

ABSTRACT

A Natural Signs Approach to the Argument from Desire

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C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that “If I find in myself a desire that no experience in this world can satisfy, the best possible explanation is that I was made for another world.” From this experience of desire for something transcendent, he formulated an argument for the existence of God. My thesis interprets the argument using a natural signs approach—instead of arguing that this experience constitutes proof of God’s existence, I argue that this experience of desire is one of many naturally occurring signs for God and constitutes the basis for a special kind of knowledge about God.

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A NATURAL SIGNS APPROACH TO THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIRE

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote that “If I find in myself a desire that no experience on this earth can satisfy, then the best possible explanation is that I was made for another world.”¹ I am going to refer to this desire as a desire for the transcendent. There are three ways one can respond to a desire like the one Lewis found within himself. One can, as he did, make an argument from this ‘evidence’ for the existence for God. This “argument from desire” is compelling, but like many theistic arguments, is not particularly successful at convincing anyone who does not already believe in God of his existence. In the end, the gap between this experience of desire and conclusive evidence that something beyond us exists proves far too large to jump. A second way of responding to this kind of desire is to dismiss it entirely as a simple expression of human need and interpret it as an experience that is not intrinsically meaningful, but a manifestation of a psychological need for fulfillment and significance.

A third option is to interpret experiences like the desire that Lewis describes as an indication that something beyond us exists. The idea that the content of certain experiences provide a kind of evidence for God, is suggested by and has been recently explored in C. Stephen Evans’ book *Natural Signs and*

Knowledge of God: a New Look at Theistic Arguments. In this work, Evans argues that if there is a God, then it is likely that natural knowledge of him is possible, and that such knowledge will be both widely available and open to interpretation. Evans' theory of natural signs provides a basis for explaining why an argument like the argument from desire is both appealing and enduring in spite of its logical weakness and how it can function as evidence. The main goal of this thesis is to interpret the desire for the transcendent as a natural sign for God and argue that it can be understood as a basis for natural knowledge of God. This project is largely an exercise in natural theology.

Natural Theology

Natural theology aims to show that there is knowledge of God independent of any special revelation, such as the Bible or any specific historical revelation claim, such as miracles². This definition of natural theology serves as the first part of what Evans calls "two-stage apologetics." The first stage is the formulation of an argument for the existence of a God that includes and borrows upon at least some of commonly acknowledged properties of God. The second stage is an argument whose major premise is that God reveals himself through particular historical events or a particular book, i.e., the Bible.³ This apologetic strategy has been traditionally used in the Christian tradition, and is historically regarded as an important part of a rational belief in God. My project seeks to

contribute to the first stage in this system of apologetics. As such, arguments that are based in natural phenomena, such as an experience of desire, can be considered worthy of evaluation. The major gain of natural theology is that it allows us to regard data collected from the natural world and our experiences as valuable.

A Brief Overview of Natural Sign Theory

Evans begins by asking what we would expect to see in the world if God did exist.⁴ Many systems of religious belief tend to assign to God the properties of omniscience, omnipotence, absolute benevolence and credit him with the creation of the world. They also assume that God created human beings to be in relationship with him, and that he cares deeply about his creations. Given these assumptions, what kind of knowledge of himself would God make available to human beings, and how would they access it? It hardly seems possible for someone to be in relationship to something they cannot know, therefore it seems plausible that if there were a God, knowledge of him would not only be possible, but would be available to all human beings in some form or another. Evans calls this the “Wide-Accessibility Principle.” This idea is accepted by atheists and theists alike. The famous atheist Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say if he learned after death that his atheism was wrong. The answer was simple—not enough evidence. This reply implies that he believes that if there

were a God, evidence of him would be both easy to find and an obvious manifestation of God's existence.⁵ Another atheist, John Schellenberg, advocates a stronger claim than Evans does with respect to accessibility of knowledge about God. He says that if there were a God, "reasonable non-belief" would not exist—it would be possible for every sincere and competent inquirer to know of God's existence based upon the evidence, and that evidence would be irresistible.

Evans' response to this is to introduce the "Easy Resistibility Principle"⁶ in which knowledge of God is not forced upon humans. This is important because the relationship that human beings are meant to have with God should be loving and freely chosen. Those who are motivated against religious belief can easily make compelling cases against it. Therefore we can reasonably expect the kind of evidence that God offers human beings about himself will be the sort of evidence that requires interpretation and is ambiguous enough such that belief in God, which implies relationship with God, is not coerced. A God who compelled humanity to love and serve him would be a God with contradictory aims to any faith that considers God to be loving. In a world where reasonable non-belief and free will could not exist, we would be unable to have the kind of loving relationship with God that Christianity values as important.

Blaise Pascal summarizes the Wide-Accessibility Principle and the Easy Resistibility principles in his *Pensées*, in which he writes “[God] has qualified our knowledge of him by giving signs which can be seen by those who seek him and not by those who do not. There is enough light for those who desire only to see and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition.”⁷ Because of this, Evans refers to these principles as “Pascalian constraints.” I will return to these principles and Evans’ book in my final chapter.

A Philosophical Account of Desire

I will now turn my attention to discussing and defining desire. Desire is a powerful force that “animates the world...Banish [it] from the world and you get a world of frozen beings who have no reason to live, and no reason to die.”⁸ It exists in a constant state of ebb and flow, and is perhaps the most natural thing that we do; no one has to teach us how to want.⁹ Desires are “pro-attitudes” with propositional content that represents a particular goal. In order to desire something, we must believe that it is possible. Along with our beliefs, our desires represent how we think the world could be, and what is possible given our circumstances.¹⁰ This suggests that desire guides action.

If we desire an object, p , we tend to take actions that that bring about p , and generally, we believe that p is good. Our desire for p sticks with us for as long as it is the case that we do not have it. Desires are only for conceivable states

of affairs, and some desires are intrinsic, meaning that what we desire is desired for its own sake. Including the conceivable states of affairs and intrinsic distinctions in my understanding of desire creates a stronger definition that can account for some of the objections that opponents raise to the argument from desire. I will address these objections later and their connection to desire in chapter III.

