

The Argument from Desire/Longing for the Existence of God

In his autobiography [The Confessions](#), Saint Augustine (354-430) traces the steps in his life that led to his conversion to Christianity. In his youth, Augustine indulged in a life full of worldly pleasures. He searched for a deep sense of joy and satisfaction, although nothing could satisfy this desire. That is, nothing could satisfy his desire except a right relationship with God through Christianity. Other philosophers such as Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, and C. S. Lewis have experienced the same type of longing for the divine that has only been satisfied by knowing God. As a result, some philosophers have argued that this sense of desiring to know God serves as evidence that God exists.

The Premises of the Argument

One way to make the argument from desire follows these premises:

1. All natural desires have a real, corresponding satisfaction.
2. Humans naturally desire something which cannot be met in this world. Therefore,
3. Some real object must exist beyond this world, which satisfies this human desire (which is God).

The first premise can be supported from our own experience. We experience the desire to eat. This sense of hunger exists because it is something our bodies need to survive. Our sense of hunger exists as a way to ensure we survive. Similarly, we thirst when we need water, and we have a natural drive for sex. All of these natural desires point to a real fulfillment of those desires. They all point to a real object that satisfies them. It would be odd, perhaps utterly inexplicable, if we had a natural desire for food, water, and sex, yet none of these things existed. We have these desires because they are "built-in" to point us to what we need to survive. This is the basic idea behind the first premise. Every natural desire we know has some real, corresponding satisfaction.



St. Augustine of Hippo
(354-430)

The second premise is most likely going to be the grounds for disputing the argument. Many atheists may infer from their own experience that they have never had a desire for a relationship with God. But the type of desire indicated in the second premise is more subtle than that. Theists suggest that a person's desire for God is evident by our striving to be satisfied in the finite pleasures and distractions of the world, although none of these finite things ever satisfy our desire. For Augustine, he sought satisfaction in a sexually promiscuous lifestyle as a youth. But Augustine found that the more he tried to satisfy this longing with his hedonistic lifestyle, the more dissatisfied he was with his life.

Augustine believed that there was a paradoxical circle that this pattern of seeking fulfillment and not finding it was able to point people in the right direction. In his *Confessions*, Augustine puts it this way:

Why are they not happy? Because they are much more concerned over things which are more powerful to make them happy, for they remember truth so slightly. There is but a dim light in men; let them walk, let them walk, lest darkness overtake them. . . . Truth is loved in such a way that those who love some other thing want it to be the truth, and, precisely because they do not wish to be deceived, are unwilling to be convinced that they are deceived. Thus they hate the truth for the sake of that other thing which they love because they take it for truth. They love truth when it enlightens them, they hate truth when it accuses them.

So, according to Augustine, people are driven to search for something that satisfies their desires beyond this world. The fleeting satisfaction of the satisfaction people have of the transitory things of this world will always leave a person wanting more and feeling unfulfilled. Only after he became acquainted with the Christian God did Augustine find his desires satisfied. As he famously wrote in his *Confessions*, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."



Blaise Pascal
(1632-1662)

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) noticed a similar feature of human nature. Like Augustine, Pascal believes that God created humans with a natural tendency to desire God. In his *Pensées*, Pascal wrote:

The Christians' God is a God who makes the soul aware that he is its sole good; that in him alone can it find peace; that only in loving him can it find joy; and who at the same time fills it with loathing for the obstacles which hold it back and prevent it from loving God with all its might. Self-love and concupiscence, which hold it back are intolerable. This God makes the soul aware of this underlying self-love which is destroying it, and which he alone can cure.

Consequently, when people seek other pleasures to fill this desire, they vainly attempt to quench a desire to be at peace with God with something else, which will only distract them from seeing their need for God momentarily. In an elegant passage of his *Pensées*, Pascal used the allegory of a God-shaped void in each person's heart as an illustration:

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.



