

Divine Hiddenness in the Christian Tradition

Edgar Danielyan
2015

Divine revelation in the Christian tradition exhibits a degree of hiddenness and epistemological distance that cannot be fully bridged by philosophy understood exclusively as supremacy of human *ratio*. St Paul writes, contrasting the present and the future, as well as the asymmetry of human and divine knowing: 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'¹ While Tertullian's answer to his own rhetorical question about what Athens has to do with Jerusalem² is certainly not the last word on the matter, his views on the relationship of the Judeo-Christian tradition and philosophy are not entirely without foundation in both the Hebrew Bible³ and the New Testament.⁴ Word 'revealed' being antonym of word 'hidden' requires however an explanation of how we are to approach the apparent internal inconsistency of equivalent proposition 'God that is revealed is God that is not revealed'. Given the Jesus narratives of the gospels and the Christian understanding of God as attested by the church tradition divine hiddenness does not come as an unfortunate omission but as an expected even if temporary and experientially very challenging state of affairs that can however be described as a paradox from a narrowly rationalist perspective. Divine hiddenness and divine revelation according to the Christian tradition are however 'finely tuned', to borrow an expression from the fine tuning argument, so that the God that makes himself close to men is still a hidden God as the Catholic Church teaches:

In revealing his mysterious name, YHWH ("I AM HE WHO IS", "I AM WHO AM" or "I AM WHO I AM"), God says who he is and by what name he is to be called. This divine name is mysterious just as God is mystery. It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name, and hence it better expresses God as what he is — infinitely above everything that we can understand or say: he is the "hidden God", his name is ineffable, and he is the God who makes himself close to men.⁵

This hidden God that is revealing Himself in space-time reveals Himself in ways that not only do not remove the mystery of His nature but also affirm and underscore it in the Christian tradition:

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NRSV)

² 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?' in Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, http://www.tertullian.org/works/de_praescriptione_haereticorum.htm [accessed 28 April 2015]

³ Job 5:13-14

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:25, 1 Corinthians 3:19

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church §206, <http://www.catholiccrossreference.com/catechism/#!/search/206> [accessed 14/04/2015]

O *mystery deep, inscrutable*, without beginning, you have adorned your supernal realm as a chamber to the *unapproachable light*. [emphasis added] ⁶

Philosophical consideration of the above however presents us with a situation which has been described by some as leading to an argument against existence of God:

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. ⁷

I follow Howard-Snyder and Moser in differentiating between *existential* and *cognitive* 'problems of hiddenness' and shall only focus on the cognitive aspect for the purposes of this paper ⁸ (hereinafter the 'cognitive problem') and particularly on questioning J. L. Schellenberg's conclusion that since apparently there are 'capable inculpable non-believers in God' the cognitive problem is actually an argument for the non-existence of God. What Schellenberg considers 'most problematic is the fact that the theistic proposition "God exists" is epistemically nonsecured for so many of us' ⁹ and he finds that incompatible with his understanding of God. What are our grounds and assumptions for expecting epistemological security when it comes to belief in God? Moser suggests they are not convincing:

'Do we, however, have a right to know God? In particular, are we entitled to know that God exists without knowing God as Lord, as the morally supreme agent over our lives, including our intellectual lives? Some people uncritically assume so, but this is unconvincing.' ¹⁰

⁶ Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, tr. by Tiran Archbishop Nersoyan (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 23.

⁷ Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, 'Introduction: The Hiddenness of God', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 31.

⁸ I take Hans Jonas in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice* to be reflecting on the existential problem despite the title of his paper. I am sympathetic to much of his reflection, however I do not see it necessarily leading to his conclusion. The terrible horrors of the Shoah that must be unequivocally remembered and condemned do indeed pose overwhelming questions, but these questions are not of *qualitatively* different sort from what the members of human race have inflicted upon themselves. In particular, the Armenian Genocide that preceded the Holocaust involved relatively fewer victims and their annihilation was not as efficient or as effectively planned (despite involvement of Kaiser's military advisers) yet it was as dehumanising and destructive as any and forced the first nation to adopt Christianity to ponder where is the mercy of God when it was needed the most, in circumstances where the victims were chosen by their nationality and religion, a situation with clear parallels to the Shoah.