Desires are also said to have a “direction of fit” that is opposite to the direction of fit of beliefs. Beliefs are true if the world conforms to them, and desires are satisfied by changing the world to fit the desire. Desires, however, say something about how we believe the world should be, and are successful when we mold the world to our ideas. Someone who desires p will take actions to change their circumstances so that p happens; desire guides action. Unfulfilled desires leave us wanting more. We do not consciously create our desires, and the desire for the transcendent is no exception. It does not arise from immediate needs of survival or comfort—pursuing the transcendent is no easy task.

The Object of the Desire for the Transcendent

All desires have an object, and I consider the desire for something transcendent to have three possible objects—happiness, heaven and God. When philosophers speak of happiness, they tend to do so with two things in mind—a state of mind, or a life that goes well for the person leading it.¹¹ Mental states are

ephemeral and subjective and are not a sufficient basis to determine whether or not someone is happy because then happiness can be found in situations that are immoral or inauthentic. Anything, even the most dangerous, unhealthy things, can make someone happy in the sense of being a pleasing mental state.

Otherwise, someone living a morally reprehensible life in which all of their desires, good or bad, are satisfied could be called happy. One could easily imagine a number of situations where the fully realized desires of one person cause harm to others.

Another reason that mental-state happiness is insufficient is evidenced by Jeremy Bentham's declaration in defense of hedonism that "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure [and that] it is for them alone to point out what we do." Although we are strongly motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain, human beings seem to be capable of a richer happiness than might be provided by hedonism. We can choose things that are unpleasant for the sake of a greater good, whether that good be another human life or a worthy cause. Even if we try to make a case that altruistic acts provide a greater pleasure than the pain involved in whatever sacrifice is required, the idea that everything is a matter of pleasure and pain still seems hollow to me. Robert Nozick's "experience machine" is a potent indicator of why hedonism seems so empty.¹² Nozick presents the following hypothetical

situation: Imagine that you can choose to be hooked up to a machine that would give you whatever experiences you regarded as happy for the rest of your life. Would you plug into it? Most people say no, because what they want is not the experience of happiness, but to actually *be* happy. The authenticity of our experiences clearly matters. If pleasure was all that mattered when it comes to being happy, we would have no reason to resist the idea of an experience machine. Yet, we do—and I think the reason is that true happiness consists of something more wholesome, stable, and desirable than what hedonism can offer. Because of this, I believe that the best way to understand happiness is in the context of well-being.

Well-being is most commonly considered to be that which is non-instrumentally or ultimately good for a person.¹³ This definition supports an Aristotelian understanding of happiness in that it suggests that happiness is not the possession of an object or of a certain experience, but that happiness covers the whole of human life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that happiness is the “the highest of realizable goods”¹⁴ and the “noblest and pleasantest thing in the world.”¹⁵ To Aristotle, happiness is not pleasure, wealth, fame, honor or virtue because these are all instrumental goods—things we seek for the sake of something else. By themselves, they are unable to provide us with a happy life because they can easily be taken away, and happiness is not the kind

of thing that is easily lost, once found.¹⁶ For these reasons, Aristotle concludes that happiness is the final end of man, because it is the final reason why men perform any actions, and we choose it for itself and never for the sake of something else.¹⁷

Aristotle's understanding of happiness is relevant to the discussion of well-being because he believes that to seek happiness; we must live a certain kind of life. This life consists of one in which a person exercises their best faculties in accordance with virtue or reason.¹⁸ Furthermore, "one day or any small space of time does not make a man blessed or happy." Thus, in order to achieve the highest happiness for human beings, a person must cultivate the intellectual and moral virtues across the span of a life time.¹⁹ Virtuous people are the happiest people because they take pleasure in doing virtuous acts, and so their lives contain pleasure in themselves—they do not have to seek pleasure in order to feel it and a man is not good unless he takes pleasure in noble deeds.²⁰ This understanding of happiness allows happiness to have a moral component that a purely mental-state understanding of happiness lacks.

Another important point to make during this discussion of Aristotle is that even though Aristotle is a pre-Christian writer, he believes that happiness is divinely inspired and ordained—"if the Gods do give gifts to men, happiness is likely to be among the number"²¹ and "it would be too absurd to leave

[happiness] to the dispensation of chance.”²² Even without an explicit understanding of God, there is something transcendent about happiness, and that the desire to obtain it is presented as universal, which is relevant given my earlier claim that natural knowledge of God will likely be widely available. Although I do not think happiness is the ultimate end of the desire for the transcendent, I believe that it is intimately connected with heaven and God, the two things that I believe the desire for the transcendent cause us to strive for.

In Christianity, heaven is the dwelling place of both God and the angels and it is where all saved souls go after judgment to receive their eternal reward and join in the fellowship and feast of God’s family. One of the ways that this reward is characterized is as a kind of mental state exemplified in the beatific vision. The beatific vision is the “intuitive vision of God in his essence,” or to ability to see God fully.²³ This state is one of perfect bliss beyond anything possible on earth, and beyond our capability to enjoy without divine aid. Heaven as a place is typically represented with gold, doves and royal splendor. This scriptural imagery is an attempt to convey the inexpressible magnificence of heaven. Crowns are shown to suggest that union with God in part involves sharing in his power and joy. Musical instruments, such as harps, feature prominently because “music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity.” Gold is present to suggest timeless

preciousness and rarity.²⁴ All of these symbols contribute to a picture of heaven as a place that is transcendently beautiful and a place in which everyone is perfectly happy. This suggests that happiness has two components, an earthly component realized in maximized well-being, and an eternal component that can only be realized by being face to face with God in heaven. Thus, the desire for something transcendent can be characterized as a desire for the kind of eternal happiness found only through God in heaven, and its object is a combination of these three things. Understanding the desire for the transcendent in this way allows me to say something about where it comes from.

In Ecclesiastes 3:10-12, the preacher says that he has “seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also he has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.” This idea is echoed in C.S. Lewis’s assertion that human beings were made to “run on” God.²⁵ What I suggest is that the desire for the transcendent has been implanted in the human heart since the beginning, and when properly recognized through the exercising of virtue of hope, can lead us to God and the happiness we have been made to desire. I believe that hope is how we might draw nearer to the “eternity in our hearts.” Hope is rooted in a desired state of affairs believed to be attainable.²⁶ Thomas Hobbes describes it as “appetite with an opinion of attaining.” Hope is

more stable than optimism or wishful thinking, although modern colloquial definitions of hope tend to lump it in the same category as these other, more tentative mental states. Hope requires a belief that the future will be good, and implies a certain measure of uncertainty. It would be inappropriate to hope for something certain, just as it would make little sense to believe you could have something you knew you never could. Theologically, hope is centered towards the potential of existing in the transcendent realm of heaven, and is what keeps us on the path to that final end when we face significant challenges.

Hope is connected to desiring the transcendent because it is a way in which that desire is made meaningful. Not only do we desire something more, but in some cases, we might have a belief through hope that we can obtain it as well. I believe that there is a biblical basis for thinking that hope is part of what sustains this God-given desire for the transcendent. 1 Corinthians 13:8 reads “But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.” 13:12 reads “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then shall I know, even as also I am known.” Christians have, through hope, a reason to believe that their desire to know God face to face will be someday realized. These passages also say something about how we can know that it is reasonable to desire something transcendent—in this life we only have glimpses of what the ends of transcendent desire can lead to. Someday,

God will come and open the eyes of the soul so that we can truly see what our desire for the transcendent has been hinting at all of our lives. In the next chapter, I am going to explore how heaven, desire and happiness have been dealt with in the Christian tradition.

CHAPTER II

Desire in the Christian Tradition

The aim of this chapter is to explore and explain what three writers in the Christian tradition—C.S. Lewis, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas— have to say about the desire for the transcendent. I will focus on how their accounts of desire connect with happiness and heaven as ends of the desire for the transcendent. In doing so, I hope to bolster my comments about how desire for the transcendent is linked with happiness and heaven by showing that they are rooted in a long-standing, well respected tradition of thought.

Desire in C.S. Lewis

In chapter ten of *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis is engaged in a discussion of hope, which he defines as “a continual looking forward to the eternal world [as]...one of the things a Christian is meant to do.”²⁷ He goes on to say that most people, if they searched themselves and knew what they were looking for, would come to realize that they “want acutely something that cannot be had in this world.”²⁸ His quick formulation of the argument from desire, the quote that begins this paper, follows soon after. I will derive the argument from desire from the quote in the next chapter. Lewis considers the desire he finds within himself

something that although not always recognized, inherently human.

Paradoxically, no human efforts will ever satisfy the desire. Lewis calls this desire Joy, and explores it extensively in his autobiographical work *Surprised by Joy*, which details his experiences in coming to a deep authentic Christian faith.

Lewis' first memorable encounter with Joy occurred at the age of 8, and he describes it as "a memory of a memory."²⁹ It was a desire he realized, but for something he could not name.³⁰ After the desire subsided, he felt as though something had been taken from him, a "glimpse withdrawn...only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased." Everything else that had ever happened was "insignificant in comparison."³¹ Clearly the experience made an impression. As he continued to have similar experiences, Lewis came to understand them as "stabs of Joy" because of how intense these moments were.³² The second time he remembers having the desire was while reading the books of Beatrix Potter, which he often went back to "not to gratify the desire...but to reawake...the same surprise and the same sense of incalculable importance."³³ Joy was distinctly different from ordinary pleasures and seemed to be something "in another dimension." Joy is "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."³⁴ Joy is awakened by certain experiences, and we are driven to seek those experiences over and over again. The object of

this desire is clearly something transcendent. This suggests that the major function of the longing he feels is to point him towards some transcendent end.

These same ideas about Joy are echoed in *Mere Christianity*, although Lewis does not mention Joy specifically anywhere in that text. In the same chapter from which I take my formulation of the argument from desire, Lewis claims that “earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it [the desire], but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”³⁵ Again, the real object of desire is clearly something transcendent. Lewis cites music as an example of such a pleasure because “music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity.”³⁶ Surely music is not the only way in which human beings can be made to feel this suggestion, and in fact Lewis sometimes wondered “whether all pleasures are not substitutes for Joy.”³⁷ One might suspect that in modern society, we might feel similar experiences when we take part in things that give us pleasure—well written books, thought provoking films and other such enjoyments.

Lewis’ Joy also has a reminiscent quality to it. “All Joy reminds”, he says, because it is always for something “longer ago, or further away or still about to be.”³⁸ These experiences keep us searching for the object of our desire until one day we discover that we have “returned at last from exile and desert lands to [our] own country.”³⁹ This sense of discovery suggests that we journey out

searching for something that is already inside of us—our journey as humans is ultimately circular. A final comment I would like to make about Lewis and Joy centers around Lewis' claims that God has designed the human machine to run on himself and that when we try to find a happiness apart from God's will, the result is "nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war...the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy."⁴⁰ With the understanding that part of the object of the desire for the transcendent is tied up with eternal happiness, Lewis' words indicate that ultimately all happiness is in God. If we try to find happiness anywhere else, we will fail, and quite miserably. I will now turn to discussing the major thinkers that Lewis' understanding of happiness and desire seem to draw upon.

