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# THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIRE

Robert Holyer

In this essay I offer a reformulation and defense of the argument from desire as it is presented in the works of C. S. Lewis. Specifically, I try to answer the criticisms of the argument made by John Beversluis in his recent book *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*. However, my concern is not so much Lewis as it is the argument itself, which I argue is worthy of serious and more extended philosophical treatment.

In his critical discussion of C. S. Lewis's case for Christianity, John Beversluis extracts from Lewis's writings something he calls the argument from desire.<sup>1</sup> Although Lewis himself never presented it as a philosophical argument, he did insinuate it at several points in his writings, especially in the autobiographical works, *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *Surprised by Joy*, and it was arguably the most important consideration in his own conversion. What Beversluis does is to present this facet of Lewis's development as a philosophical argument, which he then goes on to reject for both "logical and theological" reasons. In what follows I shall consider Lewis's argument only from a philosophical point of view. My intention is to reformulate and defend it, and this not primarily to vindicate Lewis from what I think are some superficial criticisms (though I hope that what I have to say will have this effect), but more importantly, because I think Lewis offers us in rough form an argument from religious experience that is both different from the one that is most commonly discussed and deserving of a more careful philosophical treatment than it receives from Beversluis.

The argument from desire comprises several insights Lewis came to over the years that enabled him to understand one of the central concerns of his life, the experience of what he called Joy. What Lewis called Joy, and what others have called *Sehnsucht* (a term Lewis himself used), melancholy, ecstatic wonder or romantic longing, is not easy to describe; in essence, it is an intense longing or desire which, though unsatisfied, "is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."<sup>2</sup> Because it is unsatisfied, "it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief."<sup>3</sup> So there are in effect two essential elements of Joy: a sort of rapturous desire and a sense of being separated or alienated from the object of desire. Lewis, of course, was not alone in the attention he devoted to these feelings. If Corbin Scott Carnell is correct, they "may be said to represent just as much a basic theme in literature as love . . ."<sup>4</sup>



For my purpose, what is most interesting about Joy is that it is in no obvious sense religious. To be sure, the sort of desire that is part of Joy is also one of the constituent elements of the experience of the holy, the one Rudolf Otto identified as fascination.<sup>5</sup> However, Joy lacks precisely what Otto regarded as 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 an unfulfilled desire, and it is not in any obvious sense a desire for God. What is more, it can be experienced along with, and is in some sense similar to, some other desires, such as the desire for beauty, sexual desire and romantic love; and consequently, it is often difficult to distinguish it from them. Also, whatever the object of Joy is, it is not something given in our experience. The conclusion reached by many who have experienced it is that it is a desire for that which lies beyond what we now experience, a desire for an unknown but ultimately satisfying something. Lewis himself experienced Joy for a number of years before he came to believe that it has any theological import. In fact, to discover what it was a desire for was the substance of his spiritual search. However, though Joy may be mixed in with our other desires and difficult to distinguish from them, it is a distinct desire: it is not just a desire for an ultimate degree of satisfaction of our other desires.

The insights Lewis came to in his quest for Joy may be summarized by three arguments which together constitute the argument from desire.<sup>6</sup>

- 1 Since all natural<sup>7</sup> desires are desires for an object that satisfies them, Joy is a desire for some object.
- 2 Joy is not a desire for any finite object, since no finite object satisfies it.
- 3 Since all desires have existents that satisfy them, Joy too has an existent which satisfies it. Therefore, (combined with 2) an infinite object exists.

To examine the argument and Beversluis's objections to it, I shall consider each component in turn.

Although 1 came as something of a discovery to Lewis, Beversluis accepts it simply as "an observation about the nature of desire." (16) What he means by this is not immediately clear. Apparently he accepts it only as a definitional truth: what we call a desire is always a desire for something. Accordingly 1 is simply a statement of how we use the term desire correctly: it needs an object. However, Beversluis argues, we cannot draw any existential conclusions from this "grammatical" truism.

Although this is certainly correct, it misses Lewis's point completely. Lewis well knew that all desires have objects in the grammatical sense. The real issue

for him was something else. One of the mistakes he discovered in his own experience was the belief that Joy was a desire for the experience of Joy, that it was quite simply a desire for a certain state of mind. If we look closely at the nature of Joy it is easy to see how Lewis made this mistake. If it is an unsatisfied desire which is itself desirable, it would easily seem that what is desirable is the state of having the desire aroused but unsatisfied. The conviction Lewis came to through his reading of Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* was that all desires are desires for some external object that satisfies them. Consequently, Joy too must be a desire for some external object and not for a state of mind. Accordingly, we would have to replace 1 with

- 1' Since all natural desires are desires for an external object that dis-  
satisfies them, Joy too is a desire for some external object.

