

# The Argument as Presented in Selected Works of C. S. Lewis

ALTHOUGH C. S. LEWIS never used the phrase “Argument from Desire,” the argument itself fills the pages of many of his most cherished works. In fact, Lewis describes humanity’s desire for God in many diverse and creative ways throughout his writings. Some of his most creative ways are found in his works of fiction, such as *Till We Have Faces*, *Perelandra*, *Pilgrim’s Regress*, and his most famous works in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. But his most direct explanation of this desire comes from his works of non-fiction, such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Weight of Glory*, and *Surprised by Joy*. He also wrote what is considered by some to be one of the best short chapters on the subject of “Heaven” in *The Problem of Pain*, which relates to this intense longing for a heavenly home. Probably the best way to begin to describe Lewis’s Argument from Desire (though, again, he never called it this) is to offer a brief description of what he says about it in some of his own works. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we will primarily focus our discussion toward his works of non-fiction, though we will later occasionally bring in illustrations from his works of fiction as well. In this chapter we will spend some time expounding the chapter entitled “Hope” in *Mere Christianity* and comparing it to the Afterword to the third edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. His other works like *Surprised by Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *The Weight of Glory* (although mentioned here) will also be discussed in more detail in future chapters to further explain the argument. Later, we will also attempt to define a critical German word that Lewis associated with the kind of “Joy”<sup>1</sup> he sought to describe.

1. As will be discussed in detail in chapter 2, Lewis used the word “Joy” in a technical sense to describe man’s intense longing for God. We must not confuse “joy” in the

## Mere Christianity and Lewis's Practical Presentation of the Argument

It may well be argued that in his chapter "Hope" in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis most succinctly (and practically) describes mankind's heavenly desire. He begins by saying that Christians have largely "ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth thrown in: aim at earth and you will get neither."<sup>2</sup> Lewis did not mean to assert that Christians no longer have the desire for heaven. Such a desire, according to Lewis, is so natural that one must *learn* to ignore it. However, while this desire is unavoidable, we often identify it with some other object. He makes the point that "our whole education tends to fix our minds on this world." Thus, "When the real want of Heaven is present with us, we do not recognize it. Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise."<sup>3</sup>

According to Lewis, since this desire is one that never truly gets satisfied on earth, there are three ways people often deal with it. One way is what Lewis calls the "Fool's Way." These people simply blame this unsatisfied desire on "things themselves." One goes through life,

Thinking that if only he tried another woman, or went for a more expensive holiday, or whatever it is, then, this time, he really would catch the mysterious something we are after. Most of the bored, discontented, rich people in the world are of this type. They spend their whole lives trotting from woman to woman . . . from continent to continent, from hobby to hobby, always thinking that the latest is "the real thing" at last, and always disappointed.<sup>4</sup>

The Fool's Way is the most common way of dealing with this longing. It is the same avenue that the writer of Ecclesiastes took. As he sought to find the meaning of life, he tried to find it in all kinds of pleasures

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normal sense of happiness or pleasure with the word "Joy" in the sense Lewis meant it. "Joy" in this Lewisian technical sense is capitalized throughout this book to distinguish it from "joy" in the usual sense.

2. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 134.

3. *Ibid.*, 135.

4. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

and goods. For example, he sought it in education (1:16–18), in wine and indulgence (2:1–8), and in occupation (2:17–24), just to name a few. But in his entire search he found nothing that filled the craving he had. Everything he sought to satisfy him seemed like “grasping for the wind,” reaching outward but grabbing nothing. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” cries the writer (1:1–2).

But the problem for the writer of Ecclesiastes was the same problem for Lewis’s Fool. They were both trying to find satisfaction for a desire that could not be fulfilled in this world. It was not until the end of Ecclesiastes that the writer finally found out what could fill his heart’s desire. It was God he was after the whole time but did not know it (12:13–14). He had a longing for God even while he did not know that God was the true object of this longing.

Like Lewis, the writer of Ecclesiastes taught that God has put “eternity into our hearts” (3:11). But the only thing big enough to fill a hole the size of eternity is a proper object that is itself eternal. For both the writer in Ecclesiastes and Lewis, this object can only be God. Thus the Fool has placed his efforts in objects that can never satisfy him.

The second way some people try to explain this unsatisfied desire is what Lewis calls the “Way of the Disillusioned ‘Sensible Man.’” There will be much more to say about this Sensible Man below. But Lewis would describe this person as one who has grown out of childish fairy tales. He “settles down and learns not to expect too much and represses the part of himself which used, as he would say, ‘to cry for the moon.’” This man calls for “common sense” and believes only in tangible things. But again, we will have more to say about this person later.<sup>5</sup>

The third way of explaining this unsatisfied desire is the “Christian Way.” Here is where Lewis suggests his own Argument from Desire most vividly.