Desire in St. Augustine

St. Augustine's *Confessions* is a detailed reflection on human happiness.⁴¹ It begins with the recognition that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.⁴² He believes God has designed us to be drawn to him through worship. Here, this restlessness is a kind of unhappiness, a painful potent longing that can only be soothed by the peace found in union with God. However, a problem quickly arises. We are made to hunger for God's presence, to call upon him and to know him, yet we cannot know something we know nothing about. This problem

creates a “paradox of inquiry”⁴³, in which Augustine wonders how it is possible to search for God if we do not already know him in some sense. It makes no sense to inquire about something you already know (since you already know it). It also does not make any sense to search for something you do not already know because you would have no idea if you found what you were looking for. Augustine addresses this issue in book 10 of the *Confessions*, which concerns memory.

Memory is the place within us where objects of thought are stored and can be encountered. This includes our perceptual sense memories, innate knowledge of first principles, emotions and affections. Some Augustine scholars even hold that God is found only in memory.⁴⁴ The example of the lost coin in *Confessions* 10.27 illustrates the paradox of inquiry very simply—we cannot look for what we do not know something about, for we would never know if we found it. We can also remember an object without it being physically present—you do not need to see a coin to know what one looks like in your mind. Similarly, if you do not already know something about God and happiness, innately or through experiences, you will not know if you have found them. Augustine then explores the phenomenon of forgetting in *Confessions* 10.28. Even if our memories lose part of something, we still remember part of it, or else we would never be able to tell that we had remembered it once we recalled it. This implies that even when

we are not conscious of something, we still have some kind of knowledge of it. We can still remember part of an object without knowing other parts of the object—without knowing it completely⁴⁵.

This discussion of memory is relevant because finding both God and the happy life are coterminous.⁴⁶ I believe that we can have the happy life in mind without experiencing it because we can experience something that points towards it—what Lewis called Joy. Those experiences make clear that we do not have all of the pieces of happiness here with us—there is something more complete inside of us and beyond us fully recognized through knowing God. Joy, or experiences that trigger memory, In order for this relationship between Joy and happiness to work, Joy must be similar enough to happiness to be a token of it that causes us to seek true happiness in God, yet different enough from happiness so that such experiences of Joy are not ultimate happiness. Having Joy in mind is an incomplete possession of the final end of true happiness. Joy is a token of the larger whole that is happiness.⁴⁷ We can search for God without already knowing him provided that we have encountered something that stands rightly in relation to him as a token—Augustine believes that joy and truth are such tokens. We can have in mind a token of an object without ever having encountered or had in mind the object itself. In doing so,

we are building a bridge between something we know and have encountered, Joy, and something we do not yet know but wish to know, God.

It is in God alone that humans find true happiness; however, they must identify God with happiness in order for them to be truly satisfied, and realize that human experiences of Joy are only reminders of the real thing. Memory then, serves as an indication that we naturally desire God in some sense, in that our best human experiences of Joy prompt us to discover that we are made to search for God. The memory aroused by Joy awakens us. In *Confessions* 1.1, Augustine asserts that God made us for himself, and in book 10, he shows that we have been made sensitive to joy and truth in such a way that, once we have tasted them, we will hunger restlessly and seek after genuine joy and truth.⁴⁸ It is because we have memory of Joy that we can confidently assert that we desire happiness above all else—anyone who is asked will say that they desire happiness.⁴⁹

The eternal nature of happiness is established in *City of God*, when Augustine writes that “as we are saved by hope, it is in hope that we have been made happy—we do not enjoy a present happiness, but look forward to happiness in the future.”⁵⁰ Like many other Christian thinkers, Augustine believes that we cannot be happy here on earth by our own efforts, and that without eternity and immortality of the soul, there is no true happy life.⁵¹ The

way to happiness is revealed by God through Jesus Christ. True happiness then is purely spiritual, driven by divine grace and meditation.⁵² Because it is in hope and eternity that we are made happy, the central object of the desire is something transcendent. Whether or not we know it, in desiring true happiness, we desire God.

Desire in St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas pulls together some of the principles found in Aristotle and Augustine in the context of a desire to see God. This desire is the subject of Lawrence Feingold's book *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*. He lists six principles taken from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *De Anima*, *Posterior Analytics* and the *Metaphysics* to explain what St. Thomas thinks about this desire to see God.⁵³ They are as follows.

1. Man is not perfectly blessed as long as he desires something more than what he has.
2. The perfection of a faculty is specified by its formal object.
3. Man has a natural desire to know that is made obvious by his ability to wonder—we see the effects of things in the world and desire to know their causes.
4. Everything that is imperfect desires to be perfected.
5. Man naturally desires the perfection of his intellect.

6. Beatitude, then, consists in the most perfect operation of man's highest faculty, the intellect.

St. Thomas combines principles 2-5 to establish the existence of a natural desire to know God's essence. I will explain this in further detail in the paragraphs that follow. That we are incapable of being completely happy without knowing God's essence follows from the first principle. However, he goes beyond Aristotle in his interpretation of the sixth principle because Aristotle does not explicitly derive the conclusion that man naturally desires knowledge of God and his essence as St. Thomas does, although he does say that contemplation of the unmoved mover would be the highest end.⁵⁴ Having briefly explored the Aristotelian influences on St. Thomas's claims about the natural desire to see God, I will now explore the details of how Aquinas reaches those conclusions from Aristotle's principles.

Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that the final end of human beings is happiness. Human beings are distinct from other created life forms in that they are rational, intellectual beings. Accordingly, he asserts that all human beings by nature, desire to know. Furthermore, no one is satisfied that they know something unless they know the first cause of that something. It then follows that we will never be truly satisfied in our knowledge until we know the first cause of everything in the universe—God.⁵⁵ Not only do we desire knowledge of

the first cause (*that* it is), but we hunger to know its essence (*what* it is). For Aquinas, this knowledge of God's essence is realized in complete happiness, by which he means the beatific vision. The beatific vision is being able to see God as he is, and is characterized by complete union with him⁵⁶. Because it is the realization of the highest faculty of man, the intellect, the activity of this vision is contemplation of God in his essence.

