

A Word on the Different Forms that the Argument Can Take

WHILE SOME READERS WILL see this chapter as merely academic in nature, it does serve an important purpose for our study. To more clearly identify all the pieces of the argument, we will benefit from looking at the different ways that the argument can be presented formally. Doing this also helps us to see not only the validity of the argument, but it will also help us later on to evaluate how strong the argument is.

Deductive or Inductive? Is That Really the Question?

Some readers of Lewis have observed two distinct forms that the Argument from Desire can take: inductive or deductive.¹ In *Mere Christianity* and *Weight of Glory* Lewis can be read to offer a slightly softer (or inductive) approach to the argument. In *Mere Christianity* he says,

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

1. A deductive argument occurs if the supporting premises (or propositions) of the argument are true and thus prove the conclusion *must* also be true. An inductive argument happens when the supporting premises of an argument confer a certain degree of *probability* to the conclusion.

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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.²

Notice he says that since he has a desire for something not found in this world then the “most probable explanation” is that I was made for another world. In this sense Lewis believes that his case is a strong case in which the conclusion (while not necessary) is “most probable.” He does something similar in *The Weight of Glory* when he says,

We remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy. But is there any reason to suppose that reality offers any satisfaction of it? . . . A man’s physical hunger does not prove that any man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man’s hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe . . . that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will.³

Notice again when he reaches his conclusion he states that it is a “pretty good indication” that such a thing as Paradise exists. As Kreeft explains, “Lewis does not claim certainty for the conclusion here, just probability. For the conclusion here is only a hypothesis that explains the data better than any other, but this fact does not prove with certainty that this hypothesis is true.”⁴

Though, again, while not wanting to make too much of it, in the Afterword of the *Pilgrim’s Regress* Lewis words his case more strongly (i.e., deductively) saying,

It appeared to me therefore that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur’s caste—the chair in which only one could sit. And if

2. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 137.

3. Lewis, *Weight*, 32–33.

4. Kreeft, *Heaven*, 208.

nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist.⁵

Notice the stronger statements made such as “he *must* come out at last to a clear knowledge” and “the One who can sit in the chair *must* exist.” Again, one should not make too much of all this. The differences may simply reflect Lewis’s recognition that the argument, while very strong in his mind, cannot give us absolute certainty. But again, since some have found in these quotes two clear ways of arguing for his case, the point is mentioned here. It may be helpful to spell out a few of the ways the argument can be formulated.

A deductive form of the argument offered by John Beversluis in his critical book *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* is as follows:

1. Nature makes nothing in vain; that is, every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it.
2. Joy is a natural desire, but not for any natural object because no object in the natural world can satisfy it.
3. Therefore Joy is a desire for an object beyond the natural world and that object must exist.⁶

While Beversluis’s argument contains all the needed premises, in order to simplify it, we should break it down to see all of its constituent parts:

1. All natural desires have existing objects that satisfy them.
2. Joy is a natural desire.
3. Therefore Joy has an existing object that satisfies it.

Consequently, the follow up to this argument would go as follows:

4. Joy has an existing object that satisfies it.
5. But the object of Joy is not found anywhere in this world.
6. Therefore the existing object of Joy is not of this world.

Notice that *if* the previous five premises are true then the final conclusion (number 6) is *necessarily* true. Everything in this argument hinges on two very fundamental points. The first is whether or not *all* natural

5. Lewis, *Regress*, 204–5.

6. Beversluis, *Lewis and Search*, 41.

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desires have objects that exist to satisfy them. The second is whether or not Joy is really a natural desire that has nothing on earth to satisfy it. If a strong case can be made for these two points, then the conclusion that there must be something outside of this world that serves as Joy's object of satisfaction is strong as well. But even if we allow this deductive form of the argument, it still hinges on the inductive or abstract strength of the plausibility of the five previous premises themselves. This is not surprising. All deductive arguments are only as strong as the inductive or abstract strength of the premises that lead to their conclusions.⁷ For example, even if we find that, by way of experience, the premise that "all men are mortal," is true, this does not have to mean it is a *necessary* truth. It only means that since we find that *all* humans have died (so far as history has shown), and that the nature of human beings is such that they have bodies that have physiological limitations that eventually lead to death, it is rational to universalize the statement that "all men are mortal." But if we were to find even one person that is immortal, this might well force us to remove the universal statement that asserted that "all" men were mortal. But no such person has been found to date and such a proposition is not consistent with all the known qualities of human bodies. So even if "all men are mortal" is not a necessary truth, it is a truth we find in our world nonetheless. Similarly, even if it is *possible* natural desires could exist without satisfying objects, this would not nullify the Argument from Desire *per se*. The Argument from Desire does not assert that all natural desires *necessarily* have objects that satisfy them. We can imagine a world where aliens constantly crave eating but, nonetheless, live off of something other than eating. As impractical as that might seem, it is certainly not a logical impossibility. But the point Lewis makes is that no such objectless natural desire has been found in human nature. Thus one may rationally universalize the first premise even if only in the Humean "matter of fact" sense.

Nevertheless, pretend *one* such natural desire that has no satisfying object *was* to be found. This would still not defeat the Argument from

7 An "abstract" concept can be gained by knowing something general about a thing. For example, knowing something about human beings generally speaking is to know something about them "abstractly." We do not have to know every human being to draw conclusions about human nature generally. We will get into why all this is important in the next chapter.

Desire *per se*. It would only bring us to its inductive form (we will save further discussion about why this issue is important in chapter 5).

Thus, either way one looks at it, even without the deductive version of the argument the inductive version still allows for a strong case for the Argument from Desire. Interestingly enough, after examining the material in *Mere Christianity* and *Weight of Glory*, Beversluis offers this inductive form that he finds there:

1. Many natural desires have objects that can satisfy them.
2. Joy is a natural desire for a kind of satisfaction that no object in the natural world can satisfy.
3. Therefore Joy is a desire for an object beyond the natural world and that object probably exists.⁸

Even allowing for this weaker inductive form of the argument, one would still be more warranted to affirm the conclusion than to deny it.

However, while Lewis used terms like “most probable” in presenting his conclusion, there is no indication that Lewis ever entertained the idea that there actually exists any innate desires that have no objects to satisfy them. Even in the case of the above quote from *Mere Christianity*, Lewis observes that “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.” Clearly Lewis believed that *all* innate desires just so happen to have objects that satisfy them. Even if this truth is not a *logically necessary* truth, it is a truth that happens to exist within the world of human nature nonetheless.

The strength of the argument truly rests on what Lewis is saying here. This is why it is best to see the humble spirit in Lewis when he uses phrases like “most probable” and “pretty good indication” in offering his conclusions. Lewis recognized that there is no one argument that will serve to settle the matter for everyone. He also knew that there was no one formal argument that could prove with Cartesian certainty the truthfulness of the Christian faith. Any differences in the wording of Lewis’s quotes on this subject can best be seen as simple rhetorical differences that spring from the nature and purpose of the work itself. This is supported by the fact that in *The Weight of Glory* he is expounding a sermon and in *Mere Christianity* he is being more practical in his tone. Yet in the Afterword of *The Pilgrim’s Regress* Lewis offers a more analytical and

8. Beversluis, *Lewis and Search*, 43.

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explicit way of arguing his case. As Kreeft observes, “The *Surprised by Joy* passages are not primarily intended to argue but to reveal. The book is not philosophy but autobiography. Yet an argument is hinted at. The passage in *Mere Christianity* is more argumentative than *Surprised by Joy*, but is more practical, a matter of pastoral guidance. Only in the work *The Pilgrim’s Regress* did Lewis use it as an explicit argument.”⁹

Settling on Peter Kreeft’s Version of the Argument

In any case, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, the reasons for bringing out these different forms of the argument are not moot. The point in doing so will be made clearer as we later address the objections that are made concerning the Argument from Desire. But for our main purposes we present Peter Kreeft’s three basic premises of the argument to serve as the basis for our discussion in what follows. Notice that if the first two premises are true, the conclusion must also be true. The argument is worded as follows:

1. The major premise of the argument is that *every natural or innate desire in us bespeaks a corresponding real object that can satisfy the desire.*
2. The minor premise is that *there exists in us a natural desire which nothing in time, nothing on earth, no creature, can satisfy.*
3. The conclusion is that *there exists something outside of time, earth, and creatures which can satisfy this desire . . .* This something is what many people call God and heaven.¹⁰

It is important to note that the first premise of the argument implies that there are at least two kinds of desires. This point is critical in understanding the argument. There are innate (i.e., natural and universal) desires and there are conditioned (i.e., artificial) ones. This premise does not say that if someone merely wishes something to be true it must be. Kreeft makes this distinction very clear when he writes, “We naturally desire things like food, drink, sex, knowledge, friendship, and beauty . . . We also desire things like Rolls Royces, political offices, flying through

9. Kreeft, *Heaven*, 206.

10. *Ibid.*, 201–2. Italics mine.

the air like superman . . .”¹¹ This premise is explained more succinctly by Lewis in the quote given above from *Mere Christianity*. Lewis is speaking of the kind of desires that we are “born with.” They are desires for such things as food, water, and sex.¹²

So if there are natural and universal desires, then there must be some reason we have them. As stated above, even from an evolutionary perspective a desire cannot survive long if it serves no purpose for survival. Even John Beversluis, who is a staunch critic of the Argument from Desire, believes that there is no evolutionary purpose for the kind of desire Lewis defended and yet we have the desire anyway.¹³ If this is so, then the question here is, why do we have this natural divine desire at all? Again, we will discuss the evolutionary objection to the Argument from Desire in part 4.

With the risk of sounding redundant, it is important to emphasize, again, what Lewis is *not* saying. We do this because it is one of the most misunderstood aspects of his argument. He is *not* saying that the existence of *just any kind of desire* implies that the object of that desire exists. If I wish long and hard enough for unicorns to exist this will not prove that they do. This is what people mean by mere “wishful thinking.” The major premise in the argument is specifically speaking of innate (i.e., universal and natural) desires. For example, hunger means that food of some kind exists, and thirst means that some kind of drink exists, and so forth.

Since the present work asserts that this first premise is so fundamental, further comments will be addressed in chapter 5 in part 2 when we deal with certain objections to the argument.

The second (minor) premise is the most interesting and yet also the most challenging. Because of this we will spend all of part 3 looking at existential and external hints that point us to the truth of this premise. This is where the role of Lewis’s *Sehnsucht* becomes critical. According to Lewis all innate desires except one have a corresponding object that is identifiable and can be located in time and space. There exists in us, however, one natural desire that nothing in time or earth can satisfy. As discussed above, *Sehnsucht* is the German word that refers to this kind of longing. Yet, if one is open to it, one can see that we live in a world that is

11. Ibid., 202.

12. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136.

13. Beversluis, *Lewis and Search*, 45.

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filled with constant reminders of this otherworldly object. “The phenomenon the Germans call *Sehnsucht* is psychologically fascinating, and when it occurs as subject rather than thinking object—i.e., when we experience the desire rather than just thinking about it—it is obsessive and imperious—in fact, even more imperious than erotic desire at its height . . . for the object of *Sehnsucht* is the perfect heavenly beloved, whether we know it or not.”¹⁴

It is *Sehnsucht* that makes people so religiously dedicated to the point where they are willing to lose everything for the sake of it. *Sehnsucht* is what moved the apostle Paul to write in Philippians 1:21–23: “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.” Paul’s longing, which produced a kind of aching for home, motivated him to know and to anticipate that there was something more after his earthly life was over.

The conclusion of the argument, therefore, claims that what we desire is not identifiable with anything on earth. It does not claim, by itself, to prove the existence of the Christian God. Nevertheless, as we will discuss in part 3, it is *rational* to affirm that this natural hunger and homesickness is a reliable source for believing in a supernatural place and being.

14. Kreeft, *Heaven*, 204.