

C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy

Dr. Michael Gleghorn asks, What if nothing in this world can satisfy our desire because the object of our desire is other-worldly?

The Riddle of Joy

Over forty years after his death, the writings of C. S. Lewis continue to be read, discussed, and studied by millions of adoring fans. There seems to be something in Lewis that appeals to almost everyone. He is read by men and women, adults and children, Protestants and Catholics, scholars and laymen. A new movie, based on his best-selling children's classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is expected to be a mega-hit in theatres.^{1} It's difficult to think of another writer who is read (and appreciated) by such a broad spectrum of humanity as C. S. Lewis.

But what accounts for this broad, popular appeal? Doubtless many reasons could be given. Lewis wrote on such a wide variety of topics, in such a diversity of literary genres and styles, that almost anyone can find pleasure in something he wrote. Further, he wrote for a general audience. Even when he's discussing very heady philosophical and theological topics, he remains quite accessible to the intelligent layman who wants to understand. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Peter Kreeft, who notes that while "many virtues grace Lewis's work . . . the one that lifts him above any other apologetical writer . . . is how powerfully he writes about Joy."^{2}

Now it's important to understand that when Lewis writes of Joy, he's using this term in a very particular way. He's not just speaking about a general sort of happiness, or joyful thoughts or feelings. Rather, he's speaking about a desire,

but a very unique and special kind of desire. In *Surprised by Joy*, his spiritual autobiography, Lewis describes it as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”{3}

But *what* did he desire? The question haunted Lewis for years. What *was* it that he wanted? Through trial and error he came to realize that he didn’t simply want a *feeling*, a subjective, inner experience of some kind. Indeed, he later said that “all images and sensations, if idolatrously mistaken for Joy itself, soon confessed themselves inadequate. . . . Inexorably Joy proclaimed, ‘You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not you or any state of you.’”{4}

In an attempt to find the mysterious object of his desire, Lewis plunged himself into various pursuits and pleasures. But *nothing* in his experience could satisfy this desire. Ironically, these failures suggested a possible solution to Lewis. What if nothing in this world could satisfy his desire because the *object* of his desire was *other-worldly*? A radical proposal, and we turn to it now.

The Argument from Desire

What was Lewis to make of this rather mysterious, intense, and recurrent desire that nothing in the world could satisfy? Did the desire have any *real* significance? Did anything *actually* exist that could satisfy this desire? Or was the whole thing just a lot of moonshine? Although this question haunted Lewis for years and took him down many dead-end streets in pursuit of the mysterious object of his desire, he eventually came to believe that he had discovered the answer.

In *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, he wrote of his remarkable solution to the riddle of Joy—the desire we are now considering—as follows:

It appeared to me . . . that if a man diligently followed

this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. 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.{5}

In other words, Lewis reasoned from this intense desire, which nothing in the world could satisfy, to an object of desire that transcended the world. He gradually became convinced that this Supreme Object of human desire is God and heaven!

Following Peter Kreeft, we can formulate the argument as follows:{6}

- 1. Every natural or innate desire we experience has a corresponding real object that can satisfy the desire.*
- 2. We experience an innate desire which nothing in this world can satisfy.*
- 3. Therefore, there must be a real object that transcends the world which can satisfy this desire.*

Now this is a valid argument in which the conclusion follows logically from the premises. So if someone wants to challenge the argument's conclusion, they must first challenge one of its premises. And, as I'm sure you can imagine, the argument has certainly had its detractors. But what sort of objections have they raised? Have they shown the argument to be unsound? And how have Lewis's defenders responded to their objections? We'll now turn to consider some of these questions.

Thus, it's important to understand that Lewis is *not* arguing

that *all* our desires have real objects of satisfaction. He's claiming only that all our *natural* and *innate* desires do. Having clarified this issue, we'll return to consider objections to this first premise in a moment.

But first, what if someone objects to Lewis's second premise, namely, that *we have an innate desire which nothing in the world can satisfy?*^{10} For example, what if someone admitted that they were not perfectly satisfied now, but believed they would be if only they had the best of everything money can buy? Well, unfortunately this experiment has already been tried—and has repeatedly failed. Just think of all the people who are very wealthy, but still not perfectly satisfied. Indeed, some of them are downright miserable!

