

Does Joy Lead to God?: Lewis, Beversluis, and the Argument from Desire

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C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, deals with the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. In the chapter on Hope, Lewis says that "most people ... know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world." People seek for this something in the things of this world, but they invariably are disappointed. There are, Lewis says, three ways of dealing with this fact. The "Fool's Way" is to decide that the repeated disappointments are due to some defect in the things themselves; but perhaps the next thing tried will not have that defect; let's try another. The "Way of the Disillusioned 'Sensible Man'" is to deny and repress the feeling altogether; it is just "wishful thinking" or "adolescent romanticism."

The "Christian Way" is to recognize, according to Lewis, that "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" since "creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists" (p. 120). Therefore Christians must keep alive in themselves "the desire for their true country," while not despising the earthly blessings that provide a foretaste of it. (All of the above can be found in *Mere Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1960], Ch. 10, pp. 118-121.)

I wish to point out at the beginning that Lewis's reasoning is not, strictly speaking, used as an argument for the existence of God, but as an argument for the existence of Heaven. His purely theistic arguments are found in the first part of the book, initially published as *The Case for Christianity*, while the chapter on Hope appeared in the section titled "Christian Behaviour" (originally published separately). Hence, although Lewis probably felt that his argument counted in favor of a belief in God, he did not use it that way.

Readers of Lewis will recognize in the "desire" of *Mere Christianity* the experience called "Joy" in Lewis's autobiographical *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (1955). In it, Lewis makes it clear that he knew all about the three ways of dealing with "Joy" from personal experience: he had tried them all. From an early age, Lewis had repeatedly had experiences of intense longing for he knew not what; they were triggered sometimes by art, sometimes by poetry, sometimes by nature, sometimes by erotic experience. So keen was the desire, and yet itself so desirable, that he returned again and again to what he thought were its sources; but he found that, although sometimes the "Joy" would repeat itself, more often it would not, and with increasing rarity as he consciously sought it.

Thus the "Fool's Way." You try everything that apparently offers you the "Joy," and find that those things don't invariably carry the "Joy" with them. By the time Lewis realized this, he was a student at Oxford. There he entered on the Way of the Disillusioned Sensible Man--called in *Surprised by Joy* "the New Look" (Ch. XIII). He decided he would never again be "taken in" by what he now regarded as "wishful thinking" or mere "aesthetic experience."

Lewis's retreat from "the New Look" consisted of a number of discrete steps (described in *Surprised by Joy*, chh. XIII and XIV). The first step was his conversion from a common sense realism to Philosophical Idealism, i.e., the position that Mind or Spirit is a (or the) fundamental component in the make-up of the universe. This conversion was effected on philosophical grounds which I will not discuss here. The second step was a renewal of "Joy" triggered by a reading of Euripides's *Hippolytus*--a renewal so intense that Lewis's "sensible" attitude to Joy was swept away.

The third step was intellectual. Lewis met, in Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* (1915) the conceptual distinction between "Enjoyment" and "Contemplation"--technical terms in Alexander's theory of knowledge. Briefly, Contemplation is the perception of an object, while Enjoyment is the process by which the object is perceived. To use Lewis's illustration, we Contemplate a table, but we Enjoy seeing (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 205).

For Lewis, this distinction made him realize that the experience of Joy was not merely an aesthetic or emotional experience. It is true that introspection revealed "Joy" to be only a matter of fleeting mental images or a "quiver in the diaphragm" (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 207); but Joy, as a form of desire, was directed to an object, and, as such, stood toward its object as the act of seeing stood towards the table. Just as a table cannot be known *in* the process of seeing, but rather *by* the process of seeing, Joy's object was known by the experience. It was not the experience itself.

But Lewis had already found that nothing in the world was the object of the desire that was Joy. Hence the experience of Joy was a pointer to something outside the world:

But this brought me already into the region of awe, for I thus understood that in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify itself with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims itself sheerly objective. Far more objective than bodies, for it is not, like them, clothed in our senses; the naked Other, imageless (though our imagination salutes it with a hundred images), unknown, undefined, desired. (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 209)

I pause here to point out, as I did above, that Lewis did not view Joy as pointing unwaveringly to the existence of God, but to a "naked Other," not necessarily personal. In fact, the next step after Lewis's realization of the true nature of Joy was to link it up with his Philosophical Idealism and become a Pantheist. He believed that we experience Joy because we are in fact bits of the Divine, isolated or estranged from Absolute Spirit. Given that this was so, the young Lewis (by now a fellow of Magdalen College) began to try to live a virtuous life--the kind of life lived in total dependence on the Absolute Spirit that he in fact, beyond all illusion, was a part of.

The rest of the story is briefly told. Lewis found that Pantheism cannot be lived; once you try, it turns into Theism, and in fact the next step for Lewis was to become a Theist. The story can be read in *Surprised by Joy*, but it should be emphasized that the experience of Joy did not play an active part in his movement from Pantheism to Theism (which took place in 1929) nor in his later movement from Theism to Christianity (1931). Joy took him gradually from a rationalistic atheism to a belief in another world, a transcendental reality from which humankind came and to which, in some sense, it belonged. But no further. This is obviously consistent with the apologetic use of the experience found in *Mere Christianity*, wherein the human longing for ultimate satisfaction is fulfilled only in Heaven.

There are two other of Lewis's writings that make use of the experience of Joy or desire. One is the sermon "The Weight of Glory," delivered in 1942 (see *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], pp. 1-15). There Lewis discusses the concept of "glory" and of the afterlife, and, in doing so, argues along the same lines as in *Mere Christianity* from the experience of inconsolable longing as a proof for Heaven as the true home of humanity.

Another discussion is found in Lewis's allegorical *Pilgrim's Regress* (1933; rev.ed., 1943). In it, the main character John follows "Sweet Desire" all over the world, only to find, like Lewis, that the experiences that seem at first to embody it invariably prove disappointing. Ultimately, John is taught by Wisdom (i.e., philosophy) that "what you desire is no state of yourself at all, but something, for that very reason, Other and Outer" (*Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 129), a statement that recalls "the Naked Other" of *Surprised by Joy*. Later in the allegory, Father History teaches John that Sweet Desire is "a starting point from which *one* road leads home and a thousand roads lead into the wilderness" (p. 155) and that it is "only a foretaste of

that which the real Desirable will be when you have found it" (p. 161). John is later led to "Mother Kirk" (Christianity) not by Sweet Desire, but by Lady Contemplation (p. 164) and by Reason (p. 166).

All these writings of Lewis unite in arguing no more and no less than that Joy or inconsolable yearning will point to a world or state beyond the one presented to our senses. Lewis does not say that it proves or counts as evidence for the existence of God, although he clearly believes that it may prepare someone for Theism or else help Christians better understand the idea of Heaven or eternal bliss. In only one passage--the preface to the revised edition of *Pilgrim's Regress*--does he suggest that Joy leads only to God:

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....The dialectic of Desire, faithfully followed, would retrieve all mistakes, head you off from all false paths, and force you not to propound, but to live through, a sort of ontological proof. (*PR*, p. 10)

Here Lewis comes close to saying that Joy proves the existence of God. But I do not think Lewis meant that. He believed, I think, that Joy, which pointed to another world for which humanity is made, could and would eventually lead a fair-minded person to the God of Theism, and in fact in his case did so. If he telescopes the process in the passage quoted above, we need not press his form of words too closely, since in other writings he made it perfectly clear what he thought Joy proved and didn't prove.

I stress this point in the above summary, since John Beversluis discusses Lewis's "Argument from Desire" in his *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) and finds it severely wanting. I think Lewis's argument is more cogent than Beversluis believes and that, in fact, he has misunderstood or misconstrued Lewis at several points. In the balance of this essay I wish to show how this is the case.

Beversluis begins (*Search*, pp. 8-9) by asserting, without further ado, that Lewis considered the Argument from Desire as a valid proof for the existence of God. I have taken some pains above to show that this is untrue or misleading; Lewis did not attempt to prove God's existence in the Argument from Desire, either in his explicitly apologetic *Mere Christianity* or in the autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*.

Beversluis continues by analyzing Lewis's train of thought in *Surprised by Joy*. He breaks down Lewis's argument into five propositions.

