One

PRO: A DEFENSE OF C. S. LEWIS’S ARGUMENT FROM DESIRE

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As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God.
—Psalm 42:1

The “argument from desire” (AFD) is a family of arguments for theism from human desire. C. S. Lewis famously described and argued from a desire that he called “Joy.” I am sympathetic to the view that the AFD is, as Alister McGrath writes, an argument “primarily for the existence of Heaven or ‘another world,’ and only secondarily for the existence of God” (McGrath, 2014, p. 105). Indeed, “a close reading of Lewis’s works suggests that Lewis’s ‘argument from desire’ is primarily about the intuition of ‘another world’ – Heaven – rather than God” (McGrath, 2014, p. 115).

Framing the AFD in terms of “a natural desire for transcendent fulfilment” (a move that fits the all-embracing nature of Joy as described by Lewis), McGrath notes: “This is not really an argument for the existence of God, in the strict sense of the term. For a start, we would need to expand Lewis’s point to include the Christian declaration that God either is, or is an essential condition for, the satisfaction of the natural human desire for transcendent fulfillment” (McGrath, 2012, p. 110). John Haldane likewise frames the AFD in terms of “a natural desire for transcendent fulfillment, which cannot be attained or experienced in the present world” (Haldane, 2007, p. 47). He concludes: “Neither Lewis’s discursive reasoning nor this argument refers immediately to God as the end of transcendent desire, but the original discussion makes it clear that what is at issue is a beatific afterlife” (Haldane, 2007, p. 47). Hence Haldane extends his AFD via the premise that “God is, or is an essential condition of the satisfaction of the natural desire for transcendent fulfillment” (Haldane, 2007, p. 47). In this McGrath and Haldane follow Robert Holyer, who argues that since “Joy is a desire . . . for ultimate happiness” and “since ultimate happiness is not possible without God, Joy is in a sense also a desire for God” (Holyer, 1988, p. 66). That said, some formulations of the AFD (especially when framed abductively, or as a reductio) invoke God more directly.
1. Lewis on the Phenomenology of Joy

In Lewis’s autobiography, Surprised by Joy, he recounts how the Castlereagh Hills of Northern Ireland “taught me longing—Sehnsucht; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower” (Lewis, 1998, p. 6). Alister McGrath explains that “leading German Romantic writers . . . used the image of a ‘Blue Flower’ as a symbol of the wanderings and yearnings of the human soul, especially as this sense of longing is evoked—though not satisfied—by the natural world” (McGrath, 2013, p. 16). The German term Sehnsucht describes this combined sense of longing for, and displacement or alienation from, the object of one’s desire. Sehnsucht is a “nostalgic longing” that arises when experience of something within the world awakens in us a desire for something beyond what the world can offer as a corresponding object of desire: “The thing I am speaking of is not an experience,” as Lewis writes in The Problem of Pain. “You have experienced only the want of it” (Lewis, 1977b, p. 118). Sehnsucht directs our attention towards the transcendent. Corbin Scott Carnell states that “Sehnsucht may be said to represent just as much a basic theme in literature as love” (Carnell, 1974, p. 23). Throughout Surprised by Joy, Lewis traces his experience of this “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction” (Lewis, 1998, p. 12), which he calls “Joy” (Lewis, 1998, p. 12).

Lewis found that Joy was occasioned by his appreciation of various aspects of reality, but pointed beyond such experiences: “Only when your whole attention and desire are fixed on something else—whether a distant mountain, or the past, or the gods of Asgard—does the “thrill” arise. It is a by-product. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer” (Lewis, 1998, p. 130). Joy is thus a state of consciousness that is occasioned by various objects of experience, but is not a desire for any of the objects of experience that occasion it. Nor is it merely a mediated positive experience of a transcendent reality, nor even a desire to experience the “thrill” of being in this particular psychological state. Rather Joy is a desire for a transcendent object of satisfaction. As Thomas Chalmers wrote: “There is in man . . . an interminable longing after nobler and higher things . . . which never is appeased by all that the world has to offer” (Chalmers, p. 233, quoted by Hammond, 1943, p. 56).

The Preface to Lewis’s novel The Pilgrim’s Regress describes “a particular recurrent experience which dominated my childhood and adolescence and which I hastily called ‘Romantic’ because inanimate nature and marvellous literature were among the things that evoked it” (Lewis, 1977a., p. 7). The power of fairy tales (undoubtedly part of what Lewis means by “marvelous literature”) lies in their ability to transport us into a world imbued with “romantic” Sehnsucht. Consider this passage from a book Lewis loved, The Wind in the Willows: