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Divine hiddenness and inculpable ignorance

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I. Introduction

The topic of God's hiddenness has recently become popular among philosophers of religion again, a resurgence largely due to J. L. Schellenberg's provocative and illuminating treatise on it entitled *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. In *Divine Hiddenness*, Schellenberg argues that the weakness of evidence for God's existence is not merely a sign that God is hidden; rather, "it is a revelation that God does not exist."[1] Schellenberg summarizes his argument in the following way:

(1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
(2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
(3) Reasonable nonbelief occurs.
(4) No perfectly loving God exists.
(5) There is no God.[2]

Schellenberg's argument has inspired numerous philosophers of religion to examine the topic of God's hiddenness more carefully. One such philosopher, Michael J. Murray, provides a "soul-making" defense of God's hiddenness in the recently released *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*.[3] Briefly, Murray argues that if God were not hidden, then at least some of us would lose something many theists deem a (very) good thing: the ability to develop morally significant characters. In the following, I examine Murray's soul-making defense and argue that it not only fails to defend adequately God's hiddenness, it produces (ironically) an argument for the nonexistence of God.

II. Murray's soul-making defense

Murray summarizes his soul-making defense of God's hiddenness in the following way:

> [O]ne of the reasons that God must remain hidden is that failing to do so would lead to a loss of morally significant freedom on the part of creatures. The reason, in brief, is that making us powerfully aware of the truth of God's existence would suffice to coerce (at least many of us) into behaving in accordance with God's moral commands. Such awareness can lead to this simply because God's presence would provide us with overpowering incentives which would make choosing the good ineluctable for us. . . . Our fear of punishment, or at least our fear of the prospect of missing out on a very great good, would compel us to believe the things that God has revealed and to act in accordance with them. But in doing this, God would have removed the ability for self-determination since there are no longer good and evil courses of action between which creatures could freely and deliberately choose. Thus we would all be compelled to choose in accordance with the divine will and would all thereby become conformed to the divine image. However, a character wrought in this fashion would not be one for which we are responsible since it does not derive from morally significant choosing. It has instead been forced upon us.[4]

Though the preceding summary is relatively straightforward, a few clarifications are required if one is to understand properly Murray's soul-making defense.

First, when Murray claims that "we" would be coerced to choose in accordance with the divine will, that "our" fear of punishment would compel "us" to believe the things that God has revealed and to act in accordance with them, he is not claiming that *all* human beings would be so coerced. Rather, he is merely asserting that at least *some* human beings would be, as is made clear when he states that "making us powerfully aware of the truth of God's existence would suffice to coerce (*at least many of*) us into behaving in accordance with God's moral commands."[5] Thus, Murray's soul-making defense of God's hiddenness does not hinge upon whether *all* human beings would be coerced to choose in accordance with the divine will were God to reveal himself, but whether at least *some* would. Throughout the paper, then, propositions such as "If God is not hidden, then we do not have the ability to choose and cultivate morally significant characters" should be understood in terms of this qualification.

Second, by "morally significant freedom" Murray means a particular kind of libertarian freedom, i.e., freedom entailing the ability to choose freely between courses of action. Murray reminds us that "theists have, at least of late, lain a great deal of explanatory weight on the need to preserve creaturely freedom."[6] For example, some have attempted to explain or justify the presence of evil in our world by appealing to the great good of a world

in which beings have libertarian freedom. Yet, according to Murray, libertarian freedom *simpliciter* does not adequately explain or justify the presence of evil in our world, for "there seems to be no reason why God could not create a world with libertarian free beings who are incapable of doing evil."[7] What's important, then, is a particular *kind* of libertarian freedom, viz., *morally significant* freedom: freedom entailing the ability to choose freely to do good and evil.[8] As one can see, morally significant freedom entails not only that there *are* good and evil courses of action available from which we may choose freely, but that we have the ability to take these courses of action.

According to Murray, theists have often argued that morally significant freedom "is a good (indeed, a very good) thing," and this is because it gives one the opportunity to develop a morally significant character and, in turn, to become either lover or imitator of God, or one who "worships and serves the creature rather than the creator."[9] But, as Murray writes, "Developing characters which have moral significance requires that they be chosen and cultivated *by their bearers*" (emphasis mine).[10] In other words, *we* must be responsible for the choice and cultivation of our characters if they are to be morally significant; and "this can only be done if creatures are first given the sort of morally significant freedom we have been discussing heretofore."[11] That is, this can be done only if there are good and evil courses of action available from which we may choose freely and we have the ability to take these courses of action. Morally significant freedom, then, is a necessary condition for having the ability to choose and cultivate morally significant characters.