⁹ J. L. Schellenberg, 'What the Hiddenness of God Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 692.

¹⁰ Paul K. Moser, 'Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 2157.

My and I believe Moser's view is that to demand straightforward 'epistemic security' regarding God as taught by the Judeo-Christian tradition is to miss some very important aspects that I discuss below and to 'objectify' God in direct rejection or misunderstanding of the same tradition.¹¹

Due to space constraints I am unable to re-state Schellenberg's position fully in this paper but have to summarise its central argument briefly and no doubt imperfectly as follows: *if* there was a kind of 'perfectly loving' God proposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition *then* that God would *necessarily* see to it that reasonable belief in His non-existence would be impossible. Since according to Schellenberg reasonable belief in His non-existence *is* possible, it follows that either He is not 'good' (thus negating one of the most central and fundamental attributes of divinity both in the Judeo-Christian as well as the philosophical traditions) or He simply doesn't exist.¹²

Needless to say many objections on different grounds have been made to Schellenberg's argument, and this paper is another one. I suggest that given the kind of God proposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition it is *not necessary* that reasonable non-belief¹³ in His existence be impossible; moreover it may even be the case that possibility of reasonable non-belief is *necessary* given the nature and purposes of God as proposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition (and this doesn't include just the argument from moral freedom).

Before considering the cognitive problem it is necessary to mention that while the cognitive problem in certain aspects resembles the problem of evil the two are related but are not identical as Van Inwagen¹⁴ demonstrates by conceiving a world where there is a cognitive problem without the problem of evil.¹⁵

Schellenberg's conclusion seems at least partly based on his misunderstanding or disregard of significant aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition and certain assumptions, especially regarding nature of religious belief as well as primacy and instrumentality of reason. Schellenberg seems to suggest that faith in God is akin to a deductive argument: sufficient evidence and nothing else leads one to believe in God; presence of such evidence results in faith, absence of it results in lack of faith. Such simplistic understanding of religious belief is very unlikely to be shared by the vast majority of Jews or Christians. Leaving aside the question of who and on what basis decides what

¹¹ This is not an argument for radical fideism but rather a rational realisation of limits of reason especially when dealing with the given religious tradition - we are considering the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus here and therefore should take seriously what the Judeo-Christian tradition has to say about His *modus operandi*.

¹² A discussion of the classical concept of The Good, especially its self-manifesting or overflowing, would be relevant here but due to space constraints and difficulty of treating such a vast subject in few words I limit myself to the approach I have outlined earlier.

¹³ As discussed by Schellenberg.

¹⁴ Peter Van Inwagen, 'What is the problem of the hiddenness of God?', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book.

¹⁵ Whether that is indeed a *possible* world is open to debate but is outside the scope of this paper.

constitutes sufficient evidence at any given point in life of every individual ¹⁶ Schellenberg attempts to address the free will objection to his argument by asking why couldn't God provide more evidence without overwhelming our free will. In so doing he assumes that there is some quality or quantity of 'evidence' or 'effects' that could be more than we have but less than would result in effective annihilation of free will - as will be suggested later this is not a foregone conclusion. In doing so he disregards the fact that nowhere does the Judeo-Christian tradition propose that belief in God is solely or primarily a matter of coming to an exclusively rational conclusion based on available external and supposedly 'objective' evidence; to the contrary what the tradition reiterates is the message of Hebrews 11:1-3, 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 and John 20:26-29. Moreover, the primary meaning of 'belief in God' of the Judeo-Christian tradition is not a matter of indifferent assent to some external value-neutral factual claim (such as 'this table exists') but is a matter of trust, thus 'to believe in God' may be more accurately described as 'to trust and welcome God' - of course not without reasons but equally not simply because the observed premises lead to an inevitable conclusion - as the gospels and the history illustrate some have believed, many have not.