But what if one of them isn't? What if someone claimed that he is perfectly satisfied right now? Admittedly, we can't really argue with such a person. We can only ask him to be honest—if not with us, at least with himself. Even so, however, this would not necessarily show that Lewis's argument is false. It may only show that the person who makes such a claim is somehow defective, like a colorblind person claiming that there is no such thing as color. If most people *experience an innate desire which nothing in the world can satisfy*, then Lewis's conclusion may still follow. But before we can be sure, we must first revisit that problematic first premise.

You'll remember that Lewis argued that *every natural or innate desire* (like our desire for food, drink, or friendship) *has a corresponding object that can satisfy the desire*. Thus, there really *are* such things as food, drink, and friends. There seems to be a correlation between our *natural* desires and objects that can satisfy them.

But there's a problem. As John Beversluis observed:

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.[{11}](#)

In other words, why think that every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it? Such questions appear to raise difficulties for Lewis's argument. So how have Lewis's supporters responded?

Peter Kreeft has written:

[T]he proposition "every natural, innate desire has a real object" is understood to be true because nature does nothing in vain, and this . . . is seen to be true by understanding the concept expressed in . . . the word "nature." Nature is meaningful . . . full of design and purpose . . . arranging a fit between organism and environment . . . desire and satisfaction . . .[{12}](#)

The Value of the Argument

In order to effectively reason from a deep, unsatisfied natural desire that nothing in the world can satisfy, to something beyond the world which can satisfy it, one must first know, or at least have good reason to believe, that *all* our natural desires *have* real objects of satisfaction. If they don't, then maybe there's just *not* any object that can satisfy the desire we're considering.

Now, of course, someone might well say, "Look, if all the natural desires we can check on, like our desires for food, drink, sex, and knowledge, have real sources of satisfaction, then wouldn't it be reasonable to infer that in the case of this one mysterious desire, which nothing in the world can satisfy, that there's also a real source of satisfaction?" Well, yes, I think this would be quite reasonable. Of course, the conclusion is only *probable*, not *necessary*. But in some

places this is all Lewis himself claimed. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote:

The Christian says: Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists . . . 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.{13}

Now this is an interesting argument and it may suggest an additional premise which has been assumed, but not directly stated. For *why* does the Christian say that creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists? Isn't it because we believe that there's a benevolent Creator and Designer of the natural world and its creatures? And if this is true, then it seems quite plausible that things have been intentionally *designed* so that there's a match between our natural desires and sources of satisfaction. And actually, there are very good reasons, completely independent of Lewis's argument, for believing that a Creator and Designer of nature *does* exist!

So it seems that the primary value of Lewis's argument may lie in showing us that it's reasonable to believe that our Creator and Designer is also the Supreme Object of our desire. And this resonates quite well with the oft-quoted words of Augustine, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." {14}

Notes

1. The film is scheduled to be released December 9, 2005.
2. Peter J. Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," in *G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis: The Riddle of Joy*, eds. Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 256.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1955), 17-18, cited in Kreeft, 253.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 220-21, cited in Kreeft, 253.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, (U.S.A.: Eerdmans, 1992), 204-05.
6. Kreeft, 250.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. For Kreeft's discussion see "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 267.
11. John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985), 19, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 267.
12. Kreeft, 269.
13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 254 (emphasis mine).
14. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1:1, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 263.

© 2005 Probe Ministries

The Need to Read: G. K. Chesterton

Continuing in '[The Need to Read](#)' series, Todd Kappelman examines the writings of G.K. Chesterton, a writer admired by both C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer.