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the

5. Ibid., 136.

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universe is a fraud. Probably earthy pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Christian understanding of this unsatisfied desire is not that it is a mere child's wishful thinking. Nor is it something that simply lingers around luring humanity continuously into all forms of pleasures that never offer what he is really looking for. It would be a cruel thing indeed for nature to give us something useless. Nature would be the greatest tease of all to give us an unending desire for something that we never find to be real. It would be a strange view of natural selection to have evolved a desire for an object that has never existed. Natural selection only selects that which is useful to life. It gives us what we need in order to survive in our environment. But what use is having a desire that has nothing at all to do with our current environment? This is not to say that there are no plausible answers to this question. We will explore these options in part 4.

But this is exactly the point that Lewis is challenging. The usefulness of this longing comes from its pointing us to an environment not like the one we are currently in. Since, according to Lewis, all innate desires must have an existing object that correlates to that desire, there must be something that exists to satisfy our currently unsatisfied desire. To better understand what Lewis is doing, we might compare him to an earlier work written by Rudolf Otto that influenced Lewis's thinking on this subject.

### **Otto's Haunted World and its Influence on Lewis's Argument**

Otto was a German theologian and philosopher of comparative religions. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto examined the experience of the divine much like what Lewis sought to accomplish. Though a case may be made that no one defended the Argument from Desire as stridently as Lewis, elements of his views are foreshadowed in works such as Otto's.

While some have "interpreted aesthetics in term of sensuous pleasures, and religion as a function of the gregarious instinct and social standards," Otto seeks to find the answers to these questions in what he calls the "numinous." While thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher are right to find that much by way of religious conviction comes from a "feeling of dependence," Otto believes it is more than this. The difference between having a sense of the divine and other kinds of feelings is a

6. *Ibid.*, 137.

qualitative difference and not just a difference of degrees. While our sense of the divine does come from a “feeling of dependence,” it is not “*merely* a feeling of dependence.” It comes from what Otto calls, “creature-consciousness” or “creature-feeling.”<sup>7</sup>

For Otto, this creature-consciousness is the “emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.” This creature-feeling is “itself a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling-element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self.”<sup>8</sup> This sense is what Otto calls the “numinous.” Rather than simply a subjective sense of dependence, the “numinous” is felt as “objective and outside” the self. It is a sense in which we are being watched (or haunted). Peter Kreeft tries to capture the word by describing it as follows:

The sense that the world we see is haunted by something we do not see, an unseen presence. It often inspires awe and fear because it is not humanly predictable and controllable, not definable and tamable. It seems to come from another dimension, another *kind* of reality, than the world it haunts. It is the primitive wonder that is the source of fairy tales and myths and also of the instinct of worship.<sup>9</sup>

While there are many hints at this “haunting” of our world, Kreeft poetically suggests that even the “whole world seems to be a face” that haunts us every day. Sometimes we feel this sense more so than other times and, like anything else, people can learn to ignore this sense of presence in life even to the point of rejecting it was ever there altogether. Lewis explains this “haunting” in his chapter on heaven, saying, “All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness.” This hovering “ecstasy” will be something that one has either “attained” in the afterlife or, though it was always within reach, “lost forever.”<sup>10</sup>

One word of explanation needs to be made before moving any further. While there are many similarities between Otto and Lewis, and while

7. Otto, *Idea*, 9–10.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Kreeft, *Heaven*, 97–98.

10. Lewis, *Problem*, 32

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it is helpful to think of the “numinous” as it can relate to Lewis’s “Joy,” there is one difference that needs to be noted. This difference is summarized in what Robert Holyer says in his article titled “The Argument from Desire.” “Joy lacks precisely what Otto regarded essential to the holy, and that is a sense of the divine presence. As Lewis described it, Joy is not an awareness of God’s presence; it is simply unfulfilled desire.”<sup>11</sup> Yet even with this difference, Joy is related to this sense of presence in such a way that we can be prompted along toward transcendence by means of it. Like the numinous, Joy cannot be located in anything earthly. While the numinous is the feeling of divine presence, Joy is the craving and search for it. Yet, in both cases, one may feel the desire or the haunting without identifying the object of it.