Although 1' better captures Lewis's point and what is necessary for the argument from desire, it is not at all clear that its major premiss, All desires are desires for some external object, is true. There are many examples of desires that seem to be desires for a certain state of mind. I should think that some people who take drugs or get drunk do so desiring a certain state of mind. Presumably, many people seek professional psychological care, hoping to achieve a specific state of mind. And in everyday speech we can find many sentences that seem to indicate a desire for a certain state of mind—for example, many people claim that they want peace of mind. Moreover, it is not at all clear that desires are only desires for certain external objects. They are more commonly a desire both for some external state of affairs and also for some state of mind which should result from it. The man who is hungry, for example, desires not only food but the cessation of hunger pains because he has eaten. In fact, only if the pains cease after eating are we convinced that he was hungry. As we shall see in discussion of 2, this is a crucial issue for Lewis.

In light of this, we should perhaps replace 1' by

- 1'' Since all natural desires are desires both for some external object  
and a corresponding mental state that results from it, Joy is a desire  
both for an external object and a corresponding mental state that is  
the result of it.

Although there are still some ambiguities in 1'', I think some further refinement of it will serve not only to articulate Lewis's insights, but also to accommodate the objections that can be raised to 1. It is certainly debatable that the desire for a drug-induced state of mind is a "natural" desire; even if it is, it could be argued that it does not deny the major premiss of 1'' since drugs produce their effects by altering our perceptions of external states of affairs. And of the many cases where we seem to desire a certain state of mind, it could be argued that what

we really desire is a state of mind that we should have as the result of an existing state of affairs, but do not. In other words, I should think that some version of 1" might be defensible.

However, Lewis's remarks are subject to another interpretation, and it may well be that what his argument requires is nothing as universal as the major premiss of 1". Perhaps all Lewis claimed<sup>8</sup> and all that is needed is

- 1''' Joy is either a desire for a state of mind or for an external object.  
 Since it is not desire for a state of mind, it is a desire for an external object.

I know of no objection to the major premiss. I suspect the most important question would be how one could establish the minor premiss. Lewis claimed that he had come to know it on the basis of experience, in particular his failure to find that the experience of Joy fulfilled his desire. This of course raises all the issues raised by 2, since the evidence Lewis had for 2 was of a piece with the evidence he had for the minor premiss of 1'''. So it is to an examination of 2 that we are naturally led. Suffice it to say that if 2 is true, so is the minor premiss of 1'''.

The concerns that lie behind 2 become relevant once one accepts some version of 1. That is, if Joy is a desire for something, even in the grammatical sense, the next appropriate question is a desire for what. Lewis sought to answer this on the basis of experience. He attempted to satisfy his desire by appropriating those objects that seemed to evoke it. What he claimed to discover was that none of the objects that evoked the desire actually satisfied it. In other words, though the objects that evoked Joy may have satisfied *some* desire, they did not satisfy the desire he called Joy. Consequently, Lewis claimed to come to know 2 by a process of elimination in which he tried any likely means of satisfying his desire only to find that none of them sufficed.

Though Beversluis sees the plausibility of Lewis's case, he does not think that Lewis has given us a satisfactory account of how we can sort out our desires to determine their real objects. He observes:

- Lewis thought that anyone who took these experiences seriously and pursued each object of desire would discover that they do not ultimately satisfy. And from this he concluded without further ado that they are not what we really want. (16)

Having summarized what he takes to be Lewis's view, he then rejects it, arguing this.

- The claim *Anything that does not ultimately satisfy us cannot be what we really wanted* may sound plausible when stated in so general a way, but it cannot survive the test of concrete examples. Would anyone

seriously want to argue that the fact that Sam is hungry again four hours after breakfast proves that it is not food that he really wanted? Or that the fact that Jill is tired by 10:00 a.m. proves that it was not sleep that she really wanted? How, then, can such a conclusion follow in the case of our experiences of Joy? Why say that the failure of music or poetry to satisfy us fully proves that they are not really what we want? (16)

Beverluis's argument is surely correct, and if he accurately summarizes Lewis's views, he has certainly put his finger on a major blunder. However, I doubt that he is giving us a faithful reading of Lewis. No doubt, you can find statements in Lewis that come close to: if  $x$  does not ultimately satisfy  $S$ , then  $x$  is not what  $S$  really wanted. However, I think Lewis summarizes his view more accurately when he says, "Do what we will, then, we remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy." What this suggests and what his examples bear out is the claim that finite objects satisfy some of our desires (those whose combined satisfaction he might call "natural happiness") without satisfying Joy. In other words, that  $x$  does not satisfy  $S$ 's desire for Joy means  $x$  is not the object of Joy. This is perfectly consistent with the claim that  $x$  may satisfy some of  $S$ 's other desires, and it does not entail the erroneous proposition that Beverluis attributes to Lewis. So I fail to see that Lewis is guilty of quite the blunder Beverluis attributes to him.

But suppose he were. Suppose he gave us an erroneous account of the criteria for making judgments like 2, or suppose (as I think to be the case) that he offers us no account of the criteria. What important conclusions follow? What really is Beverluis's point? Is it that Lewis was wrong to claim that we can sift through our desires and find their true objects? But obviously we do. Those who wish to lose weight, for example, must often determine whether their desire for food is really hunger or something else. And a man and a woman contemplating marriage would be wise to come to some understanding of the real nature of the desire they have for one another. These sorts of judgments are not always easy to make, but we do make them. Or is Beverluis's point that the evidence we should consult in making them is something other than the satisfactions we experience? But surely satisfactions are important evidence, though perhaps not in the simple way he pillories. So, for example, while it is not the case that Sam's hunger four hours after breakfast proves that he was not really hungry, his hunger one hour after what is for him a normal-sized breakfast is *prima facie* evidence that his desire for food is something other than hunger. And of course satisfactions may not be the only evidence to consider. Lewis several times refers to what he thought about the possible objects of Joy, and if we were to tease out of his highly metaphorical descriptions a set of criteria for making for 2, it would not be difficult to find more than Beverluis did. But admitting that we

do not find in Lewis an adequate account of the relevant criteria 2, perhaps Beversluis's point is that Lewis, or anyone else, cannot possibly know 2 without giving such an account. If this is his point, I fail to find it very convincing. A man's failure to give a satisfactory account of how we come to our perceptual beliefs is surely no reason to impugn his claim to know, say, that he is sitting in the library. Analogously, I see nothing in the absence of a satisfactory account of how we come to judgments like 2 that would impugn Lewis's (or anyone else's) claim to know it.

But it may be that Beversluis's objection lies elsewhere. Perhaps what he is driving at is this. Joy is not a desire for a distinct kind of satisfaction: it is merely the desire for a whole number of things which taken together are ultimately and completely satisfying. In other words, Joy is not a desire for an infinite object, but for a sum total of finite objects—what is better called a desire for a completely satisfying life. Thus, the fact that some finite object is not in itself ultimately satisfying is not to say that it is not part of what is. If this is so, then we can admit the reality of Joy but deny that it suggests any theological conclusions. While I do not know that this is Beversluis's point, it is an important objection and must be addressed.

The response to it that is most faithful to Lewis's thought is to say that we learn through experience that Joy is simply not the desire for a sum total satisfaction of our other desires. In the passage I quoted above (p. ???) Lewis drew a distinction between Joy and what he called a desire for "natural happiness," claiming that we know by experience that the two are distinct. Lewis's response, then, would seem to be that the experience of Joy itself, if carefully attended to, will convince us that it is not simply a desire for a sum total satisfaction of our other desires. However, though I do not think Lewis would, one may well accept the claim about the nature of Joy without sacrificing the argument. Insofar as the objection recognizes Joy as an identifiable desire, it seems to concede the point that as a desire for an ultimately satisfying life it is distinct from the specific desires for specific parts of that life. Moreover, though the theological conclusions do not follow as immediately, one could recast the argument to show that a life of ultimate happiness requires a God. In this case 2 would have to give way to

- 2' Joy is not a desire for a single object, but for ultimate happiness.  
 However, since ultimate happiness is not possible without a God,  
 Joy is in a sense also a desire for God.

Of course, 2' would need further support. My intent is not to offer that support, but simply to suggest that, given the two options I have sketched, the objection need not undermine 2.

A final possibility is that Beversluis's point is simply that Lewis has not proven 2. But, so far as I know, he never claimed to. What he claimed was that it is

true and that he had come to know it by sorting through his desires. Beyond this, he offers us the assurance that we too will come to know it if we will put it to the test as he did. What is more, Lewis was not alone in making these claims; if we consult others who have written about their experiences of Joy, we find that many of them also claim to know 2.<sup>10</sup> And apart from possibly pointing out an ambiguity, Beversluis offers us nothing that should lead us to believe that Lewis and others do not know 2. Consequently, what I offer in support of 2 shall consist only of two observations about the sort of evidence relevant to it. First, by the nature of the claim, it would seem that the most important evidence for it (or against it) is first-person experience. To be in the best position to verify 2, one would have to have experiences of Joy and also attempt to satisfy them. In this sense, one's evaluation of 2 would be very much person-related, which is perhaps a feature common to arguments from religious experience, not a peculiarity of the argument from desire. And of course, insofar as one's experience tends to disconfirm 2 the argument from desire may become an argument against the existence of God. Then again, Lewis does not offer the argument from desire as person-related in the sense that he thought 2 was true only for certain kinds of people. His claim for 2 is that we will discover its truth experientially. In this sense he claims a certain universality for 2: it can and should be verified by anyone who will honestly put it to the test. But this does not mean it can be verified by argument, and perhaps one of the reasons Lewis never presented the argument from desire as a philosophical proof was that he recognized that a crucial part of it could not be established argumentatively. Perhaps the best way of convincing someone of 2 is to help him clarify his experiences of Joy, and it is something like this that Lewis had in mind in *Surprised by Joy* and why Beversluis is correct to see in this work an "implicit argument" and "apologetic implications." Second, given that people other than Lewis claim to know 2, would it be appropriate for someone to accept it largely on the basis of testimony? Certainly we do accept judgments like it on that basis. For example, it is often said that money will not bring happiness, and some people choose a certain way of life because they have accepted this on the testimony of others. And we generally think that they are wise to do so. In fact, the whole wisdom tradition is based on the acceptance of judgments like 2 based initially at least on testimony. Of course all relevant kinds of testimony should be considered. But, recognizing the complexity here, I see no reason why in principle testimony is not good evidence for or against 2, and no reason why the argument from desire should lack some cogency for one who has little first-hand experience of Joy.

Considering the argument from desire as a whole, 3 is perhaps the most crucial part, and it is here that Beversluis focuses most of his philosophical criticism. If we combine 3 with the results of 2 we can cast the argument in standard form



as follows:

- 3a All natural desires have existing objects that they are desires for.
- 3b Joy is a natural desire for an infinite object.
- 3c Therefore, an infinite object exists.

The point of Beversluis's attack is the truth of the major premiss, which he denies for two different reasons.

First, he apparently construes Lewis's argument as a deductive argument, the major premiss of which is a universal affirmative proposition. However, he asks, "How could Lewis know that every natural desire has a real object *before* knowing that Joy has one?" (19) In other words, he asserts that we could never know 3a unless we also knew 3c, and if we know 3c why do we need an argument with it as a conclusion? The only justification for 3a that Beversluis can find in Lewis's writings is the claim that "Nature does nothing in vain." And the only justification he can find for this is a theory of natural law. So he concludes: "It begins to look as if Lewis arrived at his belief that every natural desire has a real object on the basis of nonempirical considerations, that he has smuggled into his argument a covert metaphysical theory of desire about which we have not been informed." (19)

Beversluis is indeed correct; 3 does fail as a deductive argument. What he fails to consider is that it may very well succeed as an inductive argument. If we know that 3a is true of all natural desires except Joy (in which case it would be amended to read "Most" rather than "All"), if we do not know that Joy does not have an object, and if 3b is the case, then we have an inductive argument that renders 3c highly probable. It is understandable that Beversluis should miss this possibility, for Lewis often speaks as though we could establish 3a the same way we establish 3c, arguing from the existence of a desire to the existence of an object that satisfies it. And Beversluis is again correct in his criticism: the fact that we are hungry does nothing by itself to establish the conclusion that there is food. However, if we know empirically (as indeed we do) that food exists and that it satisfies hunger, and if we know this of all other desires as well, we have a strong inductive argument for 3c. In other words, I fail to see that the fallacious principal, the existence of a desire proves that there exists some object to satisfy it, is at all necessary to Lewis's argument. In fact, I am arguing it can survive nicely without it.