Søren Kierkegaard
(1813-1855)

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) held to a view similar to Augustine's and Pascal's as to what it means to be a fulfilled human being. Kierkegaard believed that humans progressed in stages of becoming a person. In the first stage, the *aesthetic stage*, a person lives for hedonistic pleasures. Typically, the aesthetic person is very immature, lives for the moment, and finds boredom to be the most threatening evil. The aesthetic life is difficult to maintain, and people typically grow out of it, or live in despair within it. If a person matures beyond the aesthetic stage, he will move to the *ethical stage*. On the ethical stage, a person lives for one's duties. These duties are typical of traditional family-life. Yet, the duty-driven life of the ethical person leaves a person dissatisfied. For example, even when a man has maintained all his obligations as a citizen, father, husband, and employee, his life is not fulfilled. Kierkegaard would say that he is not fully developed as a person at this stage. What is necessary is the *religious stage*, which is the third and final stage of becoming a person. Only in the religious stage can a person deal with one's guilt before God and become a whole person. It is only when people reach this stage that they become fully developed as people. If Kierkegaard is correct, then people cannot find deep fulfillment until they reach this stage and reconcile their guilt before God.



C. S. Lewis
(1898-1963)

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) is one of the most recent thinkers to defend the argument from longing/desire for the divine as evidence for the existence of God. This comes out in his spiritual autobiographies, [Pilgrim's Regress](#) (as an allegory) and [Surprised by Joy](#) (as a straightforward autobiography). In his chapter on hope in [Mere Christianity](#), Lewis lays out an initial case for this argument:

Most of us find it very difficult to want "Heaven" at all - except in so far as "Heaven" means meeting again our friends who have died. One reason for this difficulty is that we have not been trained: our whole education tends to fix our minds on this world. Another reason is that when the real want for Heaven is present in us, we do not recognise it. Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which

arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings in which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. . . . There was something we grasped at, in the first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality.

Lewis continues to discuss possible explanations of this elusive desire. He explains the "Christian Way," like this:

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. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.

Lewis gives this argument its fullest treatment in [The Weight of Glory](#). In the book's self-titled essay, Lewis explains in detail the nature of the elusive desire that we cannot fulfill in this life. The desire for something beyond this world indicates that there is a real object that can fulfill this desire, but Lewis notes that it does not guarantee that this desire will be fulfilled. He puts it this way in "The Weight of Glory:"

A man's physical hunger does not prove that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will.

N. T. Wright has put forward a spread of arguments that are in the same vein as the argument for desire/longing in his book, [Simply Christian](#). Wright argues that our natural desire for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty are indications of a reality that exists beyond the finite things we find in this world. Wright analogizes that these desires are like echoes of a voice. The echoes serve as indicators or reminders of the voice. In his chapter on our desire for the spiritual, Wright explains:

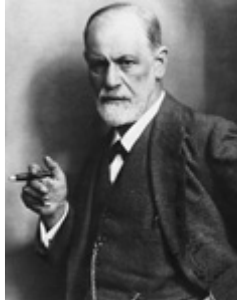
The Christian explanation of the renewed interest in spirituality is straightforward. If anything like the Christian story is in fact true (in other words, if there is a God in whom we can know most clearly in Jesus), this interest is exactly that we should expect; because in Jesus we glimpse a God who loves people and wants them to know and respond to that love. In fact, this is what we should expect if *any* of the stories told by religious people - that is, the great majority of people who have ever lived - are true: if there is any kind of divine force or being, it is at least thinkable that humans would find some kind of engagement with this being or power to be an attractive or at least interesting phenomenon.

If Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Lewis, and Wright are correct, then we have good reason to believe that our desire for something beyond this world shows us that there is a real object that satisfies this desire. Not only is the Christian God a prime candidate as the object that satisfies this desire since he is exactly the kind of object that is beyond this world that could satisfy these desires (if he exists), but according to the testimony of some of history's greatest thinkers (e.g., Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Lewis) the Christian God has given them fulfilling peace and joy. So, the argument from desire/longing confirms the truth of Christianity, unless one can challenge one of the premises.

Objection: The Desire for God is Unnatural

Of course, not everyone has understood the human desire for something beyond this world as evidence for the existence of God. While denying the fact that humans really experience some type of longing for deep satisfaction (as described by the philosophers above) is untenable, it is possible to

reinterpret *why* people experience this desire. Most noteworthy is the line of reasoning spawned by the teachings of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). Feuerbach's teachings strongly influenced Karl Marx (1818-1873) who famously believed that religion is "the opiate of the masses." Feuerbach's views taught that religious behavior is a type of wish-fulfillment, which ultimately culminated in the thought of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) whose ideas will be the main focus of this objection.



Sigmund Freud
(1856-1939)

Freud's writings explain that the desire for something beyond this world is a result of a coping mechanism that humans had to develop in order to handle the hopelessness and finitude of human life. According to Freud, we *wish* that our lives could be satisfied by a God who will give us eternal life because life is so hard. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud writes:

We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent providence and if there were a moral order in the universe and an afterlife, but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.

The psychological explanation for developing this false desire stems from the parent-child relationship. As children, we depend on our parents to take care of us, to feed us, to clothe us, to protect us. We acquire the tendency to believe someone will watch over us. As children grow up and become adults, they still desire to have someone watch over them. Of course, the perils that an adult faces cannot be resolved by other humans, so we invent an all-powerful, all-wise divine "parent" who is able to watch over us and deliver us from life's ultimate fear, death. Freud makes this clear in *Totem and Taboo*:

[Psychoanalysis] . . . teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on the relation to this father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and that at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father.

Freud's point is that humans have made God in the image of their earthly fathers. If Freud is right, then we have some reason to doubt that our desire for something beyond this world is a natural desire. Unlike hunger, thirst, and sex, our desire for God is a manufactured desire that humans once needed to cope with life's hardships. The Freudian explanation does not show that God does not exist, but (if successful) it undermines believing in God on the grounds that we have a natural desire that is satisfied by this belief.

Response To Freud

There are essentially three replies I wish to bring against the Freudian position. First, if Christianity were some kind of wish fulfillment, who would wish for it? The problem is that Christianity is a demanding religion. Orthodox Christian doctrine teaches that God is holy and expects holiness from His people. Consequently, the doctrines of sin, depravity, and hell cannot be compromised. Christianity is not the kind of system anyone would dream up in order to bring comfort to life. In fact, one of the most discomfiting and distressing things for sinners to discover is the fact of their own sin and the reality of a God who will judge their lives. The kind of religion most people would wish for would grant all the benefits of the divine scheme without making any sacrificial demands on people's lives. Christianity is not this kind of religion. When one studies the origins of Christianity, there is no trace of the type of psychological developments that would be there if Freud was correct.

Second, Freud's argument can be turned on its head to give a psychological explanation for why atheists wish for the non-existence of God. Perhaps, since a religion like Christianity makes demands on their lives and they do not wish to succumb to those standards, they psychologically project the non-existence of God. Rejecting God would entail losing an objective standard of morality and a Judge who will hold all people responsible to that standard. Therefore, why not conclude that atheists project belief in God in an attempt to put their own mind at ease concerning their own behavior? The point I want to make is that this red herring can cut both ways, and probably ought to be disregarded from this argument.

Third, when one considers other arguments for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity, the overall balance of reason tips in favor of the argument from desire/longing. These desires to find fulfilling peace and joy in God fit readily with the other evidence we have for the existence of God. The Freudian explanations become cumbersome and do not cohere with the rest of the total evidence. Since the argument from desire/longing coheres better with the rest of the evidence (and Freudian-type explanations do not), we have good reason to believe that the longing for something beyond this world are best explained by the existence of the Christian God who can satisfy these desires.

For Further Reading

Online

["The Argument from Desire"](#) by Peter Kreeft