Before we rush to judge Lewis and Otto’s views as mere mystical phenomenon, it is important to keep clear in mind the connection of this divine sense to ordinary life. Peter Berger is helpful here when he speaks in a similar vein as Lewis and Otto concerning what he calls the “signals of transcendence.” Because the Argument from Desire appeals to humanity’s internal needs and longings, it is tempting to equate it with mere internal, *a priori*, feelings and illusions that spring from childhood subconscious insecurities. This, again, is what Freud would have us think of religion: mere childish wishful thinking springing from uncontrollable fears. But while justification of the Argument from Desire cannot be empirically proven in the same manner that hyper-empirical scientific methods would look for, the argument does nonetheless suggest itself within the empirical world. The argument is best seen as an inductive argument that rests, not solely on “mysterious revelation, but rather on what we experience in our common, ordinary lives.”<sup>12</sup>

So according to Berger, it is the ordinary things of life combined with a real divine presence that connect us to this numinous feeling. These “signals of transcendence” are not themselves the things desired, however. They are hints that something beyond this world is there. In his own autobiographical sketch of his journey toward Joy, Lewis explains that, “authentic Joy . . . is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, the Joy Lewis spoke of is not always expressed as

11. Holyer, “Argument,” 26.

12. Berger, *Rumor*, 60.

13. Lewis, *Surprised*, 72.

a feeling of pleasure. “It might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief.”<sup>14</sup> But strangely it is a kind of grief that we want. It is a pain like we feel when we are separated from someone we have loved more than anything or anyone else. For Lewis, we “ache” in desire because we have a sense that there exists a love greater than anything in this world. It is a kind of unhappiness felt like one feels because of homesickness. The difference is that this feeling of homesickness is for a home we have never been to or seen before.

Thus, in *Mere Christianity* Lewis presents the Argument from Desire from a practical and inductive approach. It is in the Afterword to the third edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress* that Lewis lays out what he means by it in a more analytical and definitive way.

### **Pilgrim’s Regress and Lewis’s Direct Approach to the Argument**

In the Afterword, Lewis says that the desire he is speaking of is different from other desires in at least two ways. First, “though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight.”<sup>15</sup> The very feeling of transcendent desire is itself a form of Joy. The longing for the satisfaction is itself a kind of satisfaction. Maybe the best way we can capture what Lewis is saying is to compare it to the word “hope.” Often people will be able to endure present hardships with greater strength when they have in themselves a sense that there is something more to be valued and anticipated beyond the current situation. Hope itself is a cherished feeling even beyond the expected events hoped for. The difference still being, however, that hope has this value insofar as it points to the known expected future event. Whereas, “other desires are felt as pleasures only if satisfaction is expected in the near future,”<sup>16</sup> Joy, as Lewis understood it, was pleasurable even when the satisfaction was not foreseeable. This makes Joy a kind of desire that is itself euphoric. It is as if, as Lewis put it, “this hunger is better than any other fullness.”<sup>17</sup> It is a feeling of “want” that keeps us inspired and moving toward something

14. Ibid., 18.

15. Lewis, *Regress*, 202.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

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even when we do not know what that something is. For Lewis, this desire is a divine desire for something that transcends anything that is in front of us or around us. We long for it, in part, because of the mystery and excitement it brings to life. We desire it because we feel that there is more to life than what meets the eye. It gives us a sense that, whatever it is, it is bigger than the here and now. Thus, we cherish the desire itself, even without its satisfaction. This is why Lewis called this desire “Joy.” It offers Joy even without any final satisfaction that normally accompanies typical joy.

The second way that this heavenly desire (i.e., “Joy”) is different than all other desires is that, in the case of other desires, a person knows the object that he/she desires. We alluded to it above, but we need to specify this point here. Lewis believed that the object of this superior desire is, *when it stands by itself*, unidentifiable. Lewis expresses it this way,

There is a peculiar mystery about the object of this Desire. Inexperienced people (and inattention leaves some inexperienced all their lives) suppose, when they feel it, that they know what they are desiring. Thus if it comes to a child while he is looking at a far off hillside he at once thinks “if only I were there”; if it comes when he is remembering some event in the past, he thinks “if only I could go back to those days.” If it comes (a little later) while he is reading a “romantic” tale or poem of “perilous seas and faerie lands forlorn,” he thinks he is wishing that such places really existed and that he could reach them. If it comes (later still) in a context with erotic suggestions he believes he is desiring the perfect beloved. If he falls upon literature (like Maeterlinck or the early Yeats) which treats of spirits and the like with some show of serious belief, he may think that he is hankering for real magic and occultism. When it darts out upon him from his studies in history or science, he may confuse it with the intellectual craving for knowledge. But every one of these impressions is wrong . . . Every one of these supposed objects for the Desire is inadequate to it.<sup>18</sup>

With these points in mind, it needs to be kept clear that when one speaks of the Argument from Desire as pointing to the existence of God, one is not saying that those who experience this desire know that God is what they desire. What is being asserted here, as will be laid out more carefully later, is that since there is nothing on earth (i.e., no identifiable object) that satisfies this desire (and that since all natural desires have objects that satisfy them) then there must be some transcendent object

18. *Ibid.*, 203.

like God that exists. Thus, the success of the argument does not depend upon anyone being able to directly identify the object of this mysterious, albeit natural desire. It only depends upon the premises that will be more clearly laid out below. Before moving on to that objective there is one more essential ingredient that will help clarify the kind of Joy that Lewis describes.

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