Moreover, Murray holds that God desires that we have the ability to develop morally significant characters. And given that having morally significant freedom is a necessary condition for this ability, God must remain hidden – failing to do so "would lead to a loss of morally significant freedom on the part of creatures."[12] Murray's defense of God's hiddenness, then, includes the following two premises:

(P1) We have the ability to develop morally significant characters; and,

(P2) If God is not hidden, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters.[13]

Third, though Murray does not delve deeply into metaethics, there are at least two metaethical positions that underlie Murray's defense of God's hiddenness. First, according to Murray, there is (at least) a correlative relationship which holds between morality and God's commands at all times. In other words, that which is morally good is correlative to that which God commands us to do, and that which is morally evil is correlative to that which

God commands us to refrain from doing. To see that this is the case, consider his aforementioned claims that:

> making us powerfully aware of the truth of God's existence would suffice to coerce (at least many of us) into *behaving in accordance with God's moral commands* (emphasis mine); and,
>
> such awareness can lead to this simply because God's presence would provide us with overpowering incentives which would make *choosing the good* ineluctable for us (emphasis mine).

It should be emphasized, however, that this view regarding the relation between morality and God's commands entails neither horn of Euthyphro's dilemma, and that the ground of morality goes unstated. Even so, Murray clearly holds that the moral status of actions – particularly whether actions are morally good or morally evil – is *not* determined by what human beings *believe* to be the moral status actions. This is demonstrated by the fact that, according to Murray, morality is correlative to God's commands, and God's commands do not always coincide with the moral beliefs of human beings. Indeed, if God's commands *did* always coincide with the moral beliefs of human beings, then soul-making would be superfluous, for we would already be imitators of God. Hence, Murray's defense of God's hiddenness entails that the moral status of actions is *not* determined by what human beings believe to be the moral status of actions. This is the second metaethical position that underlies Murray's defense of God's hiddenness. Both of these metaethical positions play an important role in my response to Murray and, thus, are noteworthy.

Finally, by "coerced" or "compelled" behavior Murray means behavior resulting from the loss of morally significant freedom to overpowering incentives. One can think of these incentives as consisting of either threats or offers, Murray maintains, though he often uses examples drawn from cases of coercion via threats. In the following, Murray explains what it means to be coerced via a threat:

> It should be obvious that not just any incentives will suffice to overwhelm our desires for contrary courses of action. The incentive must be sufficiently strong that it outweighs the desires I have for those things which are inconsistent with acting in accordance with it. Let's say that a desired course of action, A_1, renders competing desired courses of action, $A_2 - A_n$, ineligible when A_1 is sufficiently compelling that it makes it impossible for me reasonably to choose $A_2 - A_n$ over A_1. We can then say that an individual, P, is *coerced* to do some act, A, by a threat when a desire is induced by a threat, which desire is suffi-

ciently compelling that it renders every other course of action except A ineligible for P.[14]

An example of coerced behavior, according to Murray, is that of handing over one's money while being robbed at gunpoint.[15] We are asked to consider a mugger who sticks the barrel of the gun in Murray's back and demands that he (Murray) hand over his money or else be shot. Murray states that, in such a situation, he would indeed hand over his money and his doing so would be the result of coercion. Vis-à-vis Murray's analysis of coerced behavior, this example satisfies the conditions under which we can say that Murray is coerced since presumably every other course of action *except* handing over the money is ineligible for him. That is, it is impossible for him reasonably to take any other course of action except that of handing over his money.

With these clarifications out of the way, a more developed capitulation of Murray's soul-making defense of God's hiddenness is in order.

Murray holds that:

(P1) We have the ability to develop morally significant characters.

He also holds that God is pleased with those who freely choose courses of action He commands us to take (morally good courses of action) and rewards them with a very great good (eternal bliss).[16] And God is displeased with those who freely choose courses of action He commands us to refrain from taking (morally evil courses of action) and punishes them with a very great evil (eternal damnation).[17] If God were not hidden, then we would be informed of the courses of action He has commanded us to take as well as those He has commanded us to refrain from taking – that is, we would be informed of which courses of action are morally good and which are morally evil. Accordingly, we would be informed of those courses of action that please and displease God as well as their correlative consequences. As a result, some of us would strongly desire to choose to behave in accordance with God's commands – we would strongly desire to choose to do good – in an attempt to please Him and thereby obtain eternal bliss and/or avoid eternal damnation.[18] Our strong desire to choose to behave in accordance with God's commands would be sufficiently compelling to render every other course of action ineligible (unreasonable) for us. At least some of us, then, would be coerced into choosing to act in accordance with God's commands, i.e., into choosing to take morally good courses of action. Thus, at least some of us would lose morally significant freedom. And in losing morally significant freedom, we would no longer be able to choose freely and cultivate our characters. That is, we would lose the ability to develop morally significant characters, for morally significant freedom is a necessary condition for having that ability. Hence,

(P2) If God is not hidden, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters.

The ability to develop morally significant characters is a (very) good thing, and God desires that we have it. Thus,

(C) God is hidden.

III. Morally significant characters and inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions

Murray's soul-making defense of God's hiddenness is quite compelling for at least two reasons. First, many of us agree with Murray that we have the ability to develop morally significant characters and that having this ability is a (very) good thing. Second, given the conception of God with which Murray is concerned, it seems he is entirely correct in holding (P2).

