

Introduction: The Hiddenness of God

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Many people are perplexed, even troubled, by the fact that God (if such there be) has not made His existence sufficiently clear. This fact – the fact of divine hiddenness – is a source of existential concern for many people. That is, it raises problems about their very existence, particularly its value and purpose. The fact of divine hiddenness is also, according to some people, a source of good evidence against the existence of God. That is, it allegedly poses a cognitive problem for theism, in the form of evidence challenging the assumption that God exists. (Here and throughout we speak of “God” as broadly represented in the historic Jewish and Christian theistic traditions.)

1. Existential Concern

The existential problem often takes the form of a crisis of faith, sometimes leading to a collapse of trust in God. Jewish and Christian theists have committed themselves to the God who, they believe, loves them perfectly. They expect to find their greatest good, their ultimate fulfillment, in personal and social relationship with God. In the Jewish tradition, this general idea finds elaboration in God’s entering into a covenant relationship with the people of Israel, who are to respond to God in faithful obedience. In the Christian tradition, the idea sometimes takes a more individualistic turn. To be sure, God enters into covenant relationship with a “people” – namely, the Church inaugurated by Jesus Christ – but Christians often emphasize the importance of each person’s entering into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. There are, of course, differences in interpretation and emphasis between and within the distinctive traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Nonetheless, the general initial expectation remains the same: God’s reality, including His love for people, will be made sufficiently well known precisely because He loves them, and their flourishing as persons created in the image of God depends on their relationship with Him.

The potential for crisis arises here. Jewish and Christian theists believe that their flourishing as persons depends on their being in a personal and social relationship with God. For many such theists, however, there is no such

discernible relationship. God is hidden, if not in fact at least in their experience. Perhaps their existence has no personal guidance from God after all. Perhaps their lives simply blow with the winds of an impersonal nature. If God exists, God seems not to care for them. God seems too hidden to care at all. So the world appears as an uncaring, inhospitable place. Despair over life itself is, then, a natural result of divine hiddenness.

The Hebrew psalmists lament as follows:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . . I cry by day, but you do not answer. . . . (Psalm 22:1–2, NRSV)

But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me? (Psalm 88:13–14, NRSV)

Psalm 10 complains about God's hiding, as follows: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalm 10:1, NRSV; cf. Job 13:24). Psalm 30 laments God's hiding after a time when the psalmist had confident security. "When I felt secure, I said, 'I will never be shaken.' O Lord, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed" (Psalm 30:7, NIV; cf. Psalm 104:27–29). Psalm 44 expresses outright annoyance at God's hiding, suggesting that God's hiding is actually morally irresponsible. "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" (Psalm 44:23–24, NRSV).

The subject of God's hiding is no merely theoretical matter in the Hebrew Psalms. It cuts to the core of the psalmists' understanding of God and of themselves. Thus at times it prompts sincere lament from God's people. Isaiah 45:15 likewise sums up a central Jewish view of God: "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior." God's hiding is sometimes a response to human disobedience and moral indifference toward God (Deuteronomy 31:16–19, 32:19–20; Psalm 89:46; Isaiah 59:2; Micah 3:4), but this is not the full story behind divine hiding. The Jewish-Christian God hides at times for a range of reasons, not all of which seem clear to humans.

Saint Anselm, eleventh-century archbishop of Canterbury and author of the famous ontological argument for God's existence, complains to God as follows:

I have never seen thee, O Lord my God; I do not know thy form. What, O most high Lord, shall this man do, an exile far from thee? What shall thy servant do, anxious in his love of thee, and cast out afar from thy face? He pants to see thee, and thy face is too far from him. He longs to come to thee, and thy dwelling place is inaccessible. He is eager to find thee, and knows not thy place. He desires to seek thee, and does not know thy face. Lord, thou art my God, and thou art my Lord, yet never have I seen thee. It is thou that hast made me, and hast made me anew, and hast bestowed upon

me all the blessings I enjoy; and not yet do I know thee. Finally, I was created to see thee and not yet have I done that for which I was made.

Anselm continues:

Why did he shut us away from the light, and cover us over with darkness? . . . From a native country into exile, from the vision of God into our present blindness, from the joy of immortality into the bitterness and horror of death. Miserable exchange of how great a good, for how great an evil! Heavy loss, heavy grief, heavy all our fate! (*Proslogion*, sect. 1)¹

Anselm believes he gets a divine answer to his prayer of complaint: the famous ontological argument! Even if it is a sound proof, however, it is a far cry from the explicit personal love from God for which he longs. It is as though panting for water he receives a stone.

