I applaud Peter Williams’s perspicuous defense of Lewis’s argument from desire. Although Lewis is the best-known defender of the argument, he nowhere expounds the argument in detail, and he sometimes formulates it in different ways. Williams does a fine job teasing out various ways in which the argument might be developed. However, I shall argue that none of the versions Williams sets forth is successful.

Williams claims that the argument from desire succeeds as part of a larger cumulative-case argument for the existence of God. Williams does not explain what he means by a cumulative-case argument, so it might be helpful to begin with a few clarifications.

The term “cumulative-case argument” is widely used in contemporary apologetics to refer to inductive arguments that involve a series of evidence-building arguments that, taken together, are intended to make a conclusion rationally convincing. Cumulative-case arguments can be compared to a rope. In well-constructed cumulative-case arguments, each individual argument adds to the probability of the conclusion, just as each individual strand of a rope adds to the strength of the whole. Williams claims that Lewis’s argument from desire has “a rightful place” within a larger cumulative-case argument for theism, but he does not state how large that place is. Does the argument significantly contribute to the probability of theism, or only contribute a little? If the contribution is significant, how great is it? Does the argument by itself render theism probable? That is, is it a successful stand-alone argument for God’s existence? If so, does it make God’s existence barely probable (say 51 percent), or extremely probable (say ninety-five percent)? Moreover, given that Williams formulates and defends four different versions of Lewis’s argument from desire, how do those arguments relate to one another? Are they mutually consistent, such that each can figure in the same cumulative-case argument for theism, or must one pick and choose? Is each version equally forceful, or do some support God’s existence more strongly than the others? Perhaps Williams can clarify his position in his response.
1. The Prima Facie Argument

Williams develops his defense of Lewis’s argument from desire in five parts. First he lays out what he calls “the *prima facie* case” for taking the experience of Joy at face value. Then he sets forth four different versions of the argument from desire, suggesting that each provides some unspecified (but substantial?) degree of support for theism. Let us begin with the *prima facie* argument.

Williams claims that there is an initial presumption in favor of treating Joy as a reliable pointer to God, and thus that the burden of proof lies on the skeptic to prove otherwise. This is supposed to follow from Richard Swinburne’s so-called principle of credulity. According to Swinburne, it is a basic principle of rationality that we ought to believe that things are as they seem to be unless we have positive reason for thinking that we are mistaken (Swinburne, 1979, pp. 254-271). Since Joy seems to point to a transcendent object of fulfillment, we should believe that such an object exists unless we have adequate evidence that such an object does not exist. Presumably, Williams calls this a “*prima facie*” argument from desire because it does not claim that Joy provides convincing evidence for the existence of God. Rather, it claims only that the burden of proof lies on the doubter to show that Joy is not what it appears.

Two things should be said about this argument. First, it is not clear that the principle of credulity is true. Skeptics of various stripes would deny it. So, too, would devotees of religions such as Hinduism and some strands of Buddhism, who hold that phenomenal reality is *maya*, or illusion. But even if the principle of credulity is true, it cannot be invoked to support the argument from desire. As Swinburne notes, the principle of credulity applies only to “perceptual claims” (Swinburne, 1979, p. 260). What it claims is that “what *one seems to perceive* is probably so” (Swinburne, 1979, p. 254; emphasis added). As we shall see, what Lewis calls Joy is a certain kind of *desire* or *emotion*, not a perceptual experience. With Joy there is no apparent perception of God or Heaven, merely an emotionally-charged longing for what Lewis calls an “unnameable something” (Lewis, 1958, p. 9). Indeed, it is a defining feature of Joy that it has no clear or determinate object, but is easily confused with “false Florimels,” that is, delusive objects (Lewis, 1958, p. 8). If Joy is, in some secondary or extended sense, a perceptual experience, it is not an experience of a Being who “probably is” as “He seems.” Lewis would not claim that we have anything like an adequate grasp of God’s nature or essence. Our experience of God is of what Rudolf Otto called a *tremendum mysterium* (Lewis, 2001a, pp. 5-10). For these reasons, Swinburne’s principle of credulity does not support Williams’s view.