There is, however, a significant defect in Murray's defense: though being coerced is *one* way to lose the ability to develop a morally significant character, it's certainly not the *only* way. Another way to lose the ability to develop a morally significant character is through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions. In order to see that this is the case, we need to analyze more deeply what it means to develop morally significant characters.

Recall Murray's claim that the development of characters which have moral significance requires that they be "chosen and cultivated by their bearers." In other words, *we* must be responsible for the choice and cultivation of our characters if they are to be morally significant; and this can only be done only if we have morally significant freedom. Moreover, choosing and cultivating one's character involves, among other things, choosing among numerous courses of action – particularly those that are morally good or morally evil as opposed to those that are morally neutral – and acting in accordance with those choices. Thus, developing morally relevant characters can be done only if there are morally good and morally evil courses of action available from which we may choose freely and we have the ability to take these courses of action – that is, only if we have morally significant freedom.

Though Murray fails to develop significantly the kind of metaphysic that explains exactly *how* choosing freely among morally good and morally evil courses of action and acting in accordance with those choices contributes to one's development of a morally significant character, the picture he seems to paint is as follows: If one chooses freely to take a morally good course of action, then goodness is (somehow) instantiated in[19] one's character through that choice; and if one chooses freely to take a morally evil course of action, then badness is (somehow) instantiated in one's character through that choice.

And, I would add, if one chooses freely to take a morally neutral course of action – one that is neither morally good nor morally bad – then neither goodness nor badness is instantiated in one's character through that choice.

It seems, however, that choosing freely among morally good and morally evil courses of action and acting in accordance with those choices, though necessary, is not *sufficient* for the development of a morally significant character.[20] For consider the case of Smith, who consistently chooses freely courses of action that are morally good, yet he erroneously and inculpably believes of himself that he consistently chooses courses of action that are morally neutral. Should our considered judgment be that goodness is instantiated in Smith's character in virtue of his consistently choosing freely morally good courses of action? That is, should we believe that Smith is a good person in virtue of his consistently choosing freely morally good courses of action? It seems not. Rather, it seems that Smith's consistently choosing freely morally good courses of action instantiates goodness in his character only if he *intends* to choose morally good courses of action and to act in accordance with that choice. And he cannot intend to choose morally good courses of action if he is inculpably ignorant of the moral status of the courses of action he takes.

Likewise, suppose Jones consistently chooses freely morally evil courses of action, yet she erroneously and inculpably believes of herself that she consistently chooses courses of action that are morally neutral. Should our considered judgment be that badness is instantiated in Jones's character in virtue of her consistently choosing freely morally evil courses of action? That is, should we believe that Jones is a bad person in virtue of her consistently choosing freely morally evil courses of action? It seems not. Rather, it seems that Jones's consistently choosing freely morally evil courses of action instantiates badness in her character only if she *intends* to choose morally evil courses of action and to behave in accordance with that choice. And she cannot intend to choose morally evil courses of action if she is inculpably ignorant of the moral status of the courses of action she takes.

If the preceding is correct, then another necessary condition for developing morally significant characters is that we *intend* to choose the morally good or morally evil courses of action that are freely chosen and acted upon.[21] This explains the considered judgment that (at least some) goodness is instantiated in the character of someone who intentionally chooses what he erroneously and inculpably believes is a morally good course of action, even though the chosen course of action is morally neutral or even morally *evil*.[22] Likewise, it explains the considered judgment that (at least some) badness is instantiated in the character of someone who intentionally chooses what he erroneously and inculpably believes is a morally evil course of action, even though the chosen course of action is morally neutral or even morally *good*.[23] Thus, in

addition to the condition that has already been discussed as necessary for the development of morally significant characters, viz., morally significant freedom, which entails not only that there are morally good and morally evil courses of action available from which we may choose freely, but that we have the ability to take these courses of action, it seems that we need to add a second necessary condition, namely, that we intend to choose the morally good or morally evil courses of action that are freely chosen and acted upon. And intending to choose morally good or morally evil courses of action cannot be done if we are inculpably ignorant of the moral status of actions.

IV. A reply to Murray

The ability to develop a morally significant character can be lost, then, in at least two ways: by being coerced into taking a particular course of action or by being inculpably ignorant of the moral status of courses of actions. In his defense of God's hiddenness, Murray suggests that if God were not hidden, then some of us would lose the ability to develop morally significant characters through divine coercion, and this would be bad. However, what Murray fails to recognize is that if God *is* hidden, then some of us lose the ability to develop morally significant characters through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions. And this, presumably, is equally bad.