For many theists, the sense of God's hiding is no fleeting affair. Even devout mystics of Jewish and Christian persuasions languish in what Saint John of the Cross (d. 1591) called "the dark night" of the soul. In a similar vein, many post-Holocaust Jewish writers speak intensely of "the silence of God," something their biblical ancestors experienced painfully. (See, for example, the Hebrew prophetic literature, particularly Isaiah, on divine elusiveness.) For many Christians, the difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that their Lord has promised, "Seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7). Having sought and knocked (and knocked again and again), they still fail to find, and no one answers the door for them. Resisting the natural slide into despair, priests and pastors counsel, "The Lord did indeed promise us, *but* we must. . . ." Well-intentioned counselors promptly fill in the blank with various provisos: For example, we must wait patiently, or we must be more attentive in a certain manner, or we must change certain questionable conduct. Even so, attempts to fill in the blank often seem lame, if not contrived. Sometimes they lead to further frustration and, eventually, to bitterness and despair. Trust in God then crumbles, along with any hope anchored in God's providence. Giving up the struggle to trust the hidden God often seems the only reasonable option as well as the only avenue to psychological well-being. Hence, even devout theists can face an existential crisis from divine hiddenness.

2. Evidence Against God's Existence?

Many nontheists regard the hiddenness of God as salient evidence that the Jewish-Christian God does not actually exist. Friedrich Nietzsche considered the matter in the following light:

A god who is all-knowing and all-powerful and who does not even make sure his creatures understand his intentions – could that be a god of goodness? Who allows

countless doubts and dubieties to persist, for thousands of years, as though the salvation of mankind were unaffected by them, and who on the other hand holds out frightful consequences if any mistake is made as to the nature of truth? Would he not be a cruel god if he possessed the truth and could behold mankind miserably tormenting itself over the truth? . . . All religions exhibit traces of the fact that they owe their origin to an early, immature intellectuality in man – they all take astonishingly lightly the duty to tell the truth: they as yet know nothing of a Duty of God to be truthful towards mankind and clear in the manner of his communications.²

Divine hiddenness, Nietzsche suggests, warrants the conclusion that theistic religion arises from an “immature intellectuality” in people. In addition, his opening rhetorical questions in the quotation suggest that, given the reality of divine hiddenness, God could not be good. So it follows from the reality of divine hiddenness, according to Nietzsche, that the perfectly good God of Jewish-Christian theism does not exist. We thus have an inference from divine hiddenness to atheism about the Jewish-Christian God.

A recent, detailed defense of atheism on the basis of divine hiddenness is J. L. Schellenberg’s *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993). His core argument is straightforward. If there were a perfectly loving God, He would see to it that each person capable of a personal relationship with Him reasonably believes that He exists, unless a person culpably lacks such belief. But there are capable, inculpable nonbelievers. Therefore, there is no perfectly loving God.

Schellenberg does not demand an undeniable proof that God exists. His demand is more lenient:

the reasons for Divine self-disclosure suggested by reflection on the nature of love are not reasons for God to provide us with some incontrovertible proof or overwhelm us with a display of Divine glory. Rather, what a loving God has reason to do is provide us with evidence sufficient for belief. One of the consequences of this is that moral freedom . . . need not be infringed in order for God to be disclosed in the relevant sense.³

The demand, then, is that a perfectly loving God provide evidence that removes reasonable nonbelief toward God’s reality. This is not a demand for either a compelling proof or a disarming sign of God’s existence. Assuming that reasonable nonbelief persists, Schellenberg concludes that a perfectly loving God does not exist. Allegedly, then, divine hiddenness underwrites atheism about the God of Jewish-Christian theism. Some nontheists would stop short of atheism and recommend agnosticism on the basis of divine hiddenness. This, of course, would be no real consolation for theists. On either option, atheism or agnosticism, their theism is under cognitive stress owing to divine hiddenness.