We must now take into account the fact that there are two kinds of happiness or beatitude that human beings are capable of, perfect and imperfect.⁵⁷ Imperfect happiness is what we can find in our earthly lives, and perfect happiness is achieved only in the vision of God. By nature, we desire perfect happiness, yet we are only capable of attaining imperfect happiness by our own faculties. Desire never ends in this life. We always want more than what we have, and given that first Aristotelian principle, all happiness we achieve on our own is always imperfect. Also, once we realize that God has ordained a supernatural end for us, it is hard to desire or be content with anything less.⁵⁸ We are designed to seek and want something we can never find on our own.

Before attempting to resolve this issue, I want to clarify what St. Thomas means by "natural" when he says that the desire for the beatific vision is a "natural" desire. There are two ways that one can think of natural desires, as innate appetites or elicited acts of the will following upon natural knowledge of

the good.⁵⁹ Innate appetites are natural attractions toward things that are fitting to the end of natural perfection.⁶⁰ Elicited acts of the will can be further divided into natural and free acts. Natural acts are willed without deliberation—we do not spend much time deciding whether or not to take life-saving actions if our lives are in immediate danger because life is desired on its own, and desired naturally. Free acts are those that follow upon deliberation—those acts we undertake in order to get something that we naturally desire.⁶¹ The term natural applies to both the innate inclinations of the will (natural appetites) and to the elicited acts of the will that arise before deliberation (natural desires).⁶² We can then draw the conclusion that every innate inclination is a natural appetite, but that elicited natural desires are not innate—they must be awakened. Thus, the desire to see God can be natural without being innate.

It is not necessary for all creatures of a species to have a particular desire for the desire to be natural.⁶³ It seems that nearly everyone is willing to say that everyone desires to be happy. Not everyone is willing to agree that happiness has anything to do with God. Their refusal or avoidance of God does not negate the natural desire for God in those who acknowledge and pursue it. The existence of such persons also highlights the importance of human choice and cultural influence. Although we cannot will to have a different final end, we can

choose not to pursue happiness, even if those who seek another path would not consider it one that leads to unhappiness.

To choose to pursue God requires deliberation on our part, and highlights the importance of the theological virtues, namely faith and hope. Merely considering that God is our final end attracts the will to desire it in a conditional way—on the hope that such a thing might be possible.⁶⁴ It is important here to make a distinction between conditional and unconditional desires. Things that we desire conditionally are things that we would want if our circumstances were a certain way, what is commonly known as wishing.⁶⁵ Things desired conditionally are desired before deliberation. To desire something unconditionally is to want it regardless of the situation. The will initiates actions that bring about the objects of those things we desire unconditionally. Happiness is an unconditional desire because it is the principle upon which we form wills toward other actions or things.⁶⁶ It is contradictory to desire two opposing things unconditionally.

A particularly illustrative example of this is Christ's prayer in Gethsemane. Although he conditionally desired not to suffer, his deliberated will unconditionally desired to do God's will.⁶⁷ Christ's desires to avoid extreme suffering and to do God's bidding are capable of existing at the same time; however, he can only act upon one of them. It is not contradictory to will

opposing things if one is willed unconditionally (in a way that sparks action) and the other conditionally (if possible). Even though the deliberated will can overrule natural desire, it does not eliminate the desire. This offers another explanation for why certain people do not feel the call to know God—they may lack the theological virtues and thus have a natural desire to see God that is conditional. The problem lies in their assumption that it is not possible to see God because they do not believe he exists.

In this chapter, I have presented C.S. Lewis' views on the desire for the transcendent, and shown how those views are rooted in the Christian tradition through the theologies of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to what we can make of this well-attested to experience of desire for something transcendent.

CHAPTER III

Two Extremes

Lewis and others have described a widely accessible experience of desire. The central question of this thesis concerns what we should make of this desire. In this chapter I will consider two options that I think are interesting, but ultimately unsatisfying explanations for the desire. I will begin by explaining how Lewis made an argument from it, and then explore the opposite perspective, which takes a deflationary view of the desire.

Lewis' Argument from Desire

Lewis forms the argument in *Mere Christianity* when he writes: "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." A simplified version of this argument is this.

1. Certain desires exist only if they have a real object.
2. We have such a desire for God.
3. God exists.

The easiest place to attack this argument is at premise two. It is easy enough for someone to lay a sufficiently compelling case that they have no desire for God, and in some cases, actively desire that he does not exist at all. I think that the desire in question here is a little more subtle than an active desire for relationship with God in a Christian context. Non-Christians tend not to have desires relating specifically to Christianity, in the same way that Christians generally tend not to desire to experience a better life in their next cycle of reincarnation. The suggestion here is that human attempts to find fulfillment in the finite pleasures of the world ultimately turn up fruitless. Yet we still desire fulfillment—there ought to be something out there that bring us the satisfaction we desire.⁶⁸ St. Augustine's experience is a particularly good example—he lived a life of hedonistic pleasure, trying to calm his restless heart, yet it was not until he converted and thought through the possibilities of religious experience that he found any kind of satisfaction. The point here is that we have some kind of desire for something transcendent, thus there must be something capable of fulfilling the desire. God is the only sort of 'thing' capable of satisfying the desire. Resistance to the argument based on this premise is not due to a denial of the

desire for a deeper kind of satisfaction, but to a denial that such satisfaction is theological in nature.

Lewis and the tradition he draws upon provide another answer to the question of whether or not this desire exists in all people, particularly those who claim not to have it. That people have some kind of experience of desiring something transcendent is well agreed upon—what they use to explain the presence of that desire is not. Lewis' solution is to claim that if we really looked inside of ourselves, would know that we “want, acutely, something that cannot be had in this world.”⁶⁹ The key here is recognition and acceptance. Someone who neither recognizes nor accepts that the desire of their heart is heaven and life with God will progress no further than believing that the next big thing will finally lead to happiness. In the end, they will be disappointed. Every time we achieve a new milestone, the joy of having it fades—something, we know not what, evades us, and we fall back into the same position of wanting and seeking all over again. The fact that we never seem to find satisfaction for desire provides an opportunity to make an interesting point, but first I will need to make a weaker version of the argument.