Due to God's hiddenness, some human beings exhibit inculpable nonbelief in God's existence and, in turn, believe they must rely solely on their own cognitive capacities (as opposed to relying additionally upon divine revelation) in order to determine whether certain courses of action can even *be* morally good or morally evil, let alone determining which (if any) are. In doing so, some of these individuals, through no fault of their own, *reject* the view that some courses of action can be morally good or morally evil, i.e., they become moral nihilists. Like many reflective, prominent contemporary and historical theists and nontheists alike, these individuals believe that if God does not exist, moral nihilism is true. These moral nihilists find the antecedent to be (strongly) supported by God's hiddenness; thus, they find the consequent to be (strongly) supported as well. Furthermore, qua moral nihilists, they do not believe that morally good and morally evil courses of action are among the possible courses of action from which they may choose. Rather, they hold that all courses of action are, in my terms, morally neutral. Accordingly, when these moral nihilists choose a course of action, they do not believe that the chosen course of action may be either morally good or morally evil. *A fortiori*, when they choose a course of action, they do not *intend* to choose one that is morally good or morally evil. Hence, even on

the assumption that moral nihilism is false and that some courses of action are morally good or morally evil (as Murray holds), the moral nihilists in question are not able to develop morally significant characters. For, as stated previously, a necessary condition for developing morally significant characters is that we must *intend* to choose the morally good or evil courses of action that are chosen. But these moral nihilists do not intend to choose morally good or morally evil courses of action since they are inculpably ignorant of the fact that some courses of action *are* morally good or morally evil. Thus, when these moral nihilists choose a course of action that they erroneously and inculpably believe is morally neutral, though as a matter of fact it is morally good, goodness is not thereby instantiated in their characters. That is, they are not good (or at least better) persons in virtue of their unintentionally choosing a morally good course of action. For goodness to be instantiated in their characters, they must *intend* to choose a morally good course of action. But, qua moral nihilists, this they do not – indeed, *can*not – do.

Due to God's hiddenness, then, some human beings exhibit inculpable nonbelief in God's existence and, through no fault of their own, embrace moral nihilism. In doing so, these individuals are inculpably ignorant of the fact that some courses of action are morally good or morally evil. In turn, they do not intend to choose morally good or morally evil courses of action. Consequently, even when they *do* unintentionally choose morally good or morally evil courses of action, they are not able to develop morally significant characters through those choices, for a necessary condition for the development of morally significant characters is that we intend to choose the morally good or morally evil courses of action that are freely chosen and acted upon. In short, if God is hidden, then some of us lose our ability to develop morally significant characters through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions. Thus,

(P3) If God is hidden, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters.

If the preceding is correct, then God's hiddenness is no more compatible with our ability to develop morally significant characters than His nonhiddenness. Indeed, God's hiddenness brings about the very thing He is allegedly trying to avoid. And this (ironically) produces an argument for the nonexistence of God. Specifically, (P1), (P2), and (P3) – when conjoined with the tautology (P4) Either God is hidden or God is not hidden – entail that God does not exist via reductio. Assume God exists. Tautologically, either God is hidden or God is not hidden. If the former, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters. Likewise, if the latter, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters. Both of these

entailments contradict (P1), the premise stating that we *do* have the ability to develop morally significant characters. Our original assumption that God exists, then, must be false. Thus, God does not exist.

V. Possible objections

In addition to the defense of (P3) provided above, one way we may attempt to establish the plausibility of (P3) is by determining if there are any grounds for rejecting it. Given that Murray already explicitly embraces (P1) and (P2), and undoubtedly would embrace (P4) as well, it seems that finding grounds for rejecting (P3) will be precisely what Murray will want to do. In the following, I discuss two objections to (P3), the second of which is the most promising and, thus, is the focus of the large majority of this section.

The argument from natural revelation

One way Murray may attempt to reject (P3) is to challenge my tacit assumption that human beings who exhibit inculpable nonbelief in God's existence and, in turn, believe they must rely solely on their own cognitive capacities to decide issues of morality do *not*, in fact, rely upon divine revelation. Murray might contend that even these nonbelievers rely upon a particular kind of divine revelation, viz., *natural* revelation: the divine disclosure of truths (moral or otherwise) through the natural order. Specifically, Murray might argue that, given natural revelation, even human beings who exhibit inculpable nonbelief in God's existence and believe they must rely solely on their own cognitive capacities to decide issues of morality rely upon divine revelation.

The problem with this objection is that even if one grants that God *is* revealing truths to us through the natural order, it does not follow that we will recognize them as such. So the question isn't whether these truths are actually being revealed through nature, but whether individuals who exhibit inculpable nonbelief in God's existence based on His hiddenness – individuals who believe they must rely *solely* on their own cognitive capacities to decide issues of morality – *recognize them as such*. Needless to say, many of these nonbelievers do not, and presumably this is explained by the fact that they are relying solely on their own cognitive capacities to decide issues of morality, *including the issue of whether some moral truths are revealed by God through the natural order*. And, as we have seen, their belief that they must rely solely on their own cognitive capacities to decide issues of morality is rooted in their inculpable nonbelief in God's existence based on God's hiddenness. So even if we grant that natural revelation occurs, it does not follow that individuals

who exhibit inculpable nonbelief in God's existence based on His hiddenness rely upon it in deciding issues of morality.

Indeed, one might argue that some of the aforementioned inculpable nonbelievers not only *do* not, but *can*not recognize divine disclosure of truths (moral or otherwise) through the natural order as such. For recognizing divine disclosure of truths as such involves, among other things, assenting to propositions such as, "God exists and is disclosing divine truths to me." But the notion that someone who exhibits inculpable nonbelief in God's existence could, at the same time, believe that God exists and is disclosing moral truths to him is absurd. So it is not even clear that the moral nihilists of above, for example, *could* recognize divine disclosures of truths.

The argument from disanalogy

Perhaps the most promising way Murray may attempt to reject (P3) is by finding a significant disanalogy between losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through divine coercion and losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions. Specifically, he might argue that in the case of losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through divine coercion, the loss is *absolute*, meaning that the coerced individual *never* has the opportunity to develop a morally significant character since there are no times at which she is not coerced to take the morally good course of action. But in the case of the individual losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions, the loss is *not* absolute, meaning that the inculpably ignorant individual *sometimes* has the opportunity to develop a morally significant character since there are moments at which she is either culpably ignorant or informed of the moral status of actions. With this in mind, Murray might argue that with regard to the inculpably ignorant moral nihilist, though at times she is inculpably ignorant of the moral status of actions, it is unreasonable to believe that there are *no* times at which she is either culpably ignorant or informed of the moral status of actions. And if this is the case, then her loss of the ability to develop a morally significant character through inculpable ignorance is not absolute, as it is in the case of divine coercion. At least some of the time, then, the moral nihilist has the ability to develop a morally significant character, whereas this is not the case with divinely coerced individuals. And this, Murray might contend, is a significant disanalogy between the two cases.

Though such an objection appears to be fairly strong, there are a number of problems with it.

First, it is not clear that it *is* unreasonable to believe that there are no times at which the moral nihilist is either culpably ignorant or informed of

the moral status of actions. So long as the moral nihilist finds moral nihilism to be more reasonable than the alternatives, the most reasonable courses of action for her to take are those that accord with moral nihilism. And so long as she is concerned with choosing the most reasonable courses of action, she will act in accordance with moral nihilism and, in turn, lack the ability to develop a morally significant character. Of course, Murray may point out that it's unlikely that she will *always* be concerned with and choose the most reasonable courses of action and, in turn, act in accordance with moral nihilism. Even if this is the case, however, unless she is somehow culpable for failing to choose the most reasonable courses of action, her deviance from moral nihilism would not immediately entail the ability to develop a morally significant character. Moreover, it's seems equally unlikely that the divinely coerced individual will *always* be concerned with and choose the most reasonable courses of action and, in turn, act in accordance with God's commands. So if the likelihood of always being concerned with and choosing the most reasonable courses of action counts against the case of the moral nihilist, it should count equally against the case of the divinely coerced individual.

Second, even if we grant that there are times at which the moral nihilist has the opportunity to develop morally significant characters since she is either culpably ignorant or informed of the moral status of actions, it is reasonable to believe that, in some cases, these times are few and far between. And if the ratio is significantly disproportional, as it is reasonable to believe that it is in many cases, then, for all intents and purposes, she loses the ability to develop a morally significant character. In other words, though she does not lose her ability to develop a morally significant character *absolutely*, she does so *almost absolutely*. And though there may be a *conceptual* difference between losing the ability to develop morally significant characters *absolutely* and losing it *almost absolutely*, there does not seem to be a significant *practical* difference. And Murray's defense clearly hinges upon the practical implications of God's hiddenness, for integral to it is the relationship between God's hiddenness and our *ability* to *develop* morally significant characters. Hence, though inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions based on God's hiddenness may not result in the *absolute* loss of the ability to develop morally significant characters, its likely that, in some cases, it results in the *almost absolute* loss of such an ability, and this renders Murray's defense of God's hiddenness significantly weaker. For not only does this alleged significant disanalogy between losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through divine coercion and losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions fail to undermine (P3), it suggests that God's hiddenness is the result

of unreasonable obstinacy. For, when one takes into account all the individual and societal problems that result from God's hiddenness, problems that may very well be avoided were God to refrain from hiding Himself (e.g., religious intolerance and wars, severe confusion [moral and otherwise], deep feelings of insignificance, etc.), God's hiding Himself in the name preserving the mere *conceptual* distinction between the absolute and almost absolute loss of the ability to develop morally significant characters appears to be unduly stubborn.

Finally, the claim that the loss of the ability to develop morally significant characters through divine coercion is absolute rests upon Murray's contention that it is impossible for the divinely coerced individual reasonably to take any other course of action except that of obeying God's commands. In other words, obeying God's commands in an attempt to obtain eternal bliss and/or avoid eternal damnation is the only reasonable course of action. But this contention is dubitable at best, for there seem to be numerous grounds for believing that alternative courses of action are not only reasonable but, in some cases, *more* reasonable than obeying God's commands, *even if* disobedience results in the loss of eternal bliss and/or the procuring of eternal damnation.

The first ground for believing that there are reasonable alternatives to obeying some of God's commands is that God's commands are often quite controversial. For example, God is reported to have commanded genocide, the subjugating of women to men, the stoning to death of homosexuals, of unruly children, of adulterers, etc. Some of us find such commands to be so objectionable that disobedience to these commands is a reasonable if not *more* reasonable alternative to obedience, even if disobedience results in the loss of eternal bliss and/or the procuring of eternal damnation. In the spirit of Mill, some of us might hold that if a God who commands these objectionable courses of action can sentence us to eternal damnation for disobedience to them, then to eternal damnation we will go.

Of course, Murray may respond by suggesting that God would not command such courses of action, since each is morally evil. There is, however, a significant problem with such a response: God's not commanding such courses of action in virtue of the fact that they are morally evil is difficult to reconcile with Murray's view that God damns eternally those who live lives of total disobedience to His commands. Take the case of stoning the adulterer. Presumably, such an action is morally evil in virtue of its injustice: the adulterer does not *deserve* to be *killed* for his adulterous activity. Since stoning the adulterer is unjust and thereby morally evil, God (allegedly) would not command it. With this in mind, we might wonder whether one who lives a life of total disobedience to God's commands deserves *eternal damna-*

tion. Many theists and nontheists alike believe one does not – imposing this "maximal" punishment, as Murray describes it, would be unjust and thereby morally evil.[24] If this is correct, and if Murray is correct in holding that God would not *command* morally evil courses of action, then presumably God would not *take* the morally evil course of action of imposing this maximal and eternal punishment on one who lives a life of total disobedience. And if this is the case, then Murray's defense of God's hiddenness is severely undermined. For, according to it, our fear of eternal damnation would coerce us to obey God's commands. But if we have reason to believe that God would not damn us eternally, then we have reason to reject the claim that some of us would be divinely coerced through fear of eternal damnation.[25]

The second ground for believing that there are reasonable alternatives to obeying some of God's commands is that, given the prima facie badness of coercion (a view Murray seems to embrace), there is prima facie reason to *resist* being coerced.[26] For example, in the case of being robbed at gunpoint, there is reason for one not to comply with the robber, and that is the fact that he is attempting to *coerce* one into handing over one's money, and coercion is prima facie bad. Of course, this reason for noncompliance is overridden by other considerations, such as the goodness of preserving one's life. But we can think of cases in which resistance to coercion based on the prima facie badness of coercion is *not* overridden by other considerations, even that of the goodness of preserving one's life. Take the case of slavery. The life of a slave is dominated by coercion, and surely resistance to further coercion on the basis of its prima facie badness, at least for some slaves, is not overridden by other considerations (even the goodness of preserving one's life). In such cases, disobedience, even on pain of death, is a reasonable (albeit unfortunate) alternative to continued obedience. Indeed, even if the slave is coerced to take only morally good courses of action, resistance to further coercion on the basis of its prima facie badness is, for some, a reasonable alternative to continued obedience and existence. Ceteris paribus, disobedience to God's commands might be deemed a reasonable alternative to obedience in virtue of the fact that God's commands are coercive in nature, *even if* one is coerced to take only morally good courses of action *and* disobedience leads to eternal damnation.

Murray might object to the preceding by attempting to establish a significant disanalogy between the case of the slave and that of the divinely coerced individual. Specifically, he might suggest that the slaveholder does not have the authority to coerce the slave (i.e., the slaveholder's authority is illegitimate), while God does have the authority to coerce His subjects (i.e., God's authority is legitimate). Most would agree with Murray that the slaveholder's authority to coerce the slave is illegitimate, and the justification for this would

be something along the following lines: To say that someone has legitimate authority over others is to say that the one with the authority has the *right* (morally speaking) to coerce them. And the slaveholder does not have such a right, for rights are grounded in sound moral principles, and the moral principle or set of principles from which the slaveholder presumes to have the right to coerce is unsound.[27] God's right to coerce his subjects, on the other hand, *is* derived from a sound moral principle or set of principles; thus, God has legitimate authority to coerce His subjects.

Even if one grants that the slaveholder's authority is illegitimate and that God's right to coerce his subjects is derived from a sound moral principle or set of principles, one might ask what the sound moral principle or set of principles from which God derives His legitimate authority is. One candidate, presumably, is something like the following: "If P creates X, then P has legitimate authority over X." Such a moral principle, however, is vulnerable to counterexamples. For example, if Smith creates a human being via intercourse, it does not immediately follow that Smith has legitimate authority over that human being.[28] Or, if Smith is a bioengineer and creates a human being through cloning, it does not immediately follow that that Smith has legitimate authority over that human being. What, then, is the sound moral principle or set of principles from which God's legitimate authority is derived? Suffice it to say that this needs to be addressed before the disanalogy between the slave and the divinely coerced individual is rendered plausible.

The final ground for believing that there are reasonable alternatives to obeying some of God's commands is that God is allegedly *mysterious* – as some theists say, "His ways are not our ways." Based on God's mysteriousness, it may be reasonable to believe that the alleged correlative relationship between morality and God's commands does *not* hold at all times. Specifically, it may be reasonable to hold that, in some cases, rather than commanding us to do that which is morally good, God commands us to do that which is morally evil. After all, He is reported to have commanded Abraham to do what many of us find to be especially evil – viz., to kill unjustly his own son Isaac – though He apparently had no intention of allowing Abraham to fulfill His command. And many theists appeal to the mystery of God's ways, among other things, in an attempt to explain this troubling command. With God's mysteriousness in mind, then, some of us may reasonably believe that, in some cases, God commands us to do that which is morally evil though He does not intend for us to fulfill His command. Hence, not fulfilling God's command through disobedience may be a reasonable alternative to obedience.

To the preceding, Murray may respond in one of two ways. First, he may respond by arguing that God's mysteriousness isn't so, well, *mysterious* such that His commands, *when revealed via His nonhiddenness*, would be so interpretively flexible. But what reason might Murray have for believing this? It's certainly not true a priori. And he cannot claim to have first-person empirical evidence to support such a claim (remember, God is supposed to be *hidden*). Nor can he rely upon the first-person empirical accounts of Moses, Abraham, and the like, to whom God has allegedly submitted commands. For either God's submitting commands to them was done in such a way as to be an instantiation of *non*hiddenness, which flies in the face of Murray's original claim that God *must* remain hidden; or it was done in such a way as to be an instantiation of hiddenness and, thus, will not serve as evidence for claims about the interpretive flexibility of the commands of a *nonhidden* God. It seems, then, that the view that God's mysteriousness isn't *so* mysterious such that His commands, when revealed via His nonhiddenness, would be so interpretively flexible is speculative at best.

Second, Murray may respond by denying that God is mysterious. But whether something or someone is mysterious, I submit, is fundamentally determined by or relative to the individual. For example, I might find the idea that some infinite sets are larger than others to be mysterious, while Cantor may not. And it would be odd to say that one of us is incorrect, that there is an objective truth to the matter. Instead, it seems more accurate to say that whether the notion of different sizes of infinite sets is mysterious is person relative. Likewise, whether God is mysterious is person relative.[29] If this is correct, then even if Murray rejects the view that God is mysterious, others may embrace it without contradiction. In turn, such individuals may reasonably believe that, at times, this mysterious God commands us to do that which is morally evil though He does not intend for us to fulfill such commands. Hence, for them, disobedience to God's command, particularly when they or their love ones have much to gain from it, may be a reasonable alternative to obedience.

The assumption that the divinely coerced individual does not have reasonable alternatives to obeying God's commands, then, is highly dubitable. For there seem to be numerous grounds for believing that the alternatives to obeying God's commands are not only reasonable but, in some cases, *more* reasonable than obeying His commands, even if disobedience results in the loss of eternal bliss and/or the procuring of eternal damnation.

To conclude: an attempt to reject (P3) by finding a significant disanalogy between losing the ability to develop morally significant characters through divine coercion and losing the ability to develop morally significant char-

acters through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions, though perhaps not hopeless, faces singificant difficulties.

VI. Conclusion

In his defense of God's hiddenness, Murray suggests that if God were not hidden, then some of us would lose the ability to develop a morally significant character through divine coercion, and this, in turn, would be bad. I have argued that Murray fails to recognize that if God is hidden, then some of us lose our ability to develop a morally significant character through inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions. And this, presumably, is equally bad. God's hiddenness, then, is no more compatible with our ability to develop morally significant characters than His nonhiddenness. And this (ironically) produces an argument for the nonexistence of God. Specifically, (P1), (P2), and (P3) – when conjoined with the tautology (P4) – entail that God does not exist via reductio.[30]

Notes

1. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1.
2. Ibid., 83.
3. *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. Michael J. Murray, "Deus Absconditus," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 63 and 68.
5. Ibid., 63, emphasis mine.
6. Ibid., 63.
7. Ibid., 64.
8. Ibid., 65.
9. Ibid., 63 and 65.
10. Ibid., 65.
11. Ibid., 65.
12. Ibid., 63.
13. For practical purposes, I have chosen to state (P2) as an indicative conditional rather than as a subjunctive or counterfactual conditional, though there is no major difference between the two since, in this case, we are dealing with present-tense conditionals. As Graham Priest states, there is no major difference between "If I shoot you, you will die" and "If I were to shoot you, you would die." See Graham Priest, *An Introduction to Non-Classical Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12.
14. Ibid., 70. Whether a desire induced by a threat is *sufficiently compelling* to coerce P depends on at least three factors: (1) threat strength, (2) threat imminence, and (3) threat indifference. And, according to Murray, the degree to which the desire compels P to act in accordance with the threat "is directly proportional to the first two and inversely proportional to the third." See "Deus Absconditus," 70–71.

15. Ibid., 70. See also Michael J. Murray, "Coercion and the Hiddenness of God," in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 244.
16. Murray, "Deus Absconditus," 67.
17. Some may object to my seeming caricature of the way God doles out punishments and rewards. Exactly how God goes about calculating who has acted in accordance with His will enough such that he deserves the very great good and who has not acted in accordance with His will enough such that he deserves the very great evil escapes me, and I do not intend to figure it out, as such is beyond the scope of this paper. I am only trying to state succinctly Murray's view that, at the end of the day (or, perhaps more appropriately, at the end of one's earthly life) God rewards some for behaving in accordance with His will and punishes others for not behaving in accordance with His will.
18. Murray, "Deus Absconditus," 67 and 75.
19. "Contributed to" or "conferred upon" may be preferable. But in the absence of a more rigorous metaphysic supplied by Murray, I cannot decide among them nonarbitrarily. Hence, I will stick with "instantiated in."
20. The following discussion is the result of careful consideration of an insightful objection raised by an anonymous referee.
21. This relation between intention and moral character is supported by deontologists such as Kant, among others. Of course, consequentialists (particularly utilitarians) reject this alleged relation between intention and moral character. But given the conception of God with which Murray is working, a God whose commands are typically understood in terms of duties and not consequences, it will not help Murray to reject the aforementioned relation by embracing a consequentialist moral theory.
22. For example, suppose Brown knows that terrorists have planted numerous bombs in supermarkets and have rigged soda machines in their respective parking lots to serve as detonators, and that radical philanthropists have planted cash dispensers in numerous supermarkets and have rigged soda machines in their respective parking lots to serve as activators. The next person to purchase a soda from one of the bomb-detonating soda machines will detonate a bomb in a supermarket, thereby killing scores of innocent human beings, while the next person to purchase a soda from these cash-dispensing soda machines will activate the cash dispensers, thereby lavishing enormous amounts of cash on the shoppers inside. Assuming that killing scores of innocents in this way is morally evil, the next person to purchase a soda from the bomb-detonating machines will take a morally evil course of action, while, assuming that lavishing enormous amounts of cash on the shoppers inside is a morally good course of action, the next person to purchase a soda from the cash-dispensing machines will take a morally good course of action. Suppose further that Brown relishes good deeds, and attempts to purchase a soda from what he erroneously and inculpably believes to be a cash-dispensing soda machine with the intention of dispensing enormous amounts of cash on the shoppers inside, and instead purchases a soda from a bomb-detonating soda machine. That is, Brown intends to choose a morally good course of action, but is inculpably ignorant of the fact that she is taking a moral evil course of action. Upon purchasing a soda from the machine, a bomb detonates which, to Brown's horror, kills scores of innocent human beings in the supermarket. Should our considered judgment be that Brown's taking this morally evil course of action fails to instantiate goodness, or worse, instantiates *badness* in his character? I think not. Rather, the fact that his intention was to choose what he believed erroneously and inculpably was a morally good course of action instantiates (at least some) goodness in his character.

23. Suppose that Jones also knows that terrorists have planted numerous bombs in supermarkets and have rigged soda machines in the parking lots to serve as detonators. However, unlike Brown, Jones does not know that radical philanthropists have planted cash dispensers in a number of other supermarkets and have rigged soda machines in their respective parking lots to serve as activators. Suppose further that Jones relishes evil deeds, and attempts to purchase a soda from what he believes to a bomb-detonating soda machine with the intention of killing scores of innocents in the supermarket, but instead purchases a soda from a cash-dispensing soda machine. That is, Jones intends to choose a morally evil course of action, but is inculpably ignorant of the fact that he is taking a moral good course of action. Upon purchasing a soda from the machine, the cash dispenser activates which, to his horror, lavishes enormous amounts of cash on the shoppers inside. Should our considered judgment be that Jones's taking this morally good course of action fails to instantiate badness, or worse, instantiates *goodness* to his character? I think not. Rather, the fact that his intention was to choose what he believed erroneously and inculpably was a morally evil course of action instantiates (at least some) badness in his character.
24. Murray, "Deus Absconditus," 75.
25. Of course, Murray may argue that one who lives a life of total disobedience to God's commands does indeed deserve eternal damnation; thus, it would not be morally evil for God to impose this punishment on such individuals. Let it suffice for now that I find such a view to be highly implausible and, for that reason and others, I will not address it here.
26. I am grateful to Paul Studtmann for pointing this out to me.
27. Presumably, the moral principle upon which the slaveholder rests his right to coerce his slaves would be, roughly: "It is morally permissible to subjugate the interests of certain human beings to those of others on the basis of their race."
28. Suppose Joe's means to creating that human being involved rape. Surely he does not have legitimate authority over the human he created.
29. Indeed, presumably God does not find Himself to be mysterious, while others do.
30. Thanks to Paul Studtmann for his invaluable comments. Without his input, this paper would be a mere shadow of what it is today.

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