The constellation of attitudes, passions, and actions comprising the existential problem of hiddenness differs from the ingredients of the cognitive problem. The existential problem calls for the sort of expertise found in a

skilled and experienced pastor, priest, or spiritual director, one well-acquainted with the turbulent ups and downs of the spiritual life. The cognitive problem calls for the sort of expertise one finds in a skilled and knowledgeable philosopher or theologian, one acquainted with the complex ins and outs of assessing evidence and implications. While recognizing the difference between these two problems, we also acknowledge that they often come together in the life of a single individual. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what it would be like for one to feel frustrated in one's attempt to find God unless one expected certain things of Him and reflected on the reasonableness and implications of those expectations. Those expectations are the main premises of arguments against theism from divine hiddenness, and those reflections are implicit assessments of those arguments. Hence, the existential problem seems naturally rooted in the cognitive problem. This book focuses largely on the cognitive problem.

The cognitive problem prompts examination of whether a certain sort of argument against theism succeeds. It is sometimes helpful to describe the allegedly problematic phenomenon – divine hiddenness – in terms that do not presuppose the existence of God. Talk of “inculpable nonbelief,” for example, is useful at times. The idea is that there are people who lack belief that God exists and do so through no fault of their own. It is perhaps noncontroversial that infants and certain mentally impaired adults, for example, fall into this category. Some philosophers contend that a large number of normal adults are included as well. The latter claim is, however, controversial among philosophers of religion. Our talk of “inculpable nonbelief” does not presume that this controversy has been settled.

Several noteworthy themes have emerged in discussion about the argument from divine hiddenness against theism. We mention the following, in no particular order of importance.

1. The cognitive problem of hiddenness has various connections with the more popular, traditional problem of evil. Analogous practical and theoretical problems of evil have emerged. The latter consists of an argument to the effect that the Jewish-Christian God does not exist, since He would not permit any evil and suffering or at least evil and suffering of the sorts, magnitude, and distribution found in our world. Indeed, one might even think of inculpable nonbelief as a certain sort of evil or suffering – a bad state of affairs – that would not exist if there were a loving God. We might, however, distinguish the problem of evil from the problem of divine hiddenness on the ground that we can imagine scenarios in which each might arise even if the other does not. In any case, even if they are logically distinct problems, they resemble each other in certain respects.

For example, the ways to structure an argument against theism from inculpable nonbelief parallel the ways to structure an argument from evil. We commonly distinguish “logical” (“deductive”) arguments from evil from

“evidential” (“inductive,” “probabilistic”) arguments from evil. A logical argument from evil affirms of some known fact about evil that it is incompatible with theism, while an evidential argument does not, either because it affirms that the fact in question is not known but only reasonably believed,⁴ or because it affirms that the fact in question is only improbable given theism, not incompatible with it.⁵ We can easily distinguish arguments from inculpable non-belief along the same lines as well.⁶

Similarly, the ways in which one might respond to an argument against theism from inculpable nonbelief parallel the ways in which one might respond to an argument from evil. Of course, one might respond by accepting the conclusion. If we do not accept the conclusion, however, we shall likely respond in one of several ways.

At one end of the spectrum, we might suggest that the concept of *perfect love* used to get the argument going in the first place must be revised. For example, we might revise this concept in such a way that our expectation of a loving personal relationship with God is refined somehow. (Analogously, some process theologians have revised their expectation of what God can do in terms of eliminating evil by revising their concept of the power of God.) In addition, we might take the argument as an occasion for a more radical reconstruction of our concept of God. For example, we might infer that the assumption of a *personal* God is ultimately at fault. Alternatively, we might say that just as the “grammar of God” (or, perhaps, the nature of God) does not allow for evidence against God, so it does not allow for evidence for Him.

At the other end of the spectrum, we might deny the allegedly troubling phenomenon in question, inculpable nonbelief, just as Augustine denied the real existence of evil. A more familiar kind of response (one that parallels a certain response to arguments from gratuitous evil) would be to hold that God would indeed prevent inculpable nonbelief (as He would gratuitous evil). We thus might contend that since one’s evidence for theism is significantly better than the evidence for inculpable nonbelief (or gratuitous evil, for that matter), there are, contrary to initial appearances, no inculpable nonbelievers (or gratuitous evils). We might thus try to identify a basis for culpable nonbelief in normal adults.

