



“The Argument from Desire”

by Peter Kreeft

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Article:

1. Every natural, innate desire in us corresponds to some real object that can satisfy that desire.
2. But there exists in us a desire which nothing in time, nothing on earth, no creature can satisfy.
3. Therefore there must exist something more than time, earth and creatures, which can satisfy this desire.
4. This something is what people call "God" and "life with God forever."

The first premise implies a distinction of desires into two kinds: innate and externally conditioned, or natural and artificial. We naturally desire things like food, drink, sex, sleep, knowledge, friendship and beauty; and we naturally shun things like starvation, loneliness, ignorance and ugliness. We also desire (but not innately or naturally) things like sports cars, political office, flying through the air like Superman, the land of Oz and a Red Sox world championship.

Now there are differences between these two kinds of desires. We do not, for example, for the most part, recognize corresponding states of deprivation for the second, the artificial, desires, as we do for the first. There is no word like "Ozlessness" parallel to "sleeplessness." But more importantly, the natural desires come from within, from our nature, while the artificial ones come from without, from society, advertising or fiction. This second difference is the reason for a third difference: the natural desires are found in all of us, but the artificial ones vary from person to person.

The existence of the artificial desires does not necessarily mean that the desired objects exist. Some do; some don't. Sports cars do; Oz does not. But the existence of natural desires does, in every discoverable case, mean that the objects desired exist. No one has ever found one case of an innate desire for a nonexistent object.

The second premise requires only honest introspection. If someone defies it and says, "I am perfectly happy playing with mud pies, or sports cars, or money, or sex, or power," we can only ask, "Are you, really?" But we can only appeal, we cannot compel. And we can refer such a person to the nearly universal testimony of human history in all its great literature. Even the atheist Jean-Paul Sartre admitted that "there comes a time when one asks, even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven, 'Is that all there is?'"

"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."

— C.S. Lewis

The conclusion of the argument is not that everything the Bible tells us about God and life with God is really so. What it proves is an unknown X, but an unknown whose *direction*, so to speak, is known. This X is *more*: more beauty, more desirability, more awesomeness, more joy. This X is to great beauty as, for example, great beauty is to small beauty or to a mixture of beauty and ugliness. And the same is true of other perfections.

But the "more" is infinitely more, for we are not satisfied with the finite and

partial. Thus the analogy (X is to great beauty as great beauty is to small beauty) is not proportionate. Twenty is to ten as ten is to five, but infinity is not to twenty as twenty is to ten. The argument points down an infinite corridor in a definite direction. Its conclusion is not "God" as already conceived or defined, but a moving and mysterious X which pulls us to itself and pulls all our images and concepts out of themselves.

In other words, the only concept of God in this argument is the concept of that which transcends concepts, something "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived" (1 Cor 2:9). In other words, this is the real God.

C. S. Lewis, who uses this argument in a number of places, summarizes it succinctly:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these 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. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. 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, Bk. III, chap. 10, "Hope")

Question 1: How can you know the major premise—that every natural desire has a real object—is universally true, without first knowing that this natural desire also has a real object? But that is the conclusion. Thus you beg the question. You must know the Conclusion to be true before you can know the major premise.

Reply: This is really not an objection to the argument from desire only, but to every deductive argument whatsoever, *every* syllogism. It is the old saw of John Stuart Mill and the nominalists against the syllogism. It presupposes empiricism—that is, that the *only* way we can ever know anything is by sensing individual things and then generalizing, by induction. It excludes deduction because it excludes the knowledge of any universal truths (like our major premise). For nominalists do not believe in the existence of any universals....except one (that all universals are only names).

This is very easy to refute. We can and do come to a knowledge of universal truths, like "all humans are mortal," not by sense experience alone (for we can never sense *all* humans) but through abstracting the common universal essence or nature of humanity from the few specimens we do experience by our senses. We know that all humans are mortal because humanity, as such, involves mortality, it is the *nature* of a human being to be mortal; mortality follows necessarily from its having an animal body. We can understand that. We have the power of understanding, or intellectual intuition, or insight, in addition to the mental powers of sensation and calculation, which are the only two the nominalist and empiricist give us. (We share sensation with animals and calculation with computers; where is the distinctively human way of knowing for the empiricist and nominalist?)

When there is no real connection between the nature of a proposition's subject and the nature of the predicate, the only way we can know the truth of that proposition is by sense experience and induction. For instance, we can know that all the books on this shelf are red only by looking at each one and counting them. But when there is a real connection between the nature of the subject and the nature of the predicate, we can know the truth of that proposition by understanding and insight—for instance, "Whatever has color must have size," or, "A Perfect Being would not be ignorant."

Question 2: *Suppose I simply deny the minor premise and say that I just don't observe any hidden desire for God, or infinite joy, or some mysterious X that is more than earth can offer?*

Reply: This denial may take two forms. First, one may say, "Although I am not perfectly happy now, I believe I would be if only I had ten million dollars, a Lear jet, and a new mistress every day." The reply to this is, of course, "Try it. You won't like it." It's been tried and has never satisfied. In fact, billions of people have performed and are even now performing trillions of such experiments, desperately seeking the ever-elusive satisfaction they crave. For even if they won the whole world, it would not be enough to fill one human heart.

Yet they keep trying, believing that "If only.. . Next time .. ." This is the stupidest gamble in the world, for it is the only one that consistently has *never* paid off. It is like the game of predicting the end of the world: every batter who has ever approached that plate has struck out. There is hardly reason to hope the present ones will fare any better. After trillions of failures and a one hundred percent failure rate, this is one experiment no one should keep trying.

A second form of denial of our premise is: "I am perfectly happy now." This, we suggest, verges on idiocy or, worse, dishonesty. It requires something more like exorcism than refutation. This is Merseault in Camus's *The Stranger*. This is subhuman, vegetation, pop psychology. Even the hedonist utilitarian John Stuart Mill, one of the shallowest (though cleverest) minds in the history of philosophy, said that "it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."

Question 3: *This argument is just another version of Anselm's ontological argument (see Argument 13 in The Handbook of Christian Apologetics), which is invalid. You argue to an objective God from a mere subjective idea or desire in you.*

Reply: No, we do not argue from the idea alone, as Anselm does. Rather, our argument first derives a major premise from the real world of nature: that nature makes no desire in vain. Then it discovers something real in human nature—namely, human desire for something more than nature—which nature cannot explain, because nature cannot satisfy it. Thus, the argument is based on observed facts in nature, both outer and inner. It has data.

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