**How Our Desires Point to God:**

**C. S. Lewis’ Theistic Argument from Desire**

Psalm 42 states that ‘As the deer pants for water, so I long for you, O God’, but did you know that there's an actual argument for the existence of God, and even of heaven, from the existence of certain human desires? C.S. Lewis was captivated by this theme, and he produced the twentieth century’s principal thematic and argumentative engagement with what has come to be known by philosophers as ‘the argument from desire’. This workshop will explore Lewis' apologetic engagement with desire and how it points us to God.

**Peter S. Williams** ([www.peterswilliams.com](http://www.peterswilliams.com/)) studied philosophy at Cardiff University (BA), Sheffield University (MA), and the University of East Anglia in Norwich (MPhil). Peter lives in England and is Assistant Professor in Communication and Worldviews at Gimlekollen College, NLA University, Norway. His publications include: *Outgrowing God*? *A Beginner’s Guide to Richard Dawkins and the God Debate* (Wipf and Stock, 2020); *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History* (Wipf & Stock, 2019); *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy*: *A Christian Introduction to the Love of Wisdom* (Wipf and Stock, 2019); *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013) and *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2011).

1. **Introduction**
2. C.S. Lewis described ‘Joy’ as an ‘unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction’ (*Surprised by Joy*, 12)
3. Innate desires are: Persistently recurring, behaviour shaping desires for anticipated coherent 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 recognized states of satisfaction and deprivation that manifest in cross-cultural artistic themes.
4. There are a range of existentially relevant innate desires, often admitted by secular writers.
5. ***Prima Facie* Arguments from Desire**
6. The experience of *enjoying* Joy is an inherently teleological one that points beyond itself to a transcendent and innately desirable ‘something more’.
7. Lewis: ‘As soon as you have grasped this simple distinction [between *looking at* and *looking along*], it raises a question. You get one experience of a thing when you look along it and another when you look at it. Which is the “true” or “valid” experience?’ (‘Meditation in a Toolshed’) He observes: ‘It has . . . come to be taken for granted that the external account of a thing somehow refutes or “debunks” the account given from inside. “All these moral ideas which look so transcendental and beautiful from inside”, says the wiseacre, “are really only a mass of biological instincts and inherited taboos.” And no one plays the game the other way round by replying, “If you will only step inside, the things that look to you like instincts and taboos will suddenly reveal their real and transcendental nature.”’ (‘Meditation in a Toolshed’)
8. Richard Swinburne’s ‘Principle of Credulity’
9. Alvin Plantinga’s ‘Reformed Epistemology’
10. Todd Buras & Michael Cantrell argue:
    * 1. ‘God’ is a precondition of humans obtaining ‘complete happiness’
      2. That ‘complete happiness’ is ‘a seemingly non-defective desire’
      3. And that ‘a seemingly non-defective desire is a prima facie indication of the possibility of its object’
      4. From which it follows that God’s existence is prima facie possible
      5. Which supports (prima facie) the key premise of the modal ontological argument (*a la* Alvin Plantinga)
11. **Aristotelian Arguments from Desire**
12. Lewis: ‘if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come at last to the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given… in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur’s castle – the chair in which only one could sit. And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist.’ - *Pilgrim’s Regress*, 15.
13. 1) Nature makes no type of thing in vain.

2) Humans have a natural type of desire, Joy, that would [probably] be vain unless some object that is never fully given in our present mode of existence is obtainable by humans in some future mode of existence.

3) Therefore, the object of Joy [probably] must be obtainable in some future mode of human existence.

1. 1) Nature makes *no type of innate human desire* in vain

2) Humans have innate types of desires that would [probably] be in vain if God doesn’t exist (e.g. desires for objective value & purpose, forgiveness, cosmic justice, etc.)

3) Therefore, God [probably] exists.

1. 1) Humans have innate 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 innate desires exist in vain) *we should assume that God exists*.

1. **The Abductive AFD**
2. ‘On Christian theism God’s intention in creating humans is to fit them for eternity in God’s presence. As such, it stands to reason that we should find ourselves dissatisfied with worldly satisfactions. Let’s put the likelihood that we should long for the infinite given theism at 0.9... I wouldn’t say that such desires couldn’t possibly arise in an atheistic world… But how likely would they arise in such a world? So long as the answer is “less likely than in a theistic world,” the presence of these desires confirms theism.’
3. ‘The Bayesian Argument from Desire’ (2006), http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2006/09/bayesian-argument-from-desire.html#comment
4. **Inductive Arguments from Desire**
5. Lewis: ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water… If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.’ - *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount, 1997), 113.
6. 1) Humans have an innate existential desire for the Transcendent/God/one or more states of being for which God is a necessary precondition

2) Most innate [human] desires/existential desires are such that there exists some object capable of satisfying them

3) Therefore, the Transcendent/God probably exists

1. Even if we set aside the distinction between innate and non-innate desires, it seems to me to be a sound heuristic principle to give every desire the presumption of having a fulfillment until conceptual analysis or evidence shows otherwise.
2. ***Reductio* Arguments from Desire**
3. Lewis: ‘If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud.’ - *Mere Christianity* (London: Fount, 1997), 113.
4. Lewis: ‘A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called ‘falling in love’ occurred in a sexless world.’