We can see another way in which certain versions of the evidential argument from evil have been connected with divine hiddenness by reflecting on William Rowe’s evidential argument against theism.⁷ Rowe asserts that there is no reason for God to permit certain horrific instances of intense suffering. Defending this assertion, Rowe says that, so far as we can tell, there is no such reason (or at least no reason we know of) that involves a good state of affairs weighty enough to justify permission of those horrors (or one that requires their permission). Rowe’s inference begins with a claim of this form: “*so far as we can tell*, there is no X,” or “there is no X of the sort in question *that we*

know of,” and then moves to “there is no X.” Some such inferences may be reasonable, but only under certain conditions. It is reasonable to draw this sort of inference only if the following proposition is acceptable:

If there were an X, then we would likely know of it.

In that case, Rowe must be assuming that the following proposition is acceptable:

If there were a reason that would justify God’s permission of this or that horror, then we would likely know of it.

One way to know of something is directly: You see it for yourself, or you grasp it mentally as when you apprehend the validity of a simple inference rule, say *modus ponens*. Another way to know of something is indirectly: You see something else and infer from it that the item in question exists, even if you do not see or grasp it directly for yourself. It is difficult to see how to argue plausibly that we would likely know directly of the reason that would justify God’s permission for this or that horror; and there are good reasons to be in doubt about whether we probably would. So, many have inferred, Rowe’s assumption is incorrect. His inference has evidently been defeated.

The previous assessment of Rowe-style inferences is too quick. It does not take into account the likelihood that we would know of God’s reason *indirectly*. This is where divine hiddenness might come into play. It seems that if God’s reason for permitting a person to suffer horrifically is not discerned by that person, God would make it clear to the person that there is such a reason by assuring the person of His own love and care. By analogy, a loving parent would assure a young child of the parent’s love in similar circumstances, especially when the child cannot understand why his or her suffering is being permitted. For many victims of horrific, intense suffering, however, no assurance is forthcoming. God is silent, so to speak. Regardless of whether the latter claims are true, this is one way that divine hiddenness has been linked to the evidential argument from evil.⁸ It allegedly provides a context in which the alleged defeater of Rowe’s inference has no force; or, alternatively, it allegedly provides a reason for thinking that Rowe’s assumption is correct.⁹

2. We have suggested that the argument from divine hiddenness is rooted in our expectations regarding God, specifically how a perfectly loving being would reveal Himself. Different expectations may be motivated by different analogies. People who emphasize that God would do whatever it takes to prevent inculpable nonbelief frequently regard God’s love in analogy with parents who wish to comfort their young children in distress. Others, however, see God’s love in analogy with familiar adult love, where the lover primarily wants certain attitudes and behavior to accompany any reciprocation of love

on the part of the beloved. Any old reciprocation won't do. Those pushing the latter analogy will focus on different kinds of human attitudes and motivations that God, in His unsurpassable love, might wish to promote or to prevent prior to bringing the nonbeliever to belief. On this view, it is not belief that God exists *per se* that is primarily important but rather the attitudes and motivations that accompany belief. On this view, the loving thing for God to do is to bring the nonbeliever to belief in such a way that serves these ulterior divine purposes. If their fulfillment is not in the offing now, God may patiently wait until they are before bringing the nonbeliever to belief.

Another analogy sees God as a benevolent reconstructive surgeon. As such, God will not aim to bring one to belief unless one's volitions are in line with God's purposes in one's believing in the first place. Specifically, God seeks a human's willingness to obey, to serve, and to trust Him, as seems fitting for His being the Lord of all. Mere curiosity, or double-mindedness on the matter of giving oneself humbly and obediently, will not do. Only those prepared to respond appropriately to personal divine revelation are its genuine recipients. For all that, God may well give general revelation sufficient to move people to query about one's relationship with God, but even here volitional matters enter into the picture. The unduly skeptical as well as the modestly indifferent may not appreciate what divine light is given them, owing to their resistance or apathy. Passionate striving and setting aside all else for the pursuit of available divine light are mandatory. God will not trivialize the supreme value of divine light.

In reply, those emphasizing the parent analogy will submit that a perfectly loving God would empathize with the plight of those who seek Him but who, through no fault of their own, come up empty-handed. Would it not be in the very context of an ongoing, developmental relationship with the seeker that God's redemptive purposes are best fulfilled, as in the case of a mother and child? At any rate, we can see that one's operative analogies can make a big difference in what one expects of a perfectly loving being.

3. We have suggested that a response to the argument from inculpable non-belief might deny that God has failed to make Himself sufficiently known. "What do you mean God is hidden? Just look around you and at yourself. What more could you want?" This response might seek inspiration from some biblical sources. "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork," declares the psalmist (Psalm 19:1, NRSV). The apostle Paul remarks: "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20, NRSV). Aside from what the psalmist and Paul actually had in mind (itself a matter of ongoing debate), if God is evident through creation, we need an explanation of why many normal people fail to believe that God exists. Some theists recommend their

theism with arguments to the best explanation that have to do with historical events, like the history of Israel or the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Still others insist that God makes Himself sufficiently well-known through more internal means, such as one's conscience.

If God is sufficiently well-known in any of the ways suggested, we need an explanation of why so many people fail to believe. A traditional answer is that, generally, failure to appreciate the evidence of creation and history or to hear the internal witness of conscience is a consequence of a person's sinfulness.¹⁰ This could be taken as a denial of the premise of the argument from hiddenness implying that some people fail to believe *inculpably*. The thesis would be that every (normal adult) nonbeliever culpably fails to believe. Exactly how sin enters the explanatory picture here will vary, some emphasizing volitional vices, others cognitive. An explanation emphasizing one thing may apply to one person but not to another. In addition, different explanations may apply to the same person at different times, and several explanations may apply to one person at one time. Naturally enough, those who find such explanations unconvincing think charges of culpability are best laid elsewhere.

Another suggestion is that every human being can believe that God exists, by *implicitly* believing in Him, even though one does not know that this is what one is doing. This can be done by pursuing a moral life and thus relating to God by way of relating to His chief attribute, goodness. Alternatively, one can implicitly believe by acting *as one would if* one were explicitly to believe in Him. In these ways, one can enter into a developmental relationship with God that will become more fully realized and explicit in the future.

4. Some people grant that God fails to make Himself sufficiently well-known, and that nonbelief cannot be written off to human sinfulness – nonbelief is at least frequently inculpable. The goal, then, is to explain inculpable nonbelief, the fact that many fail to believe through no fault of their own. The general strategy here is to articulate the benefits of God's causing or permitting inculpable nonbelief, as against the benefits of belief that God exists and the attendant availability of a personal relationship with Him. Variations on this strategy include developing and defending one or more of the following:

- God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief (at least in principle) in order to enable people *freely* to love, trust, and obey Him; otherwise, we would be coerced in a manner incompatible with love.
- God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief (at least in principle) in order to prevent a human response based on improper motives (such as fear of punishment).

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Excerpt

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- God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief because, if He were not hidden, humans would relate to God and to their knowledge of God in presumptuous ways and the possibility of developing the inner attitudes essential to a proper relationship with Him would be ipso facto ruled out.
- God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief because this hiding prompts us to recognize the wretchedness of life on our own, without God, and thereby stimulates us to search for Him contritely and humbly.
- God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief because if He made His existence clear enough to prevent inculpable nonbelief, then the sense of risk required for a passionate faith would be objectionably reduced.
- God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief because if He made His existence clear enough to prevent inculpable nonbelief, temptation to doubt His existence would not be possible, religious diversity would be objectionably reduced, and believers would not have as much opportunity to assist others in starting personal relationships with God.
- Inculpable nonbelievers are either well-disposed to love God upon believing or they are not. The well-disposed either are responsible for being so disposed or not. If not, God lets them confirm their good disposition through choices in the face of contrary temptations before making Himself known. If so, they are well-disposed for unfitting reasons and He waits for them to confirm their good disposition in a purer source before making Himself known. Inculpable nonbelievers who are not well-disposed to love God upon believing and who are not responsible for failing to be well-disposed are given the opportunity by God to change before He makes Himself known.

5. The previous explanations for inculpable nonbelief, among others, will be touched on in the book's essays. One theme that has emerged is that no single explanation may be the whole explanation of divine hiddenness. Different people, given their different stances toward God, might call for different explanations. Moreover, all of the explanations might fail individually for any particular individual and yet, to some extent, apply to a single individual, totaling up to a complete explanation. It thus won't do to object to an explanation that it does not apply to certain kinds of people; nor will it do to object that each explanation fails to apply to each candidate for inculpable nonbelief. An objection to such explanations must invoke something like the claim that they fail, collectively as well as individually, to account for what we take to be, at first glance, inculpable nonbelief. Here a distinctively epistemic problem for the proponent of the argument from hiddenness arises. Human beings are enormously complicated, and it is no easy task to tell whether any particular candidate for inculpable nonbelief possesses or fails to