Trust in the Christian God is not primarily or exclusively a dry rational conclusion - it does not mean it's *irrational*, but it does mean that *ratio* is not the sole or the main arbiter in either the message or for those who come to believe in the message; Jesus did not proclaim 'Blessed are those who are reasonable', to the contrary - it is the actions and the thought patterns of those who reject Jesus and his teaching in the gospels that can conceivably be described as 'rational', at least in the short-sighted practical sense of the word given their epistemological situation and prior knowledge (for many actions and attitudes may be rational without being moral, ethical, right, beneficial, etc.). Trust of course requires a perception (whether mistaken or not) of risk and consequences: if there is no possibility of trust being broken and consequences being suffered we do not speak of trust but of certainty and absence of risk, and where we have certainty we require not trust. This suggests that lack of 'epistemic security' may be a necessary factor in possibility of 'trust in God'. Theists are often accused of wishful thinking, which is implied to be essentially self-delusional. This misses a very important consideration hinted at in James 2:19 and elsewhere - mere inconsequential assent to a proposition that there is a Creator of everything that exists is not what has been taught by the Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia and what the same tradition understands when it speaks of belief in God.

What is meant when an atheist says 'I don't believe in God' is not the simple negation of what is meant when a Jew or a Christian says 'I believe in God'. In the first example there is simple negation of a propositional statement not unlike many other negations; the negation itself is

¹⁶ Surely this would differ from individual to individual, essentially 'requiring' God to meet as many standards of evidence as there are individuals - a proverbial case of pots teaching the potter?

epistemologically 'parasitic' in a sense that the atheist has to refer to a theistic concept before he can deny it; theist's statement is different. The theist's assertion is epistemologically independent; the theist is not simply or primarily asserting truth value of some external inconsequential claim which could be otherwise; theist is making a very different statement akin to Isaiah 6:3, welcomes its verity and intends to give his 'amen' in hope: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'¹⁷ 'After all, belief in God is normally more than a cognitive matter, and our volitional stance (especially our attitudes) may be such that God may not give us more knowledge of Himself until we turn toward Him with greater interest and openness.'¹⁸ Belief in God for a Jew or a Christian necessarily includes a significant element of 'desire for God' flowing from the Judeo-Christian conception of God.

There are a number of other issues that present themselves when reflecting on the reduction of the cognitive problem to an argument against the existence of God, and it is to these considerations that I now turn, beginning with Van Inwagen's analogy of the painting: 'Someone who wants God to "show himself" just doesn't understand the concept of God. Asking for that is like demanding that Rembrandt "show himself" in a painting.'¹⁹ Thus his interlocutor's demands that God show *special signs on demand* are not just in direct conflict with what the Christian tradition and scripture affirm²⁰ but also shows the category error which Van Inwagen precisely identifies: 'We can imagine no sign that would have to be the work of a necessary, omnipresent, omnipotent being.' The central assumption in his interlocutor's premise - that faith is solely a logical deduction based on value-neutral 'objective' evidence which *has* to be submitted by Creator to the creature to warrant the latter's faith is completely unwarranted not to say absurd, as is the identification of reason as the only avenue to belief in God despite Jesus' stubborn insistence that 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.²¹ Jesus seems to suggest that what is in our hearts is more important to God than what or how we reason; to borrow Pascal's words, 'Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point'.²²

Oakes goes even further by arguing that requests for 'special effects' 'strong' enough to act as *prima facie* evidence for *almighty* (and not simply *powerful*) God's presence would in effect be *suicidal in our current condition*:

¹⁷ Hebrew 11:1 (NRSV).

¹⁸ Laura L. Garcia, 'St John of the Cross and the necessity of divine hiddenness', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 1491.

¹⁹ Peter Van Inwagen, 'What is the problem of the hiddenness of God?', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 448. As any other analogy this one shouldn't be stretched to the breaking point - nevertheless it is a useful one provided one appreciates its limitations.

²⁰ Mark 8:12, Matthew 6:4, Matthew 12:39 (NRSV)

²¹ Matthew 18:3 (NRSV)

²² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, §263, http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Pens%C3%A9es/%C3%89dition_de_Port-Royal/XXVIII [accessed 27 April 2015]

There is more than ample metaphysical warrant (of a sort overlooked thus far) for maintaining that the "hiddenness" of God is exactly what should be expected if theism is true. ... The Divine Being could not "come out of hiding"- could not make His existence obvious or manifest to us - without ending our lives as such. This, of course, would constitute an excellent reason for God to remain "hidden" or "concealed." ... Moses makes the following request of God (Ex 33:18): "Show me now your glory." God makes the following stark and admonitory response to Moses (Ex 33:20): "You will not be able to see my face, for no human can see my face and live." ²³

Interpreting God's 'face' as God's unequivocal, direct and personal presence as Scruton does, ²⁴ it is fitting to conclude that demands for convincing but non-overwhelming evidence, whether in the form of 'special effects' or anything else, are incoherent; non-overwhelming evidence would be open to human rejection, and overwhelming evidence would destroy the finite being as Oakes suggests with scriptural warrant. Without going into the specifics of various arguments from moral freedom, suffice it to say that 'plausible deniability' of God seems essential for the possibility of non-coerced belief in God *on God's terms which flow out of God's nature*, as understood by the Judeo-Christian tradition. God may or may not be playing dice, *pace* Einstein, but the Almighty is certainly not to be thought of as an extortionist: the God of the Christian tradition is affirmed as caring about *how* and *why* humans come to believe, not just *that* they believe. To allow such freedom a universe with God must at least in principle be open to agnostic or even atheistic interpretation consistent with a universe without God, even to the point of allowing Jesus' last words at the crucifixion: 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' ²⁵ Additionally,

'Few of those who argue to God's non-existence from His hiddenness would deny that there is enough evidence to establish His "bare possibility." If Edwards is right, then, even if the evidence is as ambiguous as these critics allege, it is fully sufficient for the properly disposed to "much concern" themselves about eternal things, "earnestly ... seek them, and "do things in order to discern" them.' ²⁶

The fact that not everyone does speaks more about how many of us choose to spend our finite and short lives than about lack of evidence; Moser goes further and questions the assumption of Schellenberg and others:

²³ Robert Oakes, 'Life, Death, and the Hiddenness of God', International Journal for Philosophy of Religion <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40270226>> [accessed 16 April 2015].

²⁴ Roger Scruton, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures 2010* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012).

²⁵ Matthew 27:46 (NRSV)

²⁶ William J. Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 1789.

'Many people proceed as if we have a right to know God on our preferred terms. This is, however, nothing more than a self-serving assumption. Nothing requires that God supply knowledge of God on our preferred terms.'²⁷

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about two kinds of grace: the costly and the cheap grace; it seems his distinction is appropriate not just for reflection on grace but also in the consideration of divine hiddenness if our desire is for 'cheap evidence'. As Moser rightly observes, 'The epistemology of Jewish-Christian theism disallows God's being trivialized as an undemanding object of knowledge for our convenient examination or speculation'²⁸ yet that is exactly how Schellenberg's treatment can be described. Moser writes that 'the Jewish-Christian approach to filial knowledge of God gives primacy to revelation from God. It thus offers a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach to the source of filial knowledge of God.'²⁹ If it's not so much us seeking God as God seeking us, it seems even more misguided to dictate the terms - we may be extremely *experientially* frustrated by them but it hardly warrants us dictating our terms on *cognitive* grounds. Schellenberg's view of evidence certainly displays objectifying and misguided in my view tendencies, speaking as it is about *probabilities* (not unlike the London bus campaign of the British Humanist Association³⁰) as Ferreira identifies:

Schellenberg's view of evidence is probabilistic in just the sense Climacus rejects in his polemic against "degrees." Schellenberg argues that what should be available to truth-seekers is "probabilifying evidence."³¹

The manifest successes of mathematics and natural sciences in dealing with the created order seems to have led some to the misguided and unwarranted conclusion that the Author of the said order is also subject to our calculations of probability. Ferreira asks,

What would it be like for the absolutely different to reveal itself as such? What would count as "a loving and just God" making His presence known in such a way that it would be unreasonable not to believe it? Schellenberg, after all, requires the kind of evidence it would be irrational not to see as adequate. Schellenberg assumes a particular grammar which treats God as qualitatively similar to other things which could reveal themselves, or let themselves be revealed.³²

²⁷ Paul K. Moser, 'Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 2160.

²⁸ Moser, Loc. 2174.

²⁹ Moser, Loc. 2397.

³⁰ 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' How the exact probability was calculated and why an assumption is made that existence of God is something to worry about was not explained, alas.

³¹ M. Jamie Ferreira, 'A Kierkegaardian View of Divine Hiddenness', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc. 2947.

³² Ferreira, Loc. 2982.

Of course treating God 'as qualitatively similar to other things' is what has been consistently and vehemently rejected by the Judeo-Christian tradition as idolatrous for millennia.

I agree with Poston and Dougherty that Schellenberg's 'focus on the nature of belief manifests a central flaw in the hiddenness argument' in addition to the other issues outlined in this paper:

In the final analysis Schellenberg's argument fails because it envisions God as requiring too much: explicit, highly confident belief at all times. Fortunately, God is more generous. The Christian tradition attests that God will accept far less: He will meet us where we are'. 'And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.' If God exists and is creator of the world, then anyone can have de re belief in Him. If one values religious goods, then there is enough evidence to support rational religious faith, which does not entail high degrees of confidence.³³

Offering a Jewish perspective Ross observes that 'God's existence or nonexistence cannot be kept separate and treated apart from the question of God's nature'³⁴ and rightly points out that

It would seem that for [Schellenberg] the express claim that God exists and the evidence that would support that claim are more important, in this post-Emancipation age, than the question of the extent of our knowledge of God's nature, or the withholding by God of his providential protection from sinners. However, this opinion regarding the primacy of the claim that God exists and the question of the evidence for this claim may well seem highly problematic to anyone who knows something of the subtlety and sophistication of some of the great thinkers of the past in the three monotheistic faiths. It treats God as one more object in the inventory of those objects that exist and that may be known (thus allowing us to raise the question of our evidence for our knowledge of their existence). But a profound religious intuition, which many of the great sophisticated religious thinkers seem to share, leads one to realize that, in a sense, God's existence may be conceived as being in a class of its own.³⁵

I conclude that philosophy or *ratio* alone is unable to fully and conclusively resolve the paradox of 'hidden revealed God' of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that is exactly what should be expected if we take seriously the sort of God that the tradition proclaims and that Pascal referred to in his Memorial.³⁶ What philosophy can do however is to continually sharpen and clarify our concepts and categories to allow us to differentiate between good and bad arguments, in particular in the debate over the cognitive problem of divine hiddenness, while the experiential problem of divine hiddenness requires that what has been preached for two millennia: compassion and brotherly love for one another.

³³ Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June 2007), p. 196.

³⁴ Jacob Joshua Ross, 'The Hiddenness of God: A Puzzle or a Real Problem?', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle e-book, Loc 3211

³⁵ Ross, Loc. 3201.

³⁶ Pascal's Memorial: <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/pascal.html> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Bibliography

Aertsen, Jan, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996)

Aijaz, Imran, and Markus Weidler, 'Some Critical Reflections on the Hiddenness Argument', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27646192>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Audi, Robert, 'Faith, Belief, and Rationality', *Philosophical Perspectives* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2214096>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Hart, David Bentley, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (United States: Yale University Press, 2013)

Howard-Snyder, Daniel, and Paul Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Lovering, Robert P., 'Divine Hiddenness and Inculpable Ignorance', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40021222>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Moser, Paul, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Oakes, Robert, 'Life, Death, and the Hiddenness of God', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40270226>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Otte, Richard, 'Evidential Arguments from Evil', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40036051>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Poston, Ted, and Trent Dougherty, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief', *Religious Studies* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20006362>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Schellenberg, J. L., *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993)

Scruton, Roger, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures 2010* (London: Continuum, 2012)

Tucker, Chris, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine-Creature Relationships', *Religious Studies* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27749959>> [accessed 27 April 2015]

Van Inwagen, Peter, and Dean Zimmerman, *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)