1. Human beings desire the transcendent.
2. Desires have as their objects things that exist
3. Something transcendent exists.

Although this version of the argument can be resisted using the same principles used to resist the idea that we desire God, it allows me to say something new. Even if we do not explicitly label the transcendent as God, it is hard to avoid being led to a divine being. Granting that something transcendent exists, let us consider what a transcendent thing might be like. Common things we desire to transcend are body, time, space, death and finitude. Something transcendent would not be subject to one or more of these forces, and would thus be supernatural. Divine beings are widely recognized to be the only beings capable of escaping these forces. The recognition that desire points to something beyond ourselves makes it hard to avoid God as an explanation for that desire. Still, there are those that hold that the existence of transcendent beings is not the best explanation for this desire.

A Deflationary View of Desire

Atheists are not the only people who reject God as an explanation for this desire—some theists may simply believe that this kind of desire is not a sufficient reason to believe in God. What those who take a deflationary stance on this desire seem to be really objecting that there is anything that fulfills it, not that the desire exists.

From a modern secular perspective, heavily influenced by Freudian psychology, any desire for the transcendent is nothing more than an indication of

the fact that we are incapable of coping with the difficulties of life. We cling to religious belief because it helps us control violent impulses, behave civilly and arises out of a childish need for a strong father figure.⁷⁰ Such a portrait paints a condescending view of religion and what it is good for. "Religion", Freud wrote, "is an illusion and it derives strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires."⁷¹ We need comfort and stability in a constantly changing world and have invented gods and religion to make us feel better—a giant security blanket only the most enlightened can learn to let go of. We have been accustomed to being watched over by our parents as children, and cannot let go of how safe that made us feel when we grow to be adults, thus we have created God.⁷² Even though Freud and those influenced by this line of reasoning will reject any arguments for God based upon experience, they recognize the force of the conviction and the weight of the experiences behind the arguments they reject.

There are a few objections we can raise to this view about desire. If religion, Christianity in particular, were a kind of wish fulfillment, who would desire it? Christianity is not an easy religion when practiced properly and is completely understood. Concepts such as sin and hell cannot be avoided, and if anything, would serve to frighten more than they could possibly comfort. Furthermore, Christianity warns against the ways in which institutions can

misrepresent the teachings of the faith. Although it is certainly true that persons who recognize this point can resist religion based upon what the faith actually teaches, much of what Freud has to say in criticism of religion rests in a critique of how we relate to it as an institution.

Another basis upon which the desire for the transcendent might be written off is to say that its object gives human beings an ultimate purpose with a happy ending. Maybe all this argument really says about human experience is that we need our struggles to mean something, and have thus, in a Freudian sense, created and projected something that makes us feel better about how difficult life can seem, and how futile our struggles sometimes appear to us. Desiring something transcendent seems silly from this viewpoint—the only world we exist in is this one—how can we be made for another one?

Transcendent things are by definition beyond the limits of our capacity to know, understand or touch, and the only thing that fits this description is God. God is superior and rational, thus believing that all the things we do somehow fit into some benevolent master plan is the ultimate stability and security in a terrifying, chaotic world. Creating an afterlife in which we can be perfectly happy is merely a delusion we have invented to calm our inner turmoil. Thinking about the afterlife is an easy, unrealistic portrait of what life means. Perhaps it is meaningless to consider what life means overall, because experience is so

subjective and life is too short to even care at all. Although I understand how the difficulties of life can lead a person down this path, I think this view point is far too pessimistic a portrait of human experiences, particularly those of desires.

It is not impossible to imagine a world in which nothing really means anything, but I believe that there is basis for trusting our desires. Although they do not always lead us in the right direction, they are extremely useful and so there is sufficient basis to believe that they have to mean something when they are present and pervasive. If desire wasn't a reasonably reliable way to navigate the world, then human beings would have died out a long time ago. We can know something about what is good or bad for us based on instincts and desires honed by years of evolutionary process. It behooves us to pay attention to desires for food, water, companionship and safety, because they contribute to our overall well-being and survival. Although I recognize that we have plenty of instincts that do not lead us to good things (i.e., the desire to dominate and control others), our instincts and desires give us pause. They cause us to think in a very pointed way about the world around us. If our more basic desires are considered reasonable, why is a desire for something transcendent automatically treated so differently? I am not saying that there are not essential differences between our basic desires and our more complex ones, simply that I do not see sufficient reason to suspect that a more complex desire such as the desire from the

transcendent is any less valuable as a guide to action and belief formation. In this chapter, I have described two ways of assigning meaning to the experience of desire of the transcendent. In my final chapter, I will return to C. Stephen Evans' theory of natural signs and apply it to the desire for something transcendent.

CHAPTER IV

Natural Sign Theory

I have discussed a desire from the transcendent and presented two possible ways of dealing with it. Although I think that attempts to make an argument from the desire are much more promising than attempts to dismiss it, I think there is a better option that balances these two extremes. This option is what C. Stephen Evans suggests in *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, and what I briefly covered in the first chapter when I discussed natural theology. To review, if the kind of God that Christianity describes exists, then is reasonable to expect that knowledge of him would be subject to the Pascalian constraints of Wide-Accessibility and Easy-Resistibility. Natural signs are just this kind of knowledge, and I will now take a closer look at them.

Reidean Natural Signs

Evans' notion of natural signs is drawn from Thomas Reid's account of the relationship between perception and natural signs, and extends it to include theistic natural signs. One of Reid's most important contributions to the philosophical tradition is his attack of the Lockean "Way of Ideas", which posits

that perception is representational.⁷³ Representationalists believe that when we perceive an object, the immediate object of our thought is not the object or its properties, but an idea of the object. To think of a pear is to have an idea of a pear, and this idea is a distinct mental object perceived through the use of our “mental eyes.”⁷⁴ The idea of a pear is supposed to bear some sort of relationship to actual pears that allows our ideas to represent physical objects or serve as a basis for inferences about extra-mental objects. Thus, the immediate objects of perceptions are ideas received through the senses.