‘The Weight of Glory’ In *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection: Faith,* *Christianity and the Church* (ed. Lesley Walmsley. London: HarperCollins, 2002), 99.

1. 1) Given an instantiated kind K possessing innate existential desires, the existence of K would be absurd to the extent that its impossible for any member of K to have those desires satisfied

2) Humans are an instantiated kind K with innate existential desires that are impossible to satisfy unless God exists

3) Therefore, unless God exists, human existence is absurd (at least to a substantial extent)

4) However, human existence is not absurd (at least, not to any substantial extent)

5) Therefore, God [probably] exists

1. If the satisfaction of our innate existential desires requires God, then *the properly basic belief that life isn’t absurd* places the burden of proof on the nihilist.
2. Some may profess a willingness to pay the price of affirming nihilism, but this affirmation is not an easy one to make or to consistently sustain.
3. **Conclusion**
4. Before C.S. Lewis, many people wrote about ‘Joy’ & transcendent desires, and several thinkers gestured towards or made arguments from desire (e.g. Aquinas, Pascal, Chalmers, Chesterton, Maritain, Joad…)
5. But Lewis a) considered *a plurality of innate desires* (whilst focusing on ‘Joy’) and b) used *a plurality of argumentative forms* in *different rhetorical contexts*
6. Thus, Lewis produced the twentieth century’s principle, sustained, positive engagement with the AFD
7. These factors secure Lewis’s place as a central figure in the theistic argument from desire, one who has inspired a growing high-level engagement with the argument in contemporary philosophy and apologetics

***Suggested Resources:***

**Websites**

[www.peterswilliams.com](http://www.peterswilliams.com)

**Watch**

YouTube Playlist, “The Argument from Desire” [www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj3nK3TBydEVAFRtdqfrpW2](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj3nK3TBydEVAFRtdqfrpW2)

**Listen**

Kreeft, Peter. “Desire” [www.peterkreeft.com/audio/23\_desire.htm](http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/23_desire.htm)

Williams, Peter S. “Debate: Does God Exist? Peter S. Williams vs. Einar Bohn at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim” <http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/mf/feed/e5dvj8/Trondheim_2018_Debate.mp3arguments-from-desire/>

**Read**

Bassham, Gregory, ed. *C.S. Lewis’ Apologetics*: *Pro and Con* (London: Rodolpi-Brill, 2015), Part One.

Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Book III.

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

Horner, David. “The Pursuit of Happiness: C. S. Lewis’s Eudaimonistic Understanding of Ethics” [www.cslewis.org/journal/the-pursuit-of-happiness-c-s-lewis’s-eudaimonistic-understanding-of-ethics/viewall/#\_ftnref10](http://www.cslewis.org/journal/the-pursuit-of-happiness-c-s-lewis's-eudaimonistic-understanding-of-ethics/viewall/#_ftnref10)

Kreeft, Peter. “The argument from desire” [www.peterkreeft.com/topics/desire.htm](http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/desire.htm)

---. *Heaven*: *The Heart’s Deepest Desire*, expanded edition (Ignatius, 1989)

Lee, Robert Sloan. “As If Swallowing Light Itself: C.S. Lewis’s Argument from Desire” in *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher*: *Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*. Second edition. (David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas and Jerry L. Walls ed.’s. Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University Press, 2017)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Williams, Clifford. “Existential Arguments for Theistic Belief” in *The Naturalness of Belief*: *New Essays on Theism’s Rationality* (Paul Copan & Charles Taliaferro ed.’s. London: Lexington, 2019)

Williams, Peter S. “A Beginner’s Guide to the Theistic Argument from Desire” (2020) [www.solas-cpc.org/a-beginners-guide-to-the-theistic-argument-from-desire/](http://www.solas-cpc.org/a-beginners-guide-to-the-theistic-argument-from-desire/)

---. “C.S. Lewis as a Central Figure in Formulating the Theistic Argument from Desire”, *Linguaculture* (Volume 10, 2019:2) <http://journal.linguaculture.ro/images/2019-2/Linguaculture%202_2019_11_Peter%20S%20Williams.pdf>

---. “In Defence of Arguments from Desire” [www.peterswilliams.com/2016/11/02/in-defence-of-argumentsfrom-desire/](http://www.peterswilliams.com/2016/11/02/in-defence-of-argumentsfrom-desire/)

---. “A Brief Introduction to and Defence of the Modern Ontological Argument” <https://theofilos.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/3d_Forum_Williams_A-Brief-Introduction-to-and-Defence-of-the-Modern-Ontological-Argument.pdf>

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

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