(1) Human experience provides us with a recurring desire so wonderful that we want it again and again. (2) It cannot be the experience itself, considered simply as an inner state, that we want, because every desire is a desire for something. (3) It cannot be a finite object that we want because no finite object fully satisfies us. (4) Yet the desire persists. (5) Therefore, there must be an infinite Object that can fully satisfy us. This Object is God. (*Search*, p. 15)

Beversluis's refutation consists of two observations. (1) Just because something does not satisfy us ultimately does not mean that we did not really want it. Just because a man is hungry four hours after breakfast does not mean that he didn't really want food at all. (2) Although all desires are for something, the something may not be real. "People desire all sorts of imaginary things." (*Search*, p. 16)

Beversluis's first observation is not relevant. Lewis did not argue that ultimate satisfaction is the end of every desire, only of the desire that was Joy. He says in *Surprised by Joy* that he learned that Joy was not desire for (e.g.) sex because sex left the desire untouched. "You might as well offer a mutton chop to a man who is dying of thirst as offer sexual pleasure to the desire I am speaking of" (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 161). To use Beversluis's illustration, if a man is hungry, not four hours after breakfast, but immediately after breakfast, and even during it, it is a pretty good bet that the discomfort he feels is not really hunger.

Beverluis's second point is more vague, and therefore harder to answer. Of course people desire all sorts of imaginary things. Lewis never denied that, and in fact for many years he believed that Joy was a desire for imaginary things. He became convinced, however, that if the imaginary things had become real, he would still have been unsatisfied:

When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle claimed to have photographed a fairy, I did not, in fact, believe it: but the mere making of the claim--the approach of the fairy to within even that hailing distance of actuality--revealed to me at once that if the claim had succeeded it would have chilled rather than satisfied the desire which fairy literature had aroused. Once grant your fairy, your enchanted forest, your satyr, faun, wood-nymph and well of immortality *real*, and amidst all the scientific, social and practical interest which the discovery would awake, the Sweet Desire would have disappeared, would have shifted its ground, like the cuckoo's voice or the rainbow's end, and be now calling us from beyond a *further* hill. (Preface to *Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 9)

Lewis does not claim that whatever we desire must be real. He does assert that he has experienced an intense desire from which gradually his experience subtracted all possible objects, imaginary or real. What is the explanation for a desire so intense, a longing so inconsolable, and yet directed, as far as we can tell, towards nothing at all that we have experienced or can imagine? And what if, as Lewis asserts, most people have had or can have the same experience?

It should be stressed that Lewis's argument is an inductive one. Inductive arguments do not provide axioms which necessarily entail a certain conclusion; they provide particular instances of facts which count in favor of a generalization. With inductive arguments, there is always a kind of "uncertainty gap," in that unless all relevant particularities are counted, the generalization may yet be falsified. Hence Joy may in fact be fulfilled, in a given case, in an as-yet unknown experience; or it may be that all instances of Joy are in fact a species of recurrent temporary insanity; and both of these roads were taken by Lewis's Mr. Fool and Mr. Sensible. But those who do not take these roads are not being unreasonable.

His failure to recognize this leads Beverluis to his most specious argument:

[Lewis's] reasons for thinking that [Joy had a real object] were, first, that Joy is a natural desire, and second, that every natural desire has a real object. But this is puzzling. How could Lewis have known that every natural desire has a real object *before* knowing that Joy has one? I can legitimately claim that every student in the class has failed the test only if I first know that each of them has individually failed it. The same is true of natural desires. (*Search*, p. 19)

One may reply: If 19 of Beverluis's 20 students are known to have failed the exam, that is a good reason for thinking that the 20th failed it; an even better reason for thinking that Beverluis's tests are too hard. If every known natural desire has an object, that is a good reason for thinking that Joy has one too, although it does not logically entail it. Beverluis is accusing the Argument from Desire of failing to provide the certainty of a deductive argument, all the while failing to notice that it provides all the certainty proper to an inductive one.

At this point Beverluis enters into the least germane of all the points he makes against Lewis. Readers of *Surprised by Joy* will recall that as Lewis came closer and closer to a belief in Theism, the more and more he shrunk back from surrendering himself to God--the reason being that he saw a personal God as the Great Interferer, One Who would not let Lewis go on being the sinner he now saw himself to be. "I had hoped that the heart of reality might be of such a kind that we can best symbolise it as a place; instead, I found it to be a Person. For all I knew, the total rejection of what I called Joy might be one of the demands, might be the very first demand, He would make upon me" (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 217). If the reader will recall that, for Lewis, Joy pointed first to Heaven and not to God, the quoted passage will be quite

understandable. Joy told Lewis that there was a world beyond, infinitely desirable; but Theism told him there was an angel at the entrance to this garden, armed with a flaming sword, Who might bar the entrance. Is it inconsistent, then, that Lewis felt no joy (in the ordinary sense) as he approached the Custodian of Desire?