Reid’s understanding of sensation and perception lie in contrast to those sketched in the above paragraph. For Reid, sensations are natural signs of external objects that make perceptual awareness of them possible. By this Reid means that sensations trigger perception of external objects. Perception for Reid is a combination of conception and belief. Perception serves as natural signs of the objects perceived. Sensations lead to conceptions, which, when combined with beliefs, lead to perceptions. Conceptions are ways of being aware of objects as having certain properties.⁷⁵ One might conceive of coffee *as* having the properties of bitterness and brownness. This conception causes one to form beliefs about the objects being sensed, namely the belief that the object exists and is as one conceives it to be. In summary, an external object causes a physical change in a sense organ, which, due to physiology, causes a sensation in the

mind. This sensation, again due to natural laws, gives rise to a conception of and a belief about the external object. The output of this entire process is called perception.⁷⁶

For Reid, there are two types of perceptions. In original perception, the process of forming a conception and belief about an object is hardwired—any person who runs their hand across a table will naturally perceive it to be hard. In acquired perception, the conception and belief suggested by a sensation is influenced by previous experiences. Neither original nor acquired perception require reasoning, inference or reflection—they are both triggered by natural signs.⁷⁷ This account of perception allows us to establish that we can be directly aware of real objects in the world and come to hold beliefs about them. What it does not appear to do is guarantee the reliability of those perceptions or the beliefs that arise from them. In order to gain some confidence in our perceptions, we must examine Reid's reply to the theory of representationalism.

The theory of representationalism was so widely accepted by the philosophical tradition that Reid pointed out that no one had ever seemed to believe it needed to be proven⁷⁸. Reid does not see any way that a representationalist view can get us from knowledge of ideas to the external objects are supposed to represent. He argues that the theory of ideas alone is

sufficient to generate sweeping skepticism, since all arguments that originate in the theory lead to doubt about the extra-mental world.

Reid's theory of perception is anti-skeptical in the sense that it provides a reason to believe that sensations of the external world are valuable, valid sources of knowledge, even though he acknowledges that the beliefs produced from them are sometimes fallible⁷⁹. The reason that we can have confidence in perceptual beliefs formed from our sensations is the same reason we can have confidence in conclusions drawn from the use of reasoning—both are ways by which humans naturally come to believe things about the world, and there is no principled basis to say that one is better than the other. All of our faculties are appointed to us by nature and there is no good reason to say that reason is better than sensation. We are left with three options. We may say that none of our faculties are useful for anything, which is not a good option because we would not be able to trust anything we think or feel. Such an existence would be chaotic and unpleasant, to say the least. We may arbitrarily choose one faculty over the other, but there is no principled basis on which to do so, for both reason and sensation are prone to certain errors. Or we can, as Reid has done, set them upon equal footing and interpret the information we gain from all of them as reliable. Reid's reply to skepticism in the context of his theory of perception provides a basis for the idea that natural signs are a reliable source of information.

Desire as a Natural Sign

Having described what a natural sign is and provided at least a few reasons for why it might be a reasonable source of information, I will now interpret Lewis's argument as an attempt to articulate a natural sign for God. Natural signs for God have a number of characteristics—they are widely available, easily resistible, and are natural. Correspondingly, the beliefs produced by natural signs follow naturally from the sign being perceived and understood. Lewis's experience of desire produced a complicated sense of longing that involved a belief in some transcendent and good being, God. Lewis clearly believes that the desire he centered his argument around was natural and present in all human beings. Augustine and Aquinas have similar ideas with respect to whether or not all human beings desire God. Even those who reject religion testify to the raw power and appeal of the desire for something more. Those who reject religious belief but still feel the force of the desire for the transcendent illustrate the potential truth of the Pascalian constraints. That they feel the force of the signs demonstrates the wide accessibility principle. That they did not as a consequence form a religious belief displays the reasonableness of the easy resistibility principle.

Augustine's restless heart is a manifestation of the same sign of desire. Our hearts will stir uneasily inside of us, until we find that one thing that can

quiet them. Experiences of Joy are moments that still the heart and give us pause in a way that few other things do. In this context, the function of this sign of desire, manifested by a deep internal restlessness, is to awaken the “memory” of what we truly are—creatures of God and prompt us to seek him. Aquinas spoke of a natural desire to see God, and said that we are not content in our knowledge until we know the first cause of all things, which is God. Even Aristotle noted that we are made with a desire to achieve a state beyond what we can achieve on our own. The reason why the sign points to God and not something else is that God is the only thing that can satisfy the desire that seems to be so clearly present in us. The desire for the transcendent seems to fit the criteria to be considered a natural sign.

Why Natural Sign Theory Matters

If the natural signs approach is true, then it explains why arguments such as the argument from desire endure and continue to be compelling for many people. What a natural sign ultimately does is provoke us to think and feel about the world in new ways that may well ultimately lead us to God.

Natural signs also give our experiences of the created world meaning. The experience of desire is elicited by our interactions with and experiences of created objects, and perhaps from this we can gain a sense of the reality that exists in a deeper way than the things we experience. By having the experience of

desire and coming to understand that the world will not satisfy it, we are pointed toward the pursuit of other-worldly things. What we learn through the sign of desire is that there is something that can satisfy us completely, and it is not of this world. It is something transcendently wonderful—it is God.

Even though natural signs are resistible and defeasible, their power is still accessible to non-believers. This seems to be especially true of the sign of desire. Many of the books we read, the shows we watch on television and the movies we go to see involve characters who are searching for fulfillment, although God is usually not the answer they seek. Even so, the examples we can find in media and entertainment show us that the sign of desire seems to be quite well recognized. Many feel its force, even if they do not carry their feelings all the way to believing in God as a result of encountering the sign. Their reasons for not believing in God are too numerous to overcome, due to cultural conditioning and other factors. If natural signs are pointers towards God, they may count as a kind of possible evidence for God's reality, simply in a non-coercive way.

