

Religious Disagreement and Divine Hiddenness

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Recently, religious disagreement has been receiving a lot of attention.¹ While religious diversity is nothing new, philosophers have been giving a lot more thought to the epistemic significance of disagreement in general and to religious disagreement in particular. This shift is perhaps due to a greater appreciation of religious diversity and of genuinely pious individuals in different religious traditions, including those with no religious tradition at all. Given such an appreciation, the worry begins, how can it be rational for anyone to maintain their own religious beliefs? After all, many find it dubious that they can account for the diversity of religious belief by positing that they (and like-minded believers) are free from bias in ways others aren't, possess some special evidence others are unaware of,² enjoy greater intelligence, or

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I develop and respond to a novel objection to conciliatory views of disagreement. Having first explained conciliationism and the problem of divine hiddenness, I develop an objection that conciliationism exacerbates the problem of divine hiddenness. According to this objection, conciliationism increases God's hiddenness in both its scope and severity, and is thus incompatible with God's existence (or at least make God's existence quite improbable). I respond to this objection by showing that the problem of divine hiddenness is not made any worse by conciliationism.

1. In addition to the essays in this volume, see Tomas Bogardus, "Disagreeing with the (Religious) Sceptic," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013): 5–17; Helen De Cruz, "Religious Disagreement: An Empirical Study among Academic Philosophers," *Episteme* 14 (2017): 71–87; Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 194–214; Jennifer Lackey, "Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously," in *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, ed. Laura Frances Callahan and Timothy O'Connor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 299–316; Jonathan Matheson, "Disagreement Scepticism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," in *The Mystery of Scepticism*, ed. Ted Poston and Kevin McCain (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming); and John Pittard "Conciliationism and Religious Disagreement," in *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, ed. Michael Bergmann and Patrick Kain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80–100.

2. While religious experience may be thought to provide an important asymmetry here, see Matheson, "Disagreement Scepticism and the Rationality of Religious Belief" for an argument that appealing to it fails to adequately safeguard religious belief from the threat of disagreement.

are on the whole more intellectually virtuous. Lacking such an account of the diversity of religious belief, however, the worry only becomes stronger.

Conciliatory views of disagreement are moved by this worry and maintain that doxastic conciliation is called for once one has appreciated these facts. In contrast, Steadfast views of disagreement attempt to resist this worry and provide an account of how one can rationally retain one's belief in the face of disagreement. In what follows, I will consider a novel objection to conciliationism. According to this objection, conciliationism has the consequence that God is far more hidden than people have thought. While it is clear that God's existence could be more evident, the objection claims that conciliationism exacerbates the problem. Further, the objection claims that this greater scope and severity of hiddenness is incompatible with God's existence, or at least makes God's existence quite improbable. While conciliationism has been resisted for having overly skeptical consequences—what some see as untenable epistemic consequences—the objection to be examined here focuses instead on the moral, or religious, consequences of such a view of the epistemic significance of disagreement.

In this paper, I will first explain conciliationism (section 1) and the problem of divine hiddenness (section 2). I will then develop an objection that conciliationism exacerbates the problem of divine hiddenness in section 3. In section 4 I respond to this objection and defend conciliationism from this moral/religious objection.

1. Conciliationism

Conciliationism maintains that discovering that someone disagrees with your belief that p gives you a defeater for that belief. All else being equal, the acquisition of such a defeater will call for a reduction in confidence that the disputed proposition is true—it will call for some conciliation. Conciliatory views can differ in terms of how strong that defeater is (that is, how much conciliation is called for) and in terms of what considerations can defeat such a defeater (that is, what legitimate defeater-defeaters there are).³ Conciliationism has been thought to have quite skeptical consequences by both its defenders and its detractors. Roughly, the argument can be put as follows:

- (1) If conciliationism is correct, then for any sufficiently controversial proposition, if you are aware of the extant controversy surrounding it, then you possess a full defeater for any justification you have to believe that proposition.

3. This follows Jonathan Matheson, *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement* (London: Palgrave, 2015).

- (2) If you possess a full defeater for any justification you have to believe a proposition, then you do not know or reasonably believe that proposition.
- (3) So, if conciliationism is correct, then for any sufficiently controversial proposition, if you are aware of the extant controversy surrounding it, then you do not know or reasonably believe that proposition.