Beverluis thinks so. In fact, he argues, Lewis's shrinking from God puts the lie to the Argument from Desire. If God is what we "really" desire, how, at the crucial point, can we withdraw from Him? "The object arrived at is not desired at all....[P]eculiar behavior indeed on the part of an incurable Romantic who had just found his heart's desire! The result is that the Argument from Desire has been completely derailed" (*Search*, p. 22). In fact, Beverluis is attempting to derail a train that had long ago reached its destination. Joy pointed to the Beyond; Lewis acknowledged its existence. He became a pantheist. The further process that brought Lewis to a belief in God (i.e., his attempts to live a moral life on monistic presuppositions) did not start from Joy. The Object he reluctantly bowed his knee to was God, not Heaven.

Furthermore, there is nothing strange or incoherent about feeling simultaneous desire and reluctance for a particular object. Many children refrain from stealing candy from the knowledge that they will be punished. And many Christians could inform Beverluis that the thought of God might bring them sometime pleasure, sometime pain. It is not God who is inconsistent.

Beverluis goes from this misunderstanding to another one. Lewis's inconsistent picture of God, he says, derives from the attempt to combine "two fundamentally incompatible [*sic*] philosophical traditions" (*Search*, p. 23)--namely, Platonism and Judeo-Christian religion. It is Plato who tells us that God is the universal Object of desire; but, according to the Bible, God and Man are implacable enemies and the way to reconciliation is through repentance.

To Beverluis's accusation that Lewis's idea of God is a "philosophical hybrid, a conceptual mongrel" (*Search*, p. 22), I have two replies (aside from noting the astonishing hostility which lies behind such language): (1) It's not true; (2) What if it was?

(1). Anyone may read Lewis's account of his conversion in *Surprised by Joy*; I defy them to find any line of thought in it beginning or ending with one of Plato's doctrines. He appreciated Plato (p. 202), along with other Greek authors; and he felt Plato was at one with other Theists in opposing his Pantheistic easy-believism (p. 212); but Platonic writings form no part of the story. It is true that Lewis, like Plato, was an Idealist; but the villains here, if villains we must seek, are Hegel, Berkeley, Bradley, Green, and Bosanquet. But Lewis turned away from their doctrines, insofar as they spoke about God.

One might reply that, although Plato is not mentioned, he is "really" behind Lewis's concept of Joy. Lewis, at any rate, did not think so; by his own account, Lewis became a believer in the Beyond empirically. But, further, what does "really" mean in this sentence? That no one could think of Heaven as the true home of humanity if Plato had not existed? I am pretty sure this is wrong, although we can never make the experiment. But plenty of non-Platonists and Realists (in the philosophical sense) have argued that humanity has an innate yearning for God--among them the 19th century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge:

The truth is, that all the faculties and feelings of our minds and bodies have their appropriate objects; and the possession of the faculties supposes the existence of these objects. The senses suppose the existence and reality of the objects of sense....In like manner, our religious feelings, our sense of dependence, our consciousness of responsibility, our aspirations after fellowship with some Being higher than ourselves, and higher than anything which the world or nature contains, necessitates the belief in the existence of God. (*Systematic Theology* [New York: Scribner's, 1917], vol. I, p. 200)

That is close enough to Lewis's argument as makes no difference; but Hodge, like the other Princetonians, was a Realist. It will be remembered that the only philosopher whose ideas played a vital role in Lewis's conversion was Samuel Alexander, and he, too, was a Realist. The conclusion must be that neither Idealism in general nor Platonism in particular formed a part, necessary or contingent, of Lewis's thinking on this point. Beversluis's interpretation of *Surprised by Joy* as Lewis's "transparently unsuccessful attempt to hellenize Christianity" (*Search*, p. 23) has no basis in the text.

(2). Behind the accusation that Lewis's thinking was a combination of two different concepts of God is the apparent assumption that one's concept of God may have only one source. But why? If the ingredients of a concept are mutually explanatory and are not demonstrably incoherent, then what difference does it make where the ingredients come from? Conversely, if a concept does contain self-contradictory elements, it must be discarded, even if it all came from one source. Ever since the rise of Christianity, thoughtful Christians have made use of philosophy as an aid to their own thinking and as a tool for expression of and propagation of the Christian message. Even during the Reformation--which marked the beginning of an anti-philosophical trend in Western Christianity--theologians could be found harking back to Greek philosophy, including, by the way, Calvin, who quotes Plato approvingly (*Institutes*, I.iii.3). If Lewis mongrelizes, he is in good company.

At this point Beversluis puts off his philosophical mufti and climbs into the pulpit. The idea that all men have an innate desire for God, he thunders, is contrary to Biblical doctrine. Paul, the prophets, and the entirety of Scripture bear witness that man is wholly reprobate and without any desire that is pleasing to God. What then becomes of Joy? It is excluded as "one more version of self-realization ethics" (*Search*, p. 26), and approach to God which fails to reckon with Scripture's radical critique of the unbelieving world.

It is hard to take Beversluis seriously when he charges Lewis with teaching "self-realization ethics." Lewis believed, as every Christian must, that fellowship with God is what man was created for. Sin sundered that fellowship, and the way back to God is through repentance and faith in Christ. It was Lewis's keen sense of his own sinful carnality which made his own conversion such a painful experience--not because God was not desirable to him, but because he felt he was not desirable to God. He recognized later that conversion was the first step to his own beatitude, although it was not taken for the sake of beatitude (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 219).

I cannot, for the life of me, see anything "hellenic" or unbiblical in this. A radical doctrine of sin may require that all of man's ideas about God are vanity; but it is not clear that Lewis would have disagreed. He did not believe that Joy gave him valid ideas about God, but pointed to Something beyond himself. If following this hint through repentance and self-abasement to faith in Christ is "self-realization ethics"--then words may mean anything.

The last accusation made against the doctrine of Joy is that it betrays Lewis's own inability to live by his own rational principles. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis tells Christians that faith is the "art of holding on to things your reason has accepted, in spite of your changing moods....[U]nless you tell your moods 'where they get off,' you can never be either a sound Christian or even a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro, with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion" (pp. 123-124). Here, Beversluis asserts, Lewis abandons the very principle behind the Argument from Desire. For is not Joy itself a mood, a mere inner emotional state? Is it not far better, with the rational Lewis, to leave behind such interior fripperies and live by reason instead of, like the imaginative Lewis, to be borne on every wind of emotion?

Again, Beversluis has simply failed to construe Lewis. One of the main points of *Surprised by Joy* is that Joy is not an emotion, an inner state, or a mood; the particular emotions associated with it are only the trail it leaves within the person. It was this realization--that Joy was awakened by a perception of the Other and was not simply an "emotion" that could be reproduced under the right conditions--that set Lewis on the trail that led to his conversion. It is rational reflection on his own experience that helped Lewis; and it is exactly rational reflection on our own moods that Lewis recommends in *Mere Christianity*. Far from being the

spiritual amphibian of Beversluis's accusations--living now by Imagination, now by Reason--Lewis succeeded more than most in keeping both faculties in proper order and balance.

"The pursuit of Joy is a childish thing," says Beversluis, "and Lewis's petulant complaint that he had tried everything and been disappointed every time only underscores its childishness. The self-important claim that it is just not up to one's lofty standards is scarcely profound; it is simply adolescent disenchantment elevated to cosmic status..." (*Search*, p. 30). Lewis agreed that the *pursuit* of Joy was childish, childish because vain, vain because nothing in this world can satisfy it. He did not complain that the universe did not satisfy him; to note that a serpent is not a fish, or that a stone is not bread is nothing against serpents or stones. And to say that Earth is not Heaven is not petulant or self-important. It is the sign of Christian maturity to hope for a beatitude beyond earthly pleasures. "It seems impossible," said Lewis, "a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is" (*Weight of Glory*, p. 10).

In summary: John Beversluis has misunderstood C. S. Lewis's inductive argument for the existence of Heaven for a deductive argument for the existence of God; he has wrongly ascribed the origin of the argument to Greek philosophy; and has wrongly accused Lewis of holding together incompatible tendencies of thought. Instead of helping us better understand Lewis, he has darkened counsel.

It is better to stand with Lewis in his Argument from Desire, for we stand not only with him, but with the great part of our fellow Christians and of religious men and women, who need no Plato to teach the soul that her good is in God. In the words of the 17th century poet Francis Quarles ("Like to the Arctic Needle"):

Thus finding all the world's delight to be
But empty toys, good God, she points alone to thee.

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