Objections to Natural Sign Theology

I will now address a few objections to natural sign theology. A Kantian view of experience would lead one to reject natural signs theology.⁸⁰ An implication of this view is that we would have to say that knowing that natural signs are connected with God implies that we have experience of both God and

the sign. To know that A is a sign for B, I must have experience of both A and B to establish that they are connected, and for Kant, human experience is limited in such a way that we can never have experience of God. Because of this, it does not seem that we could ever know that God and natural signs are connected through our experiences.

One way to challenge this objection is to expand the notion of what it means to experience God. Although we can never experience God, it seems that we can experience things by which God might be understood. Evans also points out that the Kantian objection misunderstands the nature of the natural sign.⁸¹ Not all Reidean natural signs require previous experience of the sign and the thing signified because they are original. Such signs provide a way of knowing things that would not be knowable otherwise, such as the ideas that there are external objects and other minds. If we do not trust this basic knowledge, the only approach we can have to the world is a kind of extraordinarily impractical skepticism. Evans expands this to theistic natural signs, saying that they may also be original in nature, and in that case they would provide non-inferential knowledge of God. Thus, the Kantian objection would not apply.

Another objection can be made by noting that while theistic natural signs are modeled after Reidean natural signs, they have a few differences that seem problematic. Original Reidean natural signs are universal and completely

irresistible. The universality of Reidean signs is perhaps a reason to trust them, and given that theistic natural signs are not only non-universal but far more resistible, one might wonder what good reason there is to trust them. The belief that a table exists because we are touching it is far less malleable than the idea that the experience of desire for more points to God's reality. One way to defend the reasonability of theistic natural signs is to point to Pascalian constraints upon them—wide accessibility and easy resistibility.

Religious belief is very widespread and has been throughout human history. The universality of religious beliefs leads cognitive scientists to conclude that belief in God or gods are the result of natural predispositions to form such beliefs.⁸² Some say that this predisposition amounts to little more than a natural illusion that for some evolutionary reason or other is beneficial. One might then press the point—if belief has persisted for evolutionary reasons, that means it is at least useful.⁸³ If it is useful, it might be true as well. The fact that we might be able to trace an evolutionary or scientific mechanism for why religion exists is not a sufficient basis to reject natural sign theory. In fact, sign theory predicts that we might find other ways to explain the experiences that sometimes lead to formation of religious belief. The simple fact that religious belief may have some biological basis does not seem rule it out as meaningless.

Another objection to sign theory is that it is simply too convenient, particularly with respect to the Pascalian constraint of easy resistibility. When the wide availability principle is challenged, the easy resistibility principle may be considered by some as an easy sidestep to address that objection. John Schellenberg believes that if there were a God, he would be less hidden. If Christianity were true, he believes, reasonable non-belief would not be possible, and any evidence of God would be so strong as to naturally, universally produce religious belief. This is, of course, not the case. Of course, this is not the case—many people reject religious belief on very sound logical grounds.

Schellenberg holds that a loving God would make his presence obvious to all. Schellenberg has a lot of concerns about what a loving God would do, and Evans points out that they seem to be grounded in what we would expect a loving human being with God's particular set of powers would do.⁸⁴ Given what Christianity claims about God, it is reasonable to say that divine motivation not only often differs from human motivation to act, but is often undecipherable to human beings in some respects. Since we are not God, we cannot know how God would interact with human beings. Even so, we can still know something about what divine love must be like—it must resemble our human loves in some ways, even if our interpretations about it are oftentimes flawed.⁸⁵ God desires that human beings be in relationship with him, and it is very important that that

relationship be entered into fully, willingly, and enjoyed. God could have created human beings to be completely finished, virtuous human beings, but it is quite clear that each person is an unfolding story. What this seems to suggest is that there is something more valuable about human beings developing themselves and developing a relationship with God in spite of whatever mistakes we might make as we try to do so than a relationship formed without any such struggles. Although it might be easy to resist developing any kind of relationship with God, there is something ultimately valuable about turning to God out of our free will. This might provide an answer to Schellenberg's objection concerning the resistible nature of religious belief.

Conclusion

There seems to be a good case that theistic natural signs make natural knowledge of God apart from rational inquiry more likely. Arguments based in natural signs tend to be easily defeasible, and natural sign theory gives us good reason to believe that they should be. Theistic natural signs are modeled on Reidean natural signs, and the most important feature of the Reidean sign is that it provides a basic way of knowing the world, i.e., that knowledge is possible independent of any argument or inference.⁸⁶ If Reidean signs are a reliable way of knowing then they can be described as evidence, albeit not in the sense of being conclusive, irresistible proof for something. Such signs constitute non-

propositional evidence in that signs are things people become aware of or can become aware of that makes certain truths evident to them. Or, if we want to avoid the question of signs as evidence, we can consider whether or not theistic natural signs make belief in God more warranted. It seems to be the case that they do.

An added benefit of natural sign theology is that it explains why our subjective experiences matter as a source of information about the world. Taken with other grounds for belief and a desire to do so, natural signs can bolster a belief in God. At the very least, they help point us to the deeper mysteries of the world and provoke us to think about them in very meaningful, real ways.

In this thesis, I have described an experience of desire for the transcendent, and shown how C.S. Lewis articulated an argument from this desire to God's existence. Although arguments like the argument from desire are extraordinarily compelling, they tend not to convince anyone who does not already believe in the conclusion. That does not mean that this argument is meaningless; rather, there is a better way to interpret the experience at the heart of the argument—as a natural sign. In doing so, we can learn something about God's character, namely, that we are drawn to seek a relationship with him, and by doing so, we can find happiness more full than anything we can discover on our own.

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