simplest adequate explanation (that the former is simply a lack of positive experience given a certain metaphysical import) for an explanation that’s self-contradictory. Hence I don’t think that either the diversity of religious experience or the existence of mystical/pantheistic religious experience poses an insuperable objection to the PC or the *prima facie* AFD.

⁴ cf. Jerome I. Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁵ Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 277.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 279.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ William P. Alston, *The Experience of God* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 24.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 257.

Bassham observes that some people's experience of the world doesn't include God: "Reality appears to them to be Godless. Could not the principle of credulity then be used, jiu-jitsu fashion, to argue for a presumption of atheism?" I don't think so. There's a fundamental epistemic asymmetry between theistic experience and atheistic experience. Theistic religious experience includes apparent positive experience of God, experiences in which God apparently features. Atheistic experience is not apparently a positive experience of God's non-existence. It is not an experience in which God's non-existence apparently features. Rather, it is an experience of something that appears not to be God and in which God does not apparently feature. Theists have such experiences every day! In other words, there's no contradiction between having "atheistic" experiences on the one hand and having theistic religious experiences on the other hand. The atheist doesn't report a positive experience of God's non-existence that contradicts to the theists' positive experience of God's existence.

The only sort of experience to which a negative principle of credulity could be applied to justify the conclusion that God did not exist would be the experience of an omniscient being, of whom it could be said that if it seemed to them that God did not exist then this would indeed be reason to conclude that God did not exist. Even then, the negative principle of credulity would only be a way of stating the positive principle of credulity in the special circumstance of omniscience. And while an omniscient being needn't be God, one feels that the claim of omniscience on the part of any atheist one is likely to meet who wishes to persevere with this line of argumentation would not be too difficult to puncture.

Bassham claims that the PC can't be applied to Joy because a desire can't be a perceptual experience. He doesn't defend this controversial claim. According to Richard Swinburne: "some people become apparently aware of God by hearing a voice or *feeling a strange feeling*, or indeed just seeing the night sky. But occasionally perceptions do not involve any sensory element at all... one just becomes aware that something is so."¹⁰ Why can't "Joy" be a "strange feeling" that leads some people to become indirectly aware of God?

Swinburne explains that reference to "the epistemic sense" in the PC "describes how we are inclined to believe that things are."¹¹ He notes that the principle applies to epistemic appearances besides those gathered via "your ordinary senses (e.g. your sense of sight)"¹² Moreover, he says the principle applies to "relying on your own memory (i.e. what you *seem* to recall having heard him say)"¹³, and *memory is not a sensory or perceptual faculty*. Hence the PC seems to be a general epistemic principle affirming the rational priority of trust in how we find ourselves inclined by our experience to believe that things are.

Bassham complains that the PC is "patently implausible if applied to desire. Some desires are reasonable and realistically achievable, but many are not." At this point, Bassham produces a list of desires he claims are "basic" or "natural" - "desires to travel through time, to remain forever young and vigorous, and to possess miraculous

¹⁰ Swinburne, *Does God Exist?* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 119-120, my italics.

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 114.

¹² *ibid*, p. 115.

¹³ *ibid*.

powers of healing and protection” - and states that “none of these desires deserves any presumption of being obtainable.” I disagree. I would say that all of these desires – indeed, all desires - deserve the presumption that they are obtainable. Certainly any apparently innate desire not known to be a false desire should be assumed to be genuine until discredited. The reason we don’t hold out much hope of fulfilling the desires listed by Bassham is that conceptual analysis (in the case of time travel) or experience has suggested to us that the fulfilment of these desires is either impossible or highly unlikely (at least in the present world-order; but mightn’t the Christian see in the desire to be “forever young and vigorous” a legitimate and fulfil-able hankering for the resurrection body?). The point is, since it contains a crucial clause about dropping one’s credulity *in the face of sufficient reason for doubt*, the PC is *not* the “open and completely indefensible invitation to wishful thinking” that Bassham fears.

Many philosophers acknowledge the wisdom of a general epistemological bias towards our basic beliefs, but such principles always contain an exception clause. For example, C. Stephen Layman argues: “It is rational to accept what seems to be so *unless special reasons apply*.”¹⁴ Likewise, Rik Peels defends the principle of Prima Facie Rationality: “A cognitive subject S’s basic belief that p is *prima facie* rational iff it seems possible for all we know that S’s belief that p is produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism that aims at truth”, with the result that “virtually all of our basic beliefs are *prima facie* rational”.¹⁵ These basic principles of rationality put the burden of proof on the shoulders of the sceptic who claims that, despite appearances, the phenomenology of looking along a Joy is a delusion rather than the insight into the nature of reality that it seems to be from the inside.

Indeed, it seems to me that Bassham not only rejects the phenomenology of Joy as described in my previous papers, but that he ignores the fact that it’s not only the *enjoyment* but also the *contemplation* of Joy that plays a role in my argument. To take the phenomenology of Joy at face value is to look *along* it towards an innately desirable ‘transcendent other.’ Although this ‘transcendent other’ isn’t given much metaphysical specificity in the *enjoyment* of Joy, *contemplation* of Joy rounds out the picture somewhat. Joy points beyond the ontological monism of both metaphysical naturalism and pantheism. On the one hand, naturalism can’t accommodate this apparent ‘transcendent other’ both on account of its transcendence and on account of its innate desirability, value or beauty. On the other hand, to interpret Joy as a longing for ‘the One’, or for some sort of pantheistic nirvana beyond distinctions would be to collapse the distinction between the unfulfilled desire and the fulfilment of desire. Nor do I think it plausible to accept Bassham’s suggestion that “life in a Platonic realm of Forms might do the trick.”¹⁶ For one thing, I am sceptical about the existence of abstract objects.¹⁷ For another, I think the human heart not only desires to know *about* beauty, goodness, truth, love, justice, forgiveness and so on, but to *know* beauty, goodness, truth, love, justice, forgiveness and so on. As causally effete abstract objects, Platonic Forms may facilitate the contemplation of love and so on, but they

¹⁴ C. Stephen Layman, *Letters to a Doubting Thomas* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 45, my italics.

¹⁵ Rik Peels, unpublished paper.

¹⁶ Gregory Bassham, “Con: Quenching the Argument from Desire” in *C.S. Lewis’s Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

¹⁷ cf. William Lane Craig, “God and the Platonic Host” in Michael Ward & Peter S. Williams ed.’s, *C.S. Lewis at Poets’ Corner* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2016).

can't effect their enjoyment. Indeed, absent God, how are human beings meant to attain to "life in a Platonic realm"? Hence, although the *enjoyed experience* of Joy doesn't provide much metaphysical specificity, it needn't do so to contribute to the cumulative case for theism. As Douglas Groothuis concludes: "the argument from yearning renders credible some transcendent source of human satisfaction beyond the material world... [I]t points towards a theistic worldview since it is based on the claim that humans desire a transcendent reality that can satisfy the human person."¹⁸

Abductive Arguments from Desire

The abductive AFD is an argument to the best explanation that attempts to show that certain innate desires are more likely on the hypothesis of theism than on the hypothesis of atheism/naturalism. I presented abductive versions of the AFD from Alister McGrath¹⁹, Victor Reppert²⁰ and J.P. Moreland.²¹ In response, Bassham ignored these arguments and complained that, in concluding God is the best explanation of Joy, C.S. Lewis: "fails to consider alternative explanations, such as Wielenberg's appeal to evolutionary psychology." In my first reply I considered just such alternative accounts of Joy based in Naturalistic Evolutionary Psychology (NEP) and found them wanting in terms of explanatory scope and power. In response, Bassham contents himself with repeating his critique of C.S. Lewis' presentation of the abductive AFD, rather than attempting a substantive response to my critique of NEP.

Bassham summarises my reply to his critique as follows:

Williams responds by denouncing evolutionary psychology as a fraud, and casting a dubious eye on evolutionary theory as a whole... If Williams has serious doubts about evolution, all I can say is that we have more fundamental disagreements than I supposed.

Bassham's summary is misleading and inflammatory. Nowhere did I denounce evolutionary psychology "as a fraud"! Indeed, I didn't critique evolutionary psychology at all! Rather, I specified that I was critiquing *naturalistic evolutionary psychology* (NEP). In this context I did note the existence of "a broad consensus among philosophers of science that evolutionary psychology is a deeply flawed enterprise", but being "flawed" is *not* the same thing as being a "fraud"! Furthermore, NEP (unlike evolutionary theory *per se*) pre-supposes the truth and/or coherence of metaphysical naturalism (a worldview whose simplicity I think begets explanatory inadequacy). Finally, NEP presupposes the neo-Darwinian account of naturalistic human evolution, an account that Lewis himself doubted and which is the subject of much current debate. As atheist Michael Ruse observes: "we have today a vocal anti-Darwinian party, consisting somewhat surprising not only of the evangelical

¹⁸ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic/Apollos, 2011), p. 370.

¹⁹ cf. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 106 & *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), p. 110-111.

²⁰ cf. Victor Reppert, 'The Bayesian Argument from Desire' (2006), <http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2006/09/bayesian-argument-from-desire.html#comments>.

²¹ cf. J.P. Moreland, *The God Question: An Invitation to a Life of Meaning* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2009). p. 94-95.

Christians of the American South but of some of today's most eminent atheist philosophers...”²²

Bassham and I may indeed have more fundamental disagreements on this score than he had supposed, but Bassham’s statement that I doubt “evolutionary theory as a whole” is inherently vague and likely to mislead. One might almost think it was designed to invite the suspicion that I am a “creationist”! In truth, what I doubt rather depends upon what we mean by “evolutionary theory as a whole”. It is important to realize that “Evolutionary theory as a whole” subsumes several distinct scientific hypotheses that can and should be judged on their individual merits. On the one hand, I concur with Alvin Plantinga that: “There is excellent evidence for an ancient earth [and] for the Progress Thesis, the claim that there were bacteria before fish, fish before reptiles, reptiles before mammals, and mice before men . . .”²³ On the other hand, I also concur with Plantinga that “the Naturalistic Origins Thesis [is] for the most part mere arrogant bluster; given our present state of knowledge, I believe it is vastly less probable, on our present evidence, than is its denial.”²⁴ As Professors Michael J. Murray and Michael Rea write: “evidence for an ancient earth seems quite strong, while the evidence for the naturalistic origin of life is, in fact, virtually non-existent.”²⁵ The rest of evolutionary theory seems to me to lay on the spectrum of probability in-between these bookends.

Of particular relevance to NEP: “leading evolutionary theorists are in the process of rethinking important neo-Darwinian claims. Most fundamentally, they are reconsidering whether the standard model can account for large-scale evolutionary change.”²⁶ Leading palaeontologists Douglas E. Erwin and James W. Valentine explain:

One important concern has been whether the micro-evolutionary patterns commonly studied in modern organisms by evolutionary biologists are sufficient to understand and explain the events of the Cambrian or whether evolutionary theory needs to be expanded to include a more diverse set of macro-evolutionary processes. We strongly hold to the latter position.²⁷

Atheists Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piatelli-Palmarini conclude that: “Darwin’s theory of natural selection is fatally flawed... we don’t know what the mechanism of evolution is. As far as we can make out, nobody knows exactly how phenotypes evolve.”²⁸ Fodor explains:

²² Michael Ruse, ‘Darwinism as religion: what literature tells us about evolution’ <http://blog.oup.com/2016/10/darwinism-as-religion/>

²³ Alvin Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash” www.asa3.org/ASA/dialogues/Faith-reason/CRS9-91Plantinga1.html.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Michael J. Murray & Michael Rea, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 211.

²⁶ Casey Luskin, “Among Theistic Evolutionists, No Consensus” in David Klinghoffer ed., *Debating Darwin’s Doubt* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2015), p. 328.

²⁷ Douglas E. Erwin and James W. Valentine, *The Cambrian Explosion: The Construction of Animal Biodiversity* (Greenwood Village, CO: Roberts & Co, 2013), p. 10.

²⁸ Jerry Fodor & Massimo Piatelli-Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong* (London: Profile Books, 2010), p. xvi & 153.

it's important to see that the phylogeny [i.e. common descent] could be true even if the adaptationism isn't... the classical Darwinist account of evolution as primarily driven by natural selection is in trouble on both conceptual and empirical grounds... an appreciable number of perfectly reasonable biologists are coming to think that the theory of natural selection can no longer be taken for granted...²⁹

Many secular scientists and philosophers acknowledge the existence of boundary conditions that circumscribe explanatory frontiers beyond which adaptationalism becomes an inadequate explanation of evolutionary change. Writing in the journal *Theory in Biosciences*, Günter Theißen of the Department of Genetics at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, comments:

while we already have a quite good understanding of how organisms adapt to the environment, much less is known about the mechanisms behind the origin of evolutionary novelties, a process that is arguably different from adaptation. Despite Darwin's undeniable merits, explaining how the enormous complexity and diversity of living beings on our planet originated remains one of the greatest challenges of biology.³⁰

Atheist philosopher Mary Midgley observes that while “our current belief in our evolutionary origin calls for matter to take over the burden of creation... the physical difficulties facing this enterprise seem bad enough.”³¹ She calls attention to the problem of explaining the supposedly unplanned *arrival* as well as the naturally selected *survival* of the biologically fit:

The idea of natural selection, which... is usually called in to account for this vast creative surge, is already looking increasingly inadequate to explain evolution... Natural selection is only a filter and filters do not provide the taste of the coffee that pours through them. Similarly, the range of evolutionary alternatives between which selection takes place has to be there already in matter. How it comes to be present there is the real mystery about creation.³²

She also notes that there are “increasing difficulties about matters like the origin of life...”³³

Philosopher Thomas Nagel describes his own situation as “that of an atheist who, in spite of being an avid consumer of popular science, has for a long time been skeptical of the claims of traditional evolutionary theory to be the whole story about the history of life.”³⁴ In Nagel's view: “Sophisticated members of the contemporary culture have been so thoroughly indoctrinated that they easily lose sight of the fact that evolutionary reductionism defies common sense. A theory that defies common sense

²⁹ Jerry Fodor, ‘Why Pigs Don't Have Wings’, *London Review of Books*, 18th October 2007 www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n20/fodo01_.html.

³⁰ Günter Theißen, “Saltational Evolution: Hopeful Monsters are Here to Stay,” *Theory in Biosciences*, Vol. 128: 43 (2009).

³¹ Mary Midgley, *Are You An Illusion?* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), p. 14-15.

³² *ibid*, p. 16.

³³ *ibid*, p. 12.

³⁴ Thomas Nagel, “Public Education and Intelligent Design”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2008), p. 202 http://as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/1172/papa_132.pdf

can be true, but doubts about its truth should be suppressed only in the face of exceptionally strong evidence.”³⁵ Far from seeing adequate evidence for the hypotheses of Darwinism and Naturalistic Origins, Nagel argues that:

the dominant scientific consensus... faces problems of probability that I believe are not taken seriously enough, both with respect to the evolution of life forms through accidental mutation and natural selection and with respect to the formation from dead matter of physical systems capable of such evolution. The more we learn about the intricacy of the genetic code and its control of the chemical processes of life, the harder those problems seem... the coming into existence of the genetic code... Seems particularly resistant to being revealed as probable given physical law alone.³⁶

In sum, when it comes to the subject of evolution, I agree with these atheists!³⁷

“As for evolutionary psychology,” says Bassham, “nobody views it as a rock-hard science. It is, unavoidably, more speculative than other branches of science.” Quite. Whilst certain NEP hypotheses seem more plausible than others, the project as a whole appears to be fuelled more by its assumptions than by its results. The reason Bassham views the “theoretical foundations of evolutionary psychology” as being “reasonable secure” is because he accepts the neo-Darwinian theory of human evolution.

Besides, the “theoretical foundations” of NEP can be as “secure” as you like without availing Bassham’s case if it turns out that the particular NEP theory he advances is insecure. Whilst discussing the inductive AFD Bassham admitted that Joy is *not* “readily explainable in naturalistic evolutionary terms.” I’m more than happy to continue *in agreement with Bassham and Wielenberg* that “these possible explanations are highly conjectural.” Indeed, Bassham now concedes that: “Wielenberg’s proposed evolutionary explanations for Joy are, as he admits, highly speculative.” In point of fact, as I previously pointed out, Wielenberg offers *no explanation for the appearance of Joy in our gene pool*, only for its spread *should it appear*. Bassham does nothing in his reply to rectify this crucial oversight. Instead, Bassham retreats to criticising C.S. Lewis’ defence of the abductive argument from desire for ignoring competing naturalistic explanations. Be that as it may, it’s surely a

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos* (Oxford University Press), p. 9-10.

³⁷ cf. David L. Abel, ed. *The First Gene* (New York: Long View Press, 2011); Douglas Axe, *Undeniable: How Biology Confirms Our Intuition That Life Is Designed* (New York: HarperOne, 2016); Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Free Press, 2006); Michael J. Behe, *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free Press, 2007); David Berlinski, “On the Origin of Life” www.discovery.org/a/3209; William A. Dembski, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased Without Intelligence* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Angus Menuge, *Agents Under Fire: Materialism and The Rationality Of Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2010); Stephen C. Meyer, *Darwin’s Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life And The Case For Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2013); David Klinghoffer, ed. *Signature of Controversy: Responses to Critics of Signature in the Cell* (Discovery Institute, 2010); David Klinghoffer ed., *Debating Darwin’s Doubt* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2015); Robert C. Koons, “The Check Is In The Mail: Why Darwinism Fails to Inspire Confidence” in William A. Dembski ed., *Uncommon Dissent: Intellectuals Who Find Darwinism Unconvincing* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2004).

bit rich to criticise Lewis for not engaging with a subject that only emerged as a discipline well after his death. However, this is an irrelevant response to my defence of the abductive argument, since I not only *considered* alternative naturalistic explanations for Joy, but found them wanting.

Inductive Arguments from Desire

Trent Dougherty observes that the AFD can be presented as ‘a defeasible inference [wherein] the premises could be true and the conclusion yet false, but they bear *prima facie* support for the conclusion’³⁸:

- 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 transcendent³⁹

Explicit reference to heaven and/or God can be substituted for Dougherty’s ‘transcendent’.

Bassham challenges the inductive or inferential AFD by “citing examples of natural desires that do not appear to have possible satisfactions...” I suggest that innate desires are:

- Persistently recurring, behaviour shaping desires for anticipated corresponding ends that properly functioning members of a natural kind are either born with, or with the natural tendency to spontaneously develop, that are consequently widespread (regardless of era, age, gender, class or education) and are enshrined in linguistically recognised states of satisfaction and deprivation that manifest in cross-cultural artistic themes.

I’m not convinced that Bassham’s “fantasy desires” qualify as innate desires by these criteria.

My response noting that the majority of Bassham’s examples of “fantasy desires” seem to have possible satisfactions was a ‘for the sake of argument’ response; an ‘*even if* these examples qualify as innate desires...’ response. Bassham replies that I am guilty of twisting his examples “in ways that are uncharitable. Of course science often allows us to reliably predict the future. When I speak of ‘knowing the future,’ as an example of a natural desire that does not appear to have a possible satisfaction, I mean of course knowing ‘in ways that are not naturally or scientifically possible.’” The same goes for Bassham’s other examples (e.g. “travelling to distant worlds, communicating with nonhuman creatures, remaining youthful, and the like”).

First, allow me to note that my “uncharitable” interpretations were not deliberately so. Bassham originally listed:

³⁸ Trent Dougherty, ‘Argument from Desire’
http://prosblogion.ektos.com/archives/2005/11/argument_from_d.html.
³⁹ *ibid.*

a desire to possess superhuman or magical powers, to travel to distant worlds, to know the future, to commune with nonhuman living things, to protect one's children from heartache and harm, to remain youthful and unaffected by the ravages of time, to find an adoring and awesomely attractive mate or spouse, to be universally loved and admired, and so forth.

I took it that the desire for “magical powers” was a specific desire unto itself. I also took it that Bassham's desire for magic was probably more of a passing whim or wish than a persistent, recurring, behaviour shaping desire. After all, it didn't *seem* that Bassham's desire “to find an adoring and awesomely attractive mate or spouse” was in fact the desire to find an adoring and awesomely attractive mate or spouse *by magical means*; or that his desire “to be universally loved and admired” was in fact a desire to be universally loved and admired *due to the workings of a magic spell*. Bassham also mentioned desires to “Live to a ripe old age”, to “See all of one's children live long, happy lives” and to “Be physically attractive.” Should I take it that Bassham actually meant desires for these results to come about *as the result of drinking magical potions* or some such?

Not only do I doubt these magical interpretations of Bassham's “fantasy desires”, I doubt they are to his advantage. For one thing, far fewer people have these specifically magical desires than have the non-magical version thereof, so one might doubt they are widespread enough to qualify as innate desires. For another thing, I think it's plausible to exclude purely instrumental desires – desires for anything that is a means to an end but isn't an end in and of itself - from the category of innate desire. An innate desire is a desire for an anticipated corresponding satisfaction (however vaguely this satisfaction may be conceived). Consequently, an innate desire won't be satisfied by a substitute satisfaction (just as Joy is not satisfied by the earthly object that evokes it and is thus sometimes mistakenly believed to be its satisfaction). For example, a desire for love can't be satisfied by food, such a substitution would be disappointing. However, Bassham probably wouldn't be disappointed if we exchanged his gaining magical powers with his obtaining all the ends that he desired to secure with those magical powers. Nor would he be disappointed if we substituted a different means to obtaining those ends. For example, if God promised Bassham that he would miraculously satisfy his “fantasy desires”, Bassham would hardly be disappointed at this turn of events! What this shows, I think, is that Bassham doesn't really desire magic but rather various ends to which magic would be a means if it were real, just as people desire money as a means to the various ends it can secure. Even the miser who hoards his money is using it as a means to the end of feeling the power or security that is the true object of their desire. The instrumental desire, whether for money or magic or whatever, depends upon a deeper, more fundamental desire for something that is an end in itself. Instrumental desires are not, as Bassham himself puts it, the sort of “basic” desires that we consider as being “natural” or innate desires. To better distinguish between these two types of desire, we might say that people *want* or *wish for* instrumental means such as money or magic, but that they innately *desire* ends such as sustenance, love, etc.

Interpreted in the magical sense Bassham now specifies, experience would seem to indicate that the satisfaction of at least some of Bassham's “fantasy desires” is indeed unlikely, at least within the present order of things. For example, Bassham's fantasy desire to communicate with a non-human creature turns out not to be a desire that

could be satisfied by, for example, teaching a horse to point at symbols to indicate whether it desires to have its blanket on or off.⁴⁰ Rather, Bassham specifies what amounts to a desire to converse with a non-human *person*. I presume neither an angel nor demon would fit the bill, despite being non-human creatures with which one can converse.⁴¹ I suppose that an embodied non-human creature such as a Faun or E.T. would fit the bill because experience suggests that in either case Bassham's desire would then be one that has no satisfaction, at least in the cosmos as we know it. However, if Bassham really does have an *innate* desire to converse with a Faun, perhaps he'd be right to take encouragement from the fact that an apparent majority of innate desires (including innate desires not obviously tied to our material survival) turn out to correspond to real satisfactions!

While Bassham does his best to construct a list of unfulfillable "fantasy desires", it turns out that there's evidence to show that several desires on Bassham's list can be satisfied after all. For example, Bassham summarises my critique of one of his fantasy desire examples thus: "God can confer magical or miraculous powers on whomever he chooses." Bassham points out that this critique is question begging, since it presumes the existence of God. Indeed. But then I never offered this question begging response. Bassham here engages in the "twisting" of which he accuses me. What I wrote was that: "many non-naturalists think people can possess superhuman and magical powers", and I gave a reference to Craig L. Keener's compendious work collecting evidence regarding such. Bassham ignores this evidence and accuses me of begging the question. However, a non-naturalist needn't be someone who believes in God; and even a supernaturalist who believes in God needn't make any link between God's existence and their possession of magical powers. I didn't beg the question. On the other hand, in so far as Bassham's "fantasy desire" critique of the AFD is an attempt to specify desires that can't have satisfactions *unless naturalism is false* and to dismiss these desires *on that account*, then *it is actually Bassham who is begging the question!* Bassham states that the problem with many "fantasy desires" is that "we know that at least many of those desires cannot be satisfied (absent divine activity)." Assuming, merely for the sake of argument, that these "Fantasy desires" are innate, *why not* take their existence as evidence for the "divine activity" without which (by hypothesis) they would fail to conform to the inferential conclusion that innate desires correspond to real satisfactions? The answer seems to be that Bassham excludes "divine activity" from the get-go, thereby begging the question against the AFD.

Again, Bassham says he doesn't simply desire to know the future (as I pointed out in my first reply, science sometimes allows us to know the future), but that he desires to know the future "in ways that are not naturally or scientifically possible." Of course, there's significant evidence showing that some people do in fact know the future "in ways that are not naturally or scientifically possible." Many evidential examples can be given from the biblical tradition of prophets who made unlikely specific predictions about the short and long-term future and whose predictions came true.⁴²

⁴⁰ cf. 'Horses can communicate with us - scientists' www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-37450952.

⁴¹ cf. Peter S. Williams, 'Do Angels Really Exist?' www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/do-angels-really-exist; Peter S. Williams, *The Case for Angels* (Paternoster, 2011).

⁴² cf. Peter S. Williams, *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2013); John C. Lennox, *Against the Flow: The Inspiration of Daniel in an Age of Relativism* (Monarch, 2015); Josh McDowell, *Daniel In The Critics Den* (Campus Crusade, 1979).

Bassham claims: “We all naturally desire a ‘magical’ way of instantly achieving our desires and dealing with life’s inevitable tragedies and adversities.” This statement seem to support the belief that we innately desire a life the shalom and/or flourishing of which transcends our present experience of things; but do we naturally desire *a magical way of* instantly achieving all our desires and of dealing with life’s tragedies and adversities? People desire to eat, and food is obtainable, but even in the midst of famine a desire for ‘magical’ provision doesn’t seem particularly widespread. People may bemoan their lack of food and they may bemoan the absence of peace and/or justice that is causing their lack of food, but they don’t seem to go around bemoaning their lack of food-making ‘magic’. Linguistically, people are not only said to be “lacking food” but to be “starving”. There is no corresponding term for “lacking magic”. That said, several biblical reports concern the ‘magical’ (miraculous) instant provision of food. The most famous is probably Jesus’ *multiply and independently attested* feeding to the 5000 (cf. Mark 6:25f; Matthew 14:15f; Luke 9:12f and John 6:5f). Once again, the evidence shows that one of Bassham’s supposedly unfulfillable “fantasy desires” turns out to have a satisfaction!

I doubt that Bassham’s “fantasy desires” qualify as innate desires, but *even if they did qualify*, there’s evidence to show that many of them do have satisfactions. On both counts, then, it’s not clear that there are enough “fantasy desires” known to lack satisfactions (as opposed to “fantasy desires” not known to have satisfactions) to dilute the inference from innate desires beyond the point of cogency. That is, even if we were to grant, for the sake of argument, that Bassham has identified a class of *innate* “fantasy desires” that lack satisfactions, this would be insufficient to rebut the inferential AFD because all the inferential AFD requires is that *the majority of* innate desires have satisfactions. Even Bassham grudgingly admits that there is “a weak argument from analogy”⁴³ to be made here.

Moreover, since it isn’t clear that “fantasy desires” known to lack satisfactions outnumber innate/fantasy desires with known satisfactions, on the (false) assumption that “fantasy desires” are innate, the only thing preventing Bassham from following the trail of induction to the conclusion that his fantasy desires probably have possible satisfactions seems to be a question begging commitment to the naturalistic worldview.

Aristotelian Arguments from Desire: Universal and Restricted, Deductive, Inductive and Heuristic

Lewis’s introduction to *The Pilgrim’s Regress* suggests the following deductive AFD, based upon the universal principle (taken from Aristotle) that ‘nature makes nothing in vain’:

- 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.

⁴³ Gregory Bassham, “Con: Quenching the Argument from Desire” in *C.S. Lewis’s Christian Apologetics: Pro and Con* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

3) Therefore, the object of Joy must exist and be obtainable in some future mode of human existence.

Bassham argues that Aristotle's dictum that "nature does nothing in vain" is at odds with contemporary science:

Pace Aristotle, we now know that many things in nature have no purpose or function, but are simply useless holdovers from an evolutionary process.

According to Bassham, this goes not only for "certain body parts and genetic information" but also "of some innate or instinctive desires." In response, I continue to maintain that Aristotle is "not as obviously wrong as Bassham thinks."

For example, Bassham suggests that: "An ostrich, for instance, might desire to fly... long after evolution has made this impossible." I can't be sure, having never asked an ostrich, but I doubt that ostriches (who use their wings as stabilisers whilst running, for sexual display and for temperature control purposes) have a frustrated innate desire to fly (it is, of course, one thing for an ostrich to wish it could fly and another thing for it to have an innate desire to fly, but I'm sceptical on both counts). Since he only ventures that ostriches "might" desire to fly, it appears that Bassham isn't in a position to correct my doubts, so I think I'll leave him with the burden of proof on this one.

Bassham makes no reply to my critique of his use of the argument from dis-teleology. He does respond to my sources correcting his out-dated claims about "vestigial organs" and so-called "junk DNA". Unfortunately, Bassham's response is *ad hominem*: "two of the sources Williams cites (Wells and Luskin) are connected with the pro-creationism Discovery Institute, and the third (Budziszewski) is not a scientist, but a professor of government..." In point of fact the Discover Institute is pro Intelligent Design Theory, not pro-creationism. They are *not* the same thing.⁴⁴ Neither is an *ad hominem* argument a refutation of the points made by my sources.

Bassham recommends seeing "how actual scientists (Luskin is a lawyer and a creationist) respond to the ENCODE junk DNA study..." Bassham's response to Luskin is *ad hominem*. Moreover, dismissing Luskin as "a lawyer and a creationist" is to trade on a half-truth at best. Luskin isn't a *young earth* creationist, and although he is an attorney, his B.S. and M.S. degrees from the University of California at San Diego were in Earth Sciences. Luskin conducted geological research at the Scripps Institution for Oceanography and published a paper in the peer-reviewed *G³ Journal*.⁴⁵ Moreover, Luskin's expertise in law is related to his scientific literacy, in that he has published several peer-reviewed Journal articles on legal aspects of the debate about evolution and intelligent design theory.⁴⁶ He has also published on ID,⁴⁷ including contributing several book chapters dealing with "junk-DNA".⁴⁸

⁴⁴ cf. Stephen C. Meyer, 'Intelligent Design Is Not Creationism' www.discovery.org/a/3191; 'Is ID Creationism?' www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qewVEWiGWPngKUzJ0Q9v6hS4LNxh.

⁴⁵ cf. Lisa Tauxe, Casey Luskin, Peter Selkin, Phillip Gans and Andy Calvert, "Paleomagnetic results from the Snake River Plain: Contribution to the time-averaged field global database" <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2003GC000661/full>.

⁴⁶ cf. Casey Luskin, "Darwin's Poisoned Tree: Atheistic Advocacy and the Constitutionality of Teaching Evolution in Public Schools" *Trinity Law Review*, March 1 (2016),

I also referenced Jonathan Wells's book *The Myth of Junk DNA* (2011). Wells holds a PhD in molecular and cell biology from the University of California at Berkley. It is presumably his association with the Discovery Institute and his religious views that prevents Wells from being classed as an "actual scientist" by Bassham.

Bassham's advice about listening to "actual" scientists strikes me as rather odd, in that the 2012 ENCODE junk DNA study to which he refers was of course carried out by "actual scientists". Although some "actual scientists" have been critical of the ENCODE study, the "actual scientists" involved have defended and continued to publish their work.⁴⁹ For example, according to Dr Ewan Birney, of the European Bioinformatics Institute, a principal investigator in the ENCODE project: "The nature of the attacks against us is quite unfair and uncalled-for".⁵⁰

Further research continues to add to the evidence for function in so-called "junk" DNA and RNA. For example, a 2016 paper in the journal *Genome Research* reported that: "genomic variation within highly repetitive, non-coding DNA of human centromere regions has a pronounced impact on genome stability and basic chromosomal function."⁵¹ Another 2016 paper, this time in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, has this to say about the function of long non-coding RNAs (lncRNA):

Long noncoding RNAs (lncRNAs) are important regulators of gene expression, but their structural features are largely unknown. We used structure-selective chemical probing to examine the structure of the Xist lncRNA in living cells and found that the RNA adopts well-defined and complex structures throughout its entire 18-kb length. By looking for changes in reactivity induced by the cellular environment, we were able to identify numerous previously unknown hubs of protein interaction. We also found that the Xist structure governs specific protein interactions in multiple distinct ways. Our results provide a detailed structural context for Xist function and

www.discovery.org/a/25273; "The Constitutionality and Pedagogical Benefits of Teaching Evolution Scientifically" *University of St. Thomas Journal of Law & Public Policy*, Vol. IV(1): 204-277 (Fall, 2009) www.discovery.org/a/14661; David K. DeWolf, John G. West & Casey Luskin, "Intelligent Design Will Survive Kitzmiller vs. Dover" *Montana Law Review* (May 2007)

www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/filesDB-download.php?command=download&id=1372.

⁴⁷ cf. Casey Luskin, "Human Origins and Intelligent Design" *Progress in Complexity, Information, and Design*

www.ideacenter.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/6f4c5da45d2de0a3c8c83f71f5a20b6f/miscdocs/luskin_hum_anorigins_pcid_final_071505.pdf.

⁴⁸ cf. Casey Luskin, "Francis Collins, Junk DNA, And Chromosomal Fusion" in *Science & Human Origins* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012); Casey Luskin and Logan Paul Gage, "A Reply to Francis Collins's Darwinian Arguments for Common Ancestry of Apes and Humans" in *Intelligent Design 101* (H. Wayne House ed.: Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008).

⁴⁹ cf. "Protracted Unrest Between ENCODE Researchers and Junk-DNA Advocates Goes On" www.evolutionnews.org/2014/11/protracted_unre091501.html.

⁵⁰ cf. "Scientists attacked over claim that 'junk DNA' is vital to life" *The Guardian* (24th February, 2013), www.theguardian.com/science/2013/feb/24/scientists-attacked-over-junk-dna-claim

⁵¹ Megan E. Aldrup-MacDonald, Molly E. Kuo, Lori L. Sullivan, Kimberline Chew and Beth A. Sullivan, "Genomic variation within alpha satellite DNA influences centromere location on human chromosomes with epialleles" <http://genome.cshlp.org/content/early/2016/08/10/gr.206706.116>.

lay a foundation for understanding structure-function relationships in all lncRNAs.⁵²

According to Igor Kuznetsov: "There is no 'junk DNA'. At least 80 per cent of the human genome initiates RNA production. RNA, DNA and proteins are now equal partners, we just don't yet understand their complementary roles."⁵³ Dr Francis Collins, former head of the human genome project (and a theistic evolutionist), stated in 2015 that:

In terms of junk DNA, we don't use that term anymore because I think it was pretty much a case of hubris to imagine that we could dispense with any part of the genome, as if we knew enough to say it wasn't functional... Most of the genome that we used to think was there for spacer turns out to be doing stuff.⁵⁴

On the topic of apparently functionless vestigial organs, Bassham references a textbook from the last century. Marvin Olasky recently observed that: "Robert Wiedersheim's 1895 list of 86 has shrunk, as almost all of them have proved to have functions. For example, the most famous vestigial organ - the vermiform appendix - is a crucial storage place for benign bacteria that repopulate the gut when diarrhea strikes. The appendix can be a life-saver."⁵⁵ Indeed, writing for *New Scientist*, Laura Spinney reports that: "these days many biologists are extremely wary of talking about vestigial organs at all."⁵⁶

Gerd Muller, a theoretical biologist at the University of Vienna, has advanced a more nuanced definition of vestigiality that *avoids the idea that vestigial organs are useless*. On Muller's definition: "vestigial structures are largely or entirely functionless as far as their original roles are concerned – though they may retain lesser functions or develop minor new ones."⁵⁷ According to Muller, "Anything that appears to be entirely without function is suspicious... and probably just waiting to be assigned one."⁵⁸

In my first reply I noted how "Lewis distinguished between the claim that each *type* of natural desire correlates with a real object of satisfaction and the claim that each *token* of natural desire will receive satisfaction." I also observed that: "Aristotle can hardly have formulated his maxim in ignorance of the fact that final causes can be

⁵² Matthew J. Smola, Thomas W. Christya, Kaoru Inoue, Cindo O. Nicholson, Matthew Friedersdorf, Jack D. Keene, David M. Lee, J. Mauro Calabrese and Kevin M. Weeks, "SHAPE reveals transcript-wide interactions, complex structural domains, and protein interactions across the Xist lncRNA in living cells" www.pnas.org/content/113/37/10322.abstract.

⁵³ "'Junk DNA' now center stage" *Medical Xpress* (January 20th, 2016) <http://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-junk-dna-center-stage.html>.

⁵⁴ Francis Collins, speaking at the J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference in San Francisco in 2015, https://world.wng.org/2016/06/admission_of_function_www.evolutionnews.org/2016/07/on_junk_dna_fra103008.html.

⁵⁵ Marvin Olasky, cf. https://world.wng.org/2016/06/admission_of_function_www.evolutionnews.org/2016/07/on_junk_dna_fra103008.html.

⁵⁶ Laura Spinney, "Wastes of Space?" in *Nothing: New Scientist* (London: Profile Books, 2013).

⁵⁷ Gerd Muller quoted by Laura Spinney, "Wastes of Space?" in *Nothing: New Scientist* (London: Profile Books, 2013), p. 66.

⁵⁸ Muller quoted by Laura Spinney, "Wastes of Space?" in *Nothing: New Scientist* (London: Profile Books, 2013), p. 70.

frustrated in individual cases.” (Intelligent Design theorists acknowledge that entropy generally degrades genetic information⁵⁹ and that it’s mainly through the natural selection of genetic simplifications caused by entropy that microevolution functions!⁶⁰) Hence I argued that Lewis’s appeal to Aristotle “should be understood as the claim that ‘nature makes no type of thing in vain.’”

According to Lindell Bromham (writing for *New Scientist*): “Gene duplication can provide the raw material for evolutionary change by creating a spare copy of essential sequences. If one copy of the gene can keep producing the original gene product, the spare gene copy may be able to change without jeopardising the function of the original gene.”⁶¹ Clearly, even if a duplicate token of a gene exists “in vain”, this doesn’t show either that genes *per se*, or that type of gene *per se*, are things that exist “in vain”. Indeed, even if an individual token of a duplicated DNA sequences is non-functional, it nevertheless participates in a collective function.

Again, suppose ostriches do have a frustrated natural desire to fly. Wouldn’t those frustrated tokens of desire imply that ostriches inhabit a cosmos where flight is achievable *per se*? The man who dies of thirst in a drought has a *token* of a desire that is “in vain”, but far from showing that every token of that desire is “in vain”, his fate rather shows that at least one token of that desire must *not* be “in vain”. In other words, the *type* of desire in question is *not* “vain” *per se*.

Besides, since Bascham’s evolutionary “holdovers” are things that are *presently* “in vain” *although they were once not* “in vain”, we can easily construct a deductive AFD that concedes the possibility that innate human desires are “holdovers”. For example, Richard Dawkins describes pseudo-genes as “genes that once did something useful but have now been side-lined and are never transcribed or translated.”⁶² The existence such “holdovers” proves that certain goals are *obtainable per se* because *they were obtained in the past*. The AFD proposes the existence of various innate desires that have the existence of God as their fulfilment or as the pre-condition of their fulfilment. For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that the fulfilment of these transcendent desires *was possible* in the past but is, for some reason, *no longer possible*. Our transcendent desires would then be like pseudo-genes, or the thirst of a man who dies in a drought. His token of thirst was not “in vain” at one time (when there was water he could drink), although it is “in vain” now (in a drought). The pseudo-gene was not “in vain” at one time (it once had a function it achieved) although it is “in vain” now. Likewise, given the scenario we are entertaining, our transcendent desires would at least imply that, as the goal and/or precondition of the goal of our transcendent desires, God *did* exist. This conclusion does not imply that God *does not* exist. Indeed, one might very well think that (unlike water or the product of a pseudo-gene) if God *did* exist then he *does* exist.

⁵⁹ cf. Dr J.C. Stanford, *Genetic Entropy & The Mystery of the Genome*, second edition (New York: Elim, 2005).

⁶⁰ Michael J. Behe, *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

⁶¹ Lindell Bromham, *An Introduction to Molecular Evolution and Phylogenetics* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 139.

⁶² Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth* (New York: Free Press, 2009), p. 332-333.

Even if we grant that evolutionary theory is consistent with the origin and persistence of *types* (rather than tokens) of things that lack function, it's harder than Bassham thinks to demonstrate that such organs, genetic sequences or innate instincts actually exist. The most plausible counter-example to Aristotle's dictum I can think of is probably "a pile of twigs and leaves randomly blown together by the wind". But it's harder than one might at first think to eliminate purpose, since the "pile of twigs etc." will serve a function in terms of the carbon cycle as it rots down.

For or the sake of argument, suppose some example or other were accepted as contradicting the universality of Aristotle's dictum. We could nevertheless retain a deductive form of the AFD by adding an exception clause to the dictum, somewhat as universal physical laws have built-in *ceteris paribus* clause. Suppose we stated that "Nature makes no type of thing in vain, except X" – where X stands for "a concrete example of something that exists in vain (and anything sufficiently analogous to such)". We could then argue that the innate human desires noted within a deductive AFD don't fall under this exception clause. Indeed, we could simply place the burden of proof on the sceptic to show otherwise. After all, as things stand we don't know that existential human desires exist "in vain", and critics must be careful to avoid begging the question against the AFD. And so we might make a (universal-ish) deductive AFD as follows:

- 1) Nature makes no type of thing in vain, except for X
- 2) Humans have an innate desire, dis-analogous to X, which would be in vain unless some object that is never fully given in our present mode of existence is obtainable in some future mode of existence
- 3) Therefore, the object of this otherwise vain desire must exist and be obtainable in some future mode of existence

Alternatively, as I pointed out previously, one could 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*:

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

Bassham complains that the deductive AFD based on the premise that "Nature makes no type of natural human desire in vain" ignores his claim that "some types of natural desires (for example, desires to possess magical powers) have no natural objects that can satisfy them." Not so. Rather, the argument assumes that Bassham's claim is wrong. I do not grant that a desire for magical powers is an "innate" human desire in the sense of the term assumed by the AFD.

Bassham claims that the premise "Nature makes no type of natural human desire in vain" cannot be defended without circularity:

Williams claims that natural human desires include desires for things like objective moral values, meaning, and purpose. But these can exist, Williams argues, only if God exists. So it [is] possible to know that no human desires are in vain only if one already knows that God exists.

Given that humans have natural desires for things like objective moral values, meaning and purpose, and given that these can exist only if God exists, it follows that it is possible that no natural human desires are in vain only if God exists. Does it also follow that it is possible to *know* or to *rationaly believe* that no human desires are in vain only if one already *knows* that God exists? One might as well argue that since the meta-ethical moral argument claims that 1) “Objective moral values don’t exist unless God exists”, it is impossible to know that 2) “Objective moral values exist” unless one already knows that God exists, in which case the moral argument (specifically premise 2 thereof) cannot be defended without circularity. However, one can know and even argue that objective moral values exist, as atheistic moral realists argue, without using God’s existence as a premise. Likewise, the premise that “no natural human desire is in vain” might be accepted without its acceptance resting on the basis of an argument containing a premise affirming the existence of God. For example, one might think that the burden of proof should rest with the sceptic. Then again, as I pointed out before, the premise that “no natural human desire is in vain” might be accepted because one thinks the denial of this claim would entail that human existence is absurd and one has a properly basic belief that human existence is not absurd (cf. the *reductio* AFD).

As indicated previously, *inductive* versions of the Aristotelian AFD can be mounted upon the premises that “the majority of [types of] things in nature are not made in vain” or that “the majority of innate human desires are not made in vain”:

- 1) The majority of [types of] things in nature are not made in vain
- 2) Humans have an innate type of desire that would vain if God doesn’t exist
- 3) Therefore, God probably exists

Or:

- 1) The majority of innate human desires are not made in vain by nature
- 2) Humans have natural, innate desires that would vain if God doesn’t exist
- 3) Therefore, God probably exists

Either way, as Bassham correctly observes, this move “transforms the argument into an inductive (that is, probabilistic) AFD.” Quite so; but I only mentioned these possibilities at the end of my discussion of the deductive AFD and my mentioning them didn’t imply an abandonment of the deductive AFD. I was simply noting a related avenue of argument one could pursue.

Finally, following Mariska Leunissen’s reading of Aristotle in *Explanation and Teleology in Aristotle’s Science of Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)⁶³, we could regard Aristotle’s dictum *as a heuristic principle* (like Occam’s Razor) that guides scientific research. For example, a principle such as “We should assume that

⁶³ Mariska Leunissen, *Explanation and Teleology in Aristotle’s Science of Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), https://mleunissen.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/ebooksclub-org_explanation_and_teleology_in_aristotle_039_s_science_of_nature.pdf; cf. Review by Devin Henry, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24701-explanation-and-teleology-in-aristotle-s-science-of-nature/>.

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

Given prevailing assumptions about teleology, Aristotelian versions of the AFD, whether deductive, inductive or heuristic, are less likely to be rhetorically effective than in past times (though this may change). With regard to the relative strength of the arguments from desire, I would now probably place the *deductive* AFD after the *prima facie* AFD and before the *abductive* AFD.

***Reductio* Arguments from Desire**

One can treat the *reductio* “argument from absurdity” as an auxiliary syllogism defending the first premise of the inferential or deductive versions of the AFD:

- 1) Either it is true that for any instantiated kind, K, and for any type of desire natural to that kind, it is [probably] consistent with the way the world is that a creature of kind K should (at some time) have a satisfied desire of that type, or life is ultimately irrational or absurd (at least for beings of kind K)
- 2) Life is [probably] not ultimately irrational or absurd (at least, not for beings of kind K)
- 3) Therefore, it is [probably] true that for instantiated kind, K, and for any type of desire natural to that kind, it is [probably] consistent with the way the world is that a creature of kind K should (at some time) have a satisfied desire of that type

And so on. Although I previously acknowledged Bassham’s point about the “hyperbolic” suggestion that discovering a single species with an unfulfillable natural desire would render the universe meaningless was “nicely put”, I didn’t concede that Bassham has thereby pulled a *reductio* on my *reductio*, for the question must be faced: Do mules desire to reproduce (which they cannot do), or do they merely want to have sex (which they can do)? If mules merely desire sex, then the fact that they cannot reproduce doesn’t undermine the meaningfulness of their existence. A parallel point goes for flightless birds.

Moreover, as I observed before, even if one were to grant Bassham’s point (for the sake of argument), one might nevertheless think that in a rational universe it would at least be the case that every *type* of natural desire would indicate a possible satisfaction. Even if the mule does desire to reproduce, it does in habit a world in which sexual reproduction *per se* is possible (albeit not for mules)!

It was having made these points in defence of the *reductio* AFD as previously presented that I then suggested a more focused formulation of the *reductio* ADF, the argument from *existentially relevant human desires*:

- 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

Suggesting a new formulation of an argument doesn't automatically mean repudiating an old formulation.⁶⁴

The AFD can be build upon the premise that the natural desires (e.g. existential desires) belonging to an instantiated kind K (e.g. human kind) have, or probably have, a fulfilment obtainable by members of that kind *per se* (if not every token thereof):

- 1) The existence of God is a necessary condition for the fulfilment of certain existential desires natural to the human kind to be obtainable by members of that kind *per se*
- 2) These existential desires are either obtainable by members of the human kind *per se* or human life is absurd (at least to a significant extent)
- 3) Human life is [probably] not absurd (at least, not to a significant extent)
- 4) Therefore, these human existential desires have fulfilments obtainable by members of that kind *per se*
- 5) Therefore, God [probably] exists

Instead of directly criticising my reformulated argument, Bassham critiques his own, condensed version thereof.

First, Bassham points out that some people (i.e. existentialist nihilists of Camus's stripe⁶⁵) are willing to embrace the idea that nihilism is true. Or so they say. Well, one can always avoid the conclusion of an argument if one is willing to pay the price it attaches to the rejection of its conclusion. Of course, since nihilism is an unliveable philosophy, no one *actually* pays the price of embracing nihilism *consistently*. Even Bassham tacitly admits that this isn't a serious objection to my argument, since he introduces his other objections with the phrase, "More seriously..."

Bassham says the burden of proof is on me to show that God's existence is a precondition of objective value and significance. I have already made good on this burden of proof, having mentioned the moral argument for theism (I gave references to sources defending this argument).⁶⁵ I find the moral argument convincing, Bassham

⁶⁴ One might argue that: 1) Existential desires natural to some instantiated kind K [probably] have fulfilments obtainable by members of some K or other, 2) The human kind has natural existential desires for fulfilments that would be unobtainable by any member of any kind unless God exists, 3) Therefore, God [probably] exists.

⁶⁵ cf. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Fount, 1997); George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality" in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (ed.'s. Robert Audi and William

finds it “unconvincing” but doesn’t elaborate any reasons why this is so. Besides, pursuing this further would be the subject for a whole other debate.

Finally, Bassham turns to my claim that “Human existence just ‘present’ itself to us, so to speak, as rich in objective meanings, values, and the like.” It is by combining this claim with the principle of credulity (and principles like it) that I defend the premise that human life is probably not absurd.

Bassham asks whether it is true that “all (or most) humans ‘naturally intuit’ reality as objectively meaningful, purposeful, and so forth?” Well, allow me to call Gregory Bassham as a witness on this point, since Bassham admits: “I think it is obvious that, say, feeding a starving child has value and significance – and therefore meaning...” Bassham clearly shares my basic intuition (“it is obvious”) that some actions (e.g. “feeding a starving child”) have “value”, “significance” and “meaning”! On this, we agree!

Bassham asks whether there are “compelling ‘defeaters’ for belief in objective meanings and values?” But he doesn’t suggest any. He doesn’t even make a literature punt on the point. I have considered many proposed defeaters for belief in objective value in my time and have found none to be compelling. Here’s a literature punt.⁶⁶

Psychotherapist Victor Frankl describes man as: “a being in search of meaning...”⁶⁷ Abraham H. Maslow described “the will to meaning” as “an irreducible need” and as “man’s primary concern.”⁶⁸ S. Kratochvil and I. Planova of the Department of Psychology at the University of Brno, Czechoslovakia, state: “the will to meaning is really a specific need not reducible to other needs, and is in greater or smaller degree present in all human beings.”⁶⁹

Bassham returns to questioning the principle of credulity, alleging it “allows us to cut through these thick debates and believe pretty much whatever we wish, without bothering with such nasty, inconvenient things as ‘facts’ or ‘evidence’.” Well now, I don’t think that facts or evidence are either nasty or inconvenient, but neither do I accept a theory of knowledge in which evidence is the be-all and end-all of rational belief. Nor is it true to say that the principle of credulity allows us to ignore facts and/or evidence. The principle regulates when it is reasonable to believe or disbelieve appearances, including appearances of evidence.

Bassham summarises the *reductio* AFD:

J. Wainwright. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Peter S. Williams, *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy* (Paternoster, 2013); Peter S. Williams, *The Case for God* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1999).

⁶⁶ cf. Francis Beckwith & Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Baker Books, 1998); Paul Chamberlain, *Can We Be Good Without God?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996); Peter S. Williams, *The Case for God* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1999); Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ Victor Frankl, “New Research In Logotherapy” in *Man’s Search For Ultimate Meaning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Publishing, 2000), p. 112.

⁶⁸ Abraham H. Maslow, “Comments on Dr. Frankl’s Paper,” in Anthony J. Sutich and Miles A. Vitch ed.’s, *Readings in Humanistic Psychology* (New York: The Free Press, 1969).

⁶⁹ S. Kratochvil and I. Planova quoted by Frankl, “New Research In Logotherapy” in *Man’s Search For Ultimate Meaning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Publishing, 2000), p. 86.

As Williams has it, for any person S and any belief p, p is *prima facie* properly basic for S just in case it seems to S that she is within her intellectual rights in accepting p without any supporting evidence. According to Williams, all (normal?) humans have a hard-wired basic ‘intuition’ that life is not absurd... according to the principle of credulity, we are rationally justified in believing that things are as they seem unless we have sufficient reason for doubt. There are no sufficient reasons for thinking that life is absurd. So belief that life is not absurd is properly basic for everyone.

Note how Bassham slides from “*prima facie* properly basic” at the start to “*is* properly basic” at the end (my italics). Having introduced this shift, Bassham tries to capitalize upon the distinction between “it *seeming* that p is properly basic and p’s *actually being* properly basic.” Of course there is a distinction here, but as Bassham himself says: “Williams claims [that] if it ‘seems’ to S that it is within his ‘intellectual rights’ to accept p as properly basic [then] it is *presumptively* rational for S to do so” (my italics). In my ‘Reply to Gregory Bassham’ I quoted Rik Peel’s principle of Prima Facie Rationality (PFR): “A cognitive subject S’s basic belief that p is *prima facie* rational iff it seems possible for all we know that S’s belief that p is produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism that aims at truth.”⁷⁰ I noted how Peels reckons that “virtually all our basic beliefs are *prima facie* rational.”⁷¹ I stated in my own words that “if a basic belief seems to one to be within one’s intellectual rights to accept, then one is *prima facie* justified in accepting it as a properly basic belief.” So, what Bassham should have concluded above is that “belief that life is not absurd is *presumptively* properly basic...” or that it is “*prima facie* properly basic for S”. This is a very minimal claim. It is not the claim that belief in the meaningfulness of life is *ultima facie* rational, or even that it is properly basic, but merely that it is *prima facie* properly basic or *presumptively rational*. This claim is, however, enough to put the burden of proof on the sceptic and to carry forward the *reductio* AFD. As far as I can see, Dr Bassham hasn’t offered a sound rebuttal to this argument.

Finally, I’d like to take this opportunity to note Dr Andy Bannister’s recently offered epistemic twist on the *reductio* AFD:

What was it that possessed evolution, normally so thrifty with its juggling of genes, to equip us and us alone among the animal kingdom with desires not just for cake and copulation, but for value, meaning, purpose, and significance? If atheism is true, we are at best biological freaks, whose desires no more map onto reality than do those of a dyslexic cartographer... if atheism is *true*, not merely is there no meaning to which those desires connect, but the very fact that we have them at all would make us fundamentally irrational – poor, mad, deluded creatures. Evolution has sent us careering down a blind alley, even played a sick joke upon us. But if we are *that* mad, *that* irrational, *that* demented, then we cannot trust *any* of our instincts, not one of our desires, none of our most cherished beliefs. Including our belief in cake, hope, meaning, or even atheism.⁷²

⁷⁰ Rick Peels, 2014, p. 3.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Andy Bannister, *The Atheist Who Didn’t Exist* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015), p. 185.

There are obvious similarities here with Alvin Plantinga's anti-naturalism argument from naturalistic evolution. One might formulate Bannister's argument as follows:

- 1) If we believe naturalism is true, we must believe that naturalistic evolution has equipped humans with various innate instincts and desires that exist in vain and fail to map onto reality
- 2) The belief that naturalistic evolution has equipped humans with various innate instincts and desires that exist in vain and fail to map onto reality should lead us to doubt whether our conscious cognitive instincts and desires are trustworthy
- 3) If we were to doubt whether or not any of our conscious cognitive instincts and desires are trustworthy we would be committing ourselves to a cognitive scepticism from which it would be *ad hoc* to except belief in the truth of naturalism
- 4) Hence belief in naturalism leads to scepticism about naturalism
- 5) We shouldn't accept any belief that leads to scepticism about itself
- 6) Therefore, we shouldn't believe that naturalism is true

Conclusion

My debate with Dr Bassham began with my laying out five versions of the argument from desire. Our discussion has led me to distinguish between deductive and inductive versions of the Aristotelian AFD, as well as versions based upon universal and restricted versions of Aristotle's "dictum". I have also introduced a heuristic version of the Aristotelian AFD and formalised Andy Bannister's desire focused version of Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary anti-naturalism argument from reason. The process of debate has increased my confidence that there are quite a few sound arguments from desire that together offer a cumulative AFD that usefully bolsters the cumulative case for theism.

Recommended Resources

Bassham, Gregory ed. (2015) *C.S. Lewis's Christian Apologetics: For and Against*.
Rodopi-Brill

Peter S. Williams, Argument From Desire YouTube Playlist @
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj3nK3TBydEVAFRtdqfrpW2

McAllister, Cameron. 'The Argument from Desire: Part 1: Do our natural desires count as evidence of God's existence?' <http://rzm.org/vital-signs/the-argument-from-desire-part-1-do-our-natural-desires-count-as-evidence-for-gods-existence/>

_____. 'The Argument from Desire: Part 2: What is a "Natural" Desire?'
<http://rzm.org/vital-signs/the-argument-from-desire-part-2-what-is-a-natural-desire/>

- _____. 'The Argument from Desire: Part 3: The Inconsolable Secret of Freud's Heart' <http://rzim.org/vital-signs/the-argument-from-desire-part-3-the-inconsolable-secret-of-freuds-heart/>
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