The second criticism that Beversluis levels at 3c is the observation that not all natural desires have existing objects that satisfy them. Though in general food satisfies hungers, there are many people who never have sufficient food. Here Lewis adds a helpful qualification, claiming in effect that it is not the case that every actual natural desire has an object that satisfies it, but that for every type of desire there is an existing type of object that satisfies it. In other words,

the crucial relationship for 3a is between, say, hunger and food, not between actual instances of hunger and actual instances of eating. Accordingly, we should perhaps replace 3a with

3a' For any type of natural desire there is a class of real objects that satisfy it.

and 3b with

3b' Joy is a type of natural desire for an infinite object.

Beverlysluis makes very little of this qualification, but it suffices to save the argument from an obvious objection.

However, though 3a' is not obviously false in the sense in which 3a is, is it true? Most of our desires would seem to confirm it. The challenge would be to look carefully at those desires that apparently do not. For example, do we have a desire for perfection and is this a type of desire in the relevant sense? Here we would get into some murky waters. For example, is the desire for perfection a distinct type of desire or merely a quality of other types of desire? I am inclined to think that it is the latter, for in most cases our desire for perfection is a desire for something that perfectly satisfies some other desire—for example, the perfect meal. But if it is a distinct desire, do we find objects that satisfy it? Apparently there are perfect proofs, but so far nothing you could call the perfect society or the perfect cantata. Obviously there is a great deal more that needs to be said about our desire for perfection, and there are other possible exceptions to 3a', for example, the desire for immortality. My point is simply that the way to weaken 3 as an inductive argument is to show that there are such exceptions. However, even if these exceptions exist, they do not disprove 3 but merely weaken it. And given the number of cases that seem to confirm it, I doubt that, even in weakening it, the challenger would be able to empty it of all force.

So far as I can tell, the only other way to weaken 3 is to challenge 3b': is Joy a natural desire sufficiently like other desires? Here two distinct issues could be raised. First, how widespread does the experience of Joy have to be in order to qualify as a natural desire? This would be a difficult challenge to sustain or to meet, since one can have only a very impressionistic sense of how widespread this desire actually is. But if Carnell is correct to claim that it is as basic a theme in literature as love, it is difficult to believe that this sort of challenge has much chance of success. Second, one could question the extent to which Joy is like other natural desires. Perhaps a challenger could argue that the fact that Joy is desirable even though it is unfulfilled is a feature that makes it significantly unlike other desires. However, even if the challenger has some success with this line of argument, the most he could do is to diminish the similarity between Joy and other natural desires and hence weaken the argument. The fact that it is still

a desire, albeit of a somewhat different sort, would seem to limit the extent to which this sort of challenge could vitiate the argument.

If my analysis is correct, the argument from desire may survive as an inductive argument of indeterminate force (maybe what Lewis called “a pretty good indication”) for one who knows 2 or thinks it probable either on the basis of first-hand experience or testimony. In many ways 2 is the crucial part of the argument. What I have argued is that Beversluis has not offered us good reasons to impugn claims to know it. An appropriate challenge of it would consist of a significantly different interpretation of the experience of Joy, one that denied it any theological force whatsoever. Though 3 can be challenged on a number of fronts, I think there are limits to how successful the challenges can be.

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## NOTES

1. John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 8-31. Further citations of this work will be in parenthesis in the text.

2. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1955), p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Corbin Scott Cornell, *Bright Shadow of Reality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 23.

5. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, second edition, tr. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford U. P., 1958), pp. 34-36.

6. Beversluis claims to find two significantly different versions of the argument, one in *Pilgrim's Regress* and the other in *Surprised by Joy*. (11, 17) I think they are fundamentally the same. The only difference Beversluis comes up with is that the version in *The Pilgrim's Regress* contains a defense of 3 that is nowhere explicitly stated in *Surprised by Joy*. However, there is a second and clearly different version of the argument to be found in Lewis's writings, and this in a letter to his brother Warren dated 22 November 1931 (W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1966), p. 144. This version of the argument, similar to one of Descartes's versions of the ontological argument, turns on the question of origin and is roughly this. If we have this “vague desire” for an infinite object, where could we have come by it, unless there is a God who created it in us?

7. Since “natural” is used variously in philosophical and theological discussions, I should say here that I use it to describe a desire that is a) non-pathological, b) not a supernatural gift and 3) somewhat commonly experienced.

8. The crucial passage in *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 219-220, is not clear, and therefore will bear both interpretations. Observes Lewis, “Joy itself, considered as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all.” This may represent a conclusion Lewis came to about Joy independently of any judgment about all other desires.

9. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*, revised edition (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 8.

10. For examples, see Carnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-29.