A Christian for the Twentieth Century

This article is another installment in our continuing *Need to Read* series. The purpose of the series is to introduce people

to authors they might enjoy and to offer some help by way of navigating through the themes developed in the works written by these individuals. It is regrettable that many people who enjoy C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer neglect the writings of Gilbert Keith, or G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), a man who was admired by both Lewis and Schaeffer. George Bernard Shaw called him a “colossal genius” and Pope Pius XI called him “a devoted son of the Holy Church and a gifted defender of the faith.”[\[1\]](#)

Until his death at the age of seventy-two, Chesterton was a dominant figure in England and a staunch defender of the faith, and Christian orthodoxy, as well as an enthusiastic member of the Roman Catholic church. In addition to nearly one hundred books, he wrote for over seventy-five British periodicals and fifty American publications. He wrote literary criticism, religious and philosophical argumentation, biographies, plays, poetry, nonsense verse, detective stories, novels, short stories, and economic, political, and social commentaries.[\[2\]](#)

An excellent introduction to Chesterton can be found in a book titled *Orthodoxy*, published in the United States in 1908, and affectionately dedicated to his mother. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton gives an apologetic defense of his Christian faith. He believed this defense was necessary to answer some of the criticism directed at his previous book, *Heretics*.[\[3\]](#)

Before Schaeffer wrote *Escape From Reason*, Chesterton titled the third chapter of *Orthodoxy* “The Suicide of Thought,” a chronicle of the demise of modern man.

Chesterton believed that what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. “Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled on the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does

assert, is exactly the part he ought to doubt³himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason.”{4}

Chesterton believed that man’s autonomy had been elevated beyond the reason of God; each individual has become his or her own master. The sages can see no answer to the problem of religion, but that is not the trouble with modern sages. Modern man, and his sages, said Chesterton, cannot even see the riddle.

Modern men, he believed, had become like small children who are so stupid that they do not even object to obvious philosophical contradictions.{5} Chesterton, like C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer after him, understood that religion in the twentieth century would become very philosophical even for the average man. Chesterton reminds us that Christians would be living in a time when many of their friends, family, and neighbors, as well as their co-workers and spouses, would no longer be living as though man had to be reasonable. Later Francis Schaffer would call this same cultural phenomenon the age of *non-reason*.

Chesterton was very proud of being a Roman Catholic, and frequently defended his denomination as much as he did the faith in general. He was a Roman Catholic who was also deeply concerned about the universal church and will probably be enjoyed by most people who like C. S. Lewis and a “Mere Christianity” type of approach to the faith.

Chesterton and a Reasonable Christianity

In his book *The Everlasting Man* one can find the mature Chesterton. It was written in 1925 just three years after the Roman Catholic church had received him at the age of almost fifty. In this book Chesterton employs a style of argumentation called the *reductio ad absurdum*.{6} He assumes some of the claims of rationalists and agnostics to show the

absurdity of their point of view. He begins with a demonstration that if man is treated as a mere animal the result would not only be ridiculous, but the world would not exist in its present state. Men do not really act as though there is nothing special and significant about human beings. They act as though man is unique and that he is the most superior and crowning achievement in the known universe.

In a section titled "The Riddles of the Gospel" Chesterton attempts to show what it would be like if an individual were to approach the Gospels and really confront the Christ of history who is presented there. He would not find a Christ who looks like other moral teachers. The Christ presented in the New Testament is not dull or insipid, He is dynamic and unparalleled in history. The Christ of the Gospels is full of perplexities and paradoxes.

The *freethinker* and many nonbelievers, said Chesterton, object to the apparent contradictions found in the Bible, especially as it pertains to Christ. Jesus admonished His followers to turn the other cheek and take no thought for tomorrow. However, He did not turn the other cheek with respect to the money changers in the Temple and was constantly warning people to prepare for the future. Likewise, Christ's view of the marriage bond is unique and unparalleled in history. Jews, Romans, and Greeks did not believe or even understand enough to disbelieve the mystical idea that the man and the woman had become one sacramental substance in the matrimonial union.[\[7\]](#) Christ's view of marriage is neither a product of His culture or even a logical development from the time period. It is an utterly strange and wonderful teaching which bears the stigma of being from another world.

Before C. S. Lewis had formulated his observations that Christ is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord, Chesterton had laid out the very same problem. The Christ of the New Testament, said Chesterton, is not a mere mythical figure. He cannot be merely another ethical teacher or even a good man; these options are

not open to anyone who would honestly consider the Christ who is encountered in the Scriptures. The question remains, Who is Christ?

In *The Everlasting Man* Chesterton maintains that each of the aforementioned explanations are singularly inadequate. The belief that Christ was a delusional lunatic, or even a good teacher, suggests something of the mystery which they miss.^[8] There must be something to a person who is so mysterious and confusing that he has inspired as much controversy as Christ.

Christ is who He said He was and is infinitely more mysterious than the finite human mind can fully comprehend. In his writings G. K. Chesterton demonstrates that he is a Christian writer who possessed those rare and necessary gifts which allow difficult theological and philosophical problems to be understood and discussed by the average man.

Chesterton's Reflections on America

Chesterton's writings cover theological, philosophical, social, political, and economic trends simultaneously with particular attention to a Christian worldview. In the two works *What I Saw In America* and *Sidelights*, Chesterton offers the reader his reflections on America during the early part of the twentieth century.

On January 10, 1921 Chesterton and his wife Frances began a three month tour of America. Their first stop was in New York City. Here Chesterton examined the lights of Broadway and proclaimed: "What a glorious garden of wonders this would be to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read."^[9] This begins the great man's observations and impressions of the New World, skyscrapers, rural America, Washington politics, and the nation's spiritual condition.

Some of the central themes that emerge in *Sidelights*, and especially in *What I Saw In America*, are Chesterton's views of

the effects of rationalism, commercialism, and the general spiritual poverty of many Americans. Although he is painting with extremely large brush strokes, there is much that can be learned about who we were at the early part of the twentieth century and how we became what we are today.

Chesterton was able to see both sides of the American experiment: the dream as well as the nightmare. He appears to dwell on the down side to balance the kind of utopian optimism that frequently blinds Americans to the true realities of their living conditions. Chesterton said that his first impression of America was of something enormous and rather unnatural, and was tempered gradually by his experience of kindness among the people. Additionally, and with all sincerity, he added that there was something unearthly about the vast system which seemed to be a kind of wandering in search of an ideal utopia of the future. He said "the march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. [T]he latest modern sensation is a book," referring here to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, "written to show how wretched it is to live there."[\[10\]](#)

Chesterton thought about America frequently and she would be one of his favorite subjects for almost twenty-five years after his first visit. His frequent discussion about drinking and smoking may strike many readers as peripheral, a kind of antiquated masculine fun. But these matters were crucial to Chesterton's view of a complete life and for him represented a misguided moralism in the United States. The puritanical incongruity of Americans would serve Chesterton as a point of departure for all of his thinking about the New World.

Chesterton was an Englishman and is in a position to offer criticism from the point of view of a foreigner without the difficulties of a language barrier. Although he understood that his native England and Europe at large were going through the same philosophical and social changes, it is the speed at

which America was rushing to embrace all things new that alarmed him. In *What I Saw in America* one will really discover what Chesterton found alarming and dangerous about our country in the early twentieth century.

Chesterton was confronted with prohibition on both of his trips to America and was deeply concerned with its effects on both Christian and secular aspects of society. He never tired of the extended metaphor of prohibition as the condition of religion in the United States. Making a comparison between the Carrie Nation style of saloon smashing prohibition and the Nonconformists in his native England, Chesterton believed that both groups suffered from an astoundingly fixed and immovable notion of the nature of Christianity.{11}

Chesterton saw in this legalistic stance toward liquor an indicator of what was truly wrong Protestant religion in America. He said it is a pretty safe bet that if any popular American author has mentioned religion and morality at the beginning of a paragraph, he will at least mention liquor before the end of it. To men of different creeds and cultures the whole idea would be staggering.{12} The natural result was that the man on the street frequently equated Christianity with a strong stance against drinking, smoking, and gambling. As a consequence, salvation has as much to do with abstinence as it does with regeneration.

The Victorian hypocrisy was that there were family prayers and the form of religion, but only so far as it was a cover-up for an anti-traditionalist mentality. The average Christian, believed Chesterton, was professing his religion on the one hand and embracing a pervasive and destructive industrial commercialism on the other.{13} The astute observation of Chesterton was of a man witnessing a strange new phenomenon, Christians reconciling their prosperity with their faith.

In spite of a Great Depression, one World War that would soon lead to another, and numerous social injustices, the twentieth

century in the early thirties was still a time when personal ownership of cars, regular vacations, and numerous other opportunities were increasingly available to more Americans. This was the true formation of the American dream, and it would be closely tied to materialism in the most crass form.

Chesterton was vindicated in his harsh observations about America on several fronts. First, there was then and still remains a large segment of the Christian population that believes Christian faith to be little more than a list of prohibitions. It is not that there are not things Christians should and should not participate in, rather it is the stifling of the Christian imagination with respect to the many ways which faith can manifest itself. For Chesterton the belief that good Christians do not drink would be tantamount to saying that one must wear a tie on Sunday morning to be in good standing in the faith. In the same way that some consider the latter statement to be ridiculous it was puzzling to Chesterton, as well as C. S. Lewis, why some American Christians failed to recognize the same in the former statement.

As for the American dream, Chesterton's words are still a sober warning for the unique way in which Americans, both Christian and non-Christian, have largely become a nation of consumers. We may read his words during the early part of the twentieth century as warnings not to repeat the same mistakes now.

The Unreasonableness of Modern Man

Chesterton was a prolific journalist whose books and contributions to over one hundred American and British journals and periodicals continue to be read by Christians throughout the world. The need to return to this seminal thinker can be seen in the relevance some of his shorter works still have today.

In the *T. P. Weekly* in 1910, Chesterton wrote a small piece titled *What is Right with the World?* In it he acknowledges the fact that the world does not appear to be getting very much better in any vital aspects and that this fact could hardly be disputed.[\[14\]](#) However, Chesterton does not leave the reader with the pessimistic observation that the world is not a very nice place. He adds that the only thing that is right with the world is the world itself. Existence itself as well as man and woman are right inasmuch as they were created right. The fact that so much is wrong did not distress Chesterton; it was merely an occasion

to demonstrate that the world bears the stigma of having been good at one time and now being evil. The blackness of the world, said Chesterton, is not so black if we recognize how and why things are like they are.

At one point in a work titled *The Common Man* Chesterton attempts to show why it is necessary for every individual to have a philosophy. The best reason being that certain horrible things will happen to anyone who does not possess some kind of coherent worldview.[\[15\]](#) Sounding very much like a contemporary Christian apologist, Chesterton said that a man without a philosophy would be doomed to live on the used-up scraps of other men's thought systems.[\[16\]](#)

Chesterton continues to challenge the idea that philosophy is for the few, arguing that most of our modern evils are the result of the want of a good philosophy. Philosophy, he said, was merely thought which had been thoroughly thought through. All men test everything by something. The question is whether the test has ever been tested.[\[17\]](#) One can see in Chesterton the same vigorous call to reflective thinking that Francis Schaffer used fifty years later to call an entire generation of Christians to become more philosophic and begin engaging the culture at a more substantive level.

We have been attempting to make a case for the need to read G.

K. Chesterton's works, and have urged those who enjoy C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, or Peter Kreeft to give Chesterton a look. In closing, Chesterton's poem *The Happy Man* from his book *The Wild Night* will serve as a conclusion.

To teach the grey earth like a child,
To bid the heavens repent,
I only ask from Fate the gift
Of one man well content.
Him will I find: though when in vain
I search the feast and mart,
The fading flowers of liberty,
The painted masks of art.
I only find him as the last,
On one old hill where nod
Golgotha's ghastly trinity—
Three persons and one God.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy*, by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.
2. Hosea 4:6.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.
4. Ibid., 196.
5. Ibid., 217-224.
6. Ibid., 225-236.
7. Ibid., 261-270.
8. Ibid., 207-208.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.
10. Ibid., 275-290.
11. Ibid., 291-302.
12. Ibid., 211.

©2000 Probe Ministries.