Premise (1) is motivated by the constitutive claims of conciliationism. If each disagreeing interlocutor presents you with a defeater for your belief, then your awareness of a vast controversy surrounding a proposition supplies you with sufficiently many defeaters of sufficient strength to entirely undermine any justification you had for believing that proposition.⁴ Premise (2) follows from the meaning of a full defeater. A defeater is full just in case it renders the defeated belief unjustified, and unjustified beliefs cannot be items of knowledge or be reasonably held. The conclusion, (3), validly follows from (1) and (2).

Religious beliefs, such as the belief that God exists, appear to fit the bill for sufficiently controversial beliefs; so conciliationism seems to have it that those aware of the controversy surrounding God's existence neither know that God exists nor reasonably believe that God exists.

I'm not going to address this skeptical argument or its application to religious belief. Such tasks have been taken up elsewhere.⁵ Rather, I will take the argument and its application to religious belief for granted, and examine a different sort of problem that may arise for conciliationism. According to this objection, not only does conciliationism have it that religious belief is not rational, conciliationism has it that it is rational to believe that God does not exist. The idea here is that we can supplement the above argument with some considerations regarding the nature of God and reasonably conclude that God does not exist since God would not leave us in the epistemic position that conciliationism has it that we are in. So, in a sense this objection highlights what we might call the moral or religious consequences of a Conciliatory view of disagreement. While God's existence could be more evident, the thought goes, surely God would not make it irrational to believe that he exists. Since conciliationists have it that religious belief is irrational, they appear to also have it that God is concealed to a degree that no loving and perfect being would be. So, the focus of this paper is whether the skeptical consequences of conciliationism exacerbate the problem of divine hiddenness to the extent that it is reasonable to endorse atheism.

4. For a more detailed defense of this premise, see Brandon Carey and Jonathan Matheson, "How Skeptical Is the Equal Weight View?," in *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego Machuca (New York: Routledge, 2013), 131–49.

5. In Matheson, "Disagreement Skepticism and the Rationality of Religious Belief," I examine whether the skeptical consequences apply to religious beliefs, and in what sense religious belief would be irrational. See also Feldman's "Reasonable Religious Disagreement."

2. *The Problem of Divine Hiddenness*

The problem of divine hiddenness is an argument for atheism from non-belief. Roughly, the idea is that nonbelief is a kind of evidence for the nonexistence of God. After all, if God exists, wouldn't he make his presence more obvious given his desire to enter into relationship with us? The argument can be put as follows:

- (4) If a perfectly loving God exists, then reasonable, nonculpable, non-belief does not occur.
- (5) Reasonable, nonculpable, nonbelief does occur.
- (6) So, a perfectly loving God does not exist.⁶

Premise (4) is plausible since God, being all-loving and perfect, would want to have a relationship with all willing people that could enter into such a relationship with him, and believing that God exists appears to be necessary for such a relationship. Given this, God would ensure that there would not exist cases of unreasonable or nonculpable/nonresistant nonbelief. Put differently, if God exists, every case of nonbelief would be a case where the individual was being irrational in not believing or was culpable for being in her state of nonbelief (perhaps by ignoring the evidence). Premise (5) is motivated by noting that there appear to be many nonbelievers who are fully open to believing that God exists were they to be given sufficient evidence. For instance, many agnostics and atheists are not only open to believing that God exists; they even express hope that it is true that God exists. The only obstacle to belief, for such individuals, appears to be a lack of sufficient evidence. Given (4) and (5), it follows that God does not exist.⁷

3. *The Amplified Problem of Divine Hiddenness*

While the problem of divine hiddenness focuses on the existence of reasonable and nonculpable nonbelief, when coupled with conciliationism, the problem can naturally be thought to expand in both its *scope* and *severity*. Recall that according to conciliationism those aware of the controversy surrounding God's existence do not know or reasonably believe that God exists. So, if conciliationism is correct, then not only do *some nonbelievers* lack sufficient grounds for religious belief, but *every aware believer* also lacks

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

7. For a fuller treatment of the problem of divine hiddenness see Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, ed. *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); J. L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness: Part 1 (Recent Work on the Hiddenness Argument)," *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12355>; and J. L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness: Part 2 (Recent Enlargements of the Discussion)," *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12413>.

such grounds. If conciliationism is correct, then there is a sense in which even theists should not believe that God exists.⁸ In fact, on such a view, the only theists who are reasonable in believing God exists are those that are so isolated from the broader world that they are unaware of the relevant controversy. So, conciliationism seems to extend to both *from whom* God is hidden and *how* hidden God is. God would not be hidden merely from a few nonbelievers, but many (if not most) believers would also be irrational in believing that God exists. Since all who are aware of the controversy surrounding God's existence would not be reasonable in believing God exists, the scope of divine hiddenness greatly increases on conciliationism. So, conciliationism has it that there is much more rational, nonculpable nonbelief in the world, or at least that there should be (were more theist to believe in accordance with their evidence).

Further, the degree of God's hiddenness also increases on conciliationism. The problem here is not simply that God's existence could be more evident or more compelling, but rather that those aware of the relevant controversy do not even have, on balance, reason to believe that God exists. It's not just that things could get better, but it's that things are pretty bad. For instance, conciliationism has it that God's existence is as hidden as the truth of whether there is an odd number of geese in Canada. Regarding whether there is an odd number of geese in Canada, belief is irrational. On balance, our evidence does not support that this proposition is true. That makes the truth of this proposition quite hidden, and surely, God would not have his own existence hidden to such a degree. Even if God could always give more reason to believe that he exists, failing to give more reason to believe that God exists than not, is to be hidden to a remarkable degree. So, there is good reason to believe that Conciliatory views of disagreement amplify the problem of divine hiddenness by increasing both the scope and the severity of God's hiddenness.

We can put the amplified problem of divine hiddenness as follows:

- (7) If conciliationism is true, then God is very hidden to very many.
- (8) If God is very hidden to very many, then God does not exist.
- (9) If conciliationism is true, then God does not exist.

Premise (7) is plausible since conciliationism has it that any individual aware of the extensive disagreement surrounding God's existence lacks on balance reason to believe that God exists. Lacking on balance reason to believe God exists results in God being quite hidden. For such individuals, not only could God's existence be more evident, it is not even more evident than not. Further, if conciliationism is true, very many individuals find themselves in such a situation since very many are aware of the extensive disagreement about God's existence. Premise (8) is motivated in the same ways as premise (4) in

8. For a further exploration of what sense this is, see Matheson, "Disagreement Skepticism and the Rationality of Religious Belief."

the traditional argument from divine hiddenness, though (8) is much easier to motivate. While (4) focuses on the mere existence of reasonable, nonculpable nonbelief, (8) concerns the great scope and severity of God's hiddenness.⁹ But, given (7) and (8), we get (9).

While not all will find such a moral/religious consequence of conciliationism problematic, such a consequence would likely be of great concern to those with religious commitments. It is one thing to entail that religious belief is unreasonable (as we are granting that conciliationism does), but another to entail that atheism is the reasonable response to the evidence. The idea here is that the amplified argument from divine hiddenness can pick up where the skeptical argument from disagreement left off, creating an even more powerful argument that God does not exist. According to such an argument, conciliationism has it that we are not rational in believing God exists, and the amplified argument from divine hiddenness adds that God would not allow us to be in such an epistemic situation. Such an argument may even be seen as a sufficient reason to reject conciliationism. However, in what follows I will challenge the claim that conciliationism has such a problematic moral or religious consequence.

4. Responses

The first thing to note is that the problem of divine hiddenness exists regardless of whether conciliationism is correct or not. Independent of whether disagreement has any epistemic significance, there is an argument to be made from the absence of religious belief to atheism. Indeed, the problem of divine hiddenness predates the contemporary debate over the epistemic significance of disagreement. So, there is a problem of divine hiddenness that the theist must confront regardless of whether or not conciliationism is true. Either way, theists need a response to this problem; either way, theists need a story as to why it is not more evident that God exists.

That said, we have seen reason to believe that conciliationism exacerbates any existing problem of divine hiddenness. After all, according to conciliationism it is not just that we could have more epistemic justification for believing that God exists; it is that we don't even have reasons that on balance make it reasonable for us to believe that God exists. So, even if there is a problem of divine hiddenness independent of conciliationism, don't such

9. In this way the difference between the traditional and amplified versions of the problem of divine hiddenness mirror the differences between the logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil. Whereas the logical problem of evil concerns the mere existence of evil, the evidential problem of evil concerns the amount and severity of the evil in the world. This makes the evidential problem a more formidable problem. In the same way the amplified problem of divine hiddenness moves away from the mere existence of rational, nonculpable, nonbelief to appreciating the degree to which God is hidden from so many (at least if conciliationism is true).

views of disagreement make the problem significantly worse? And isn't that a distinctive problem?

There are a couple of things that can be said in response here. First, it is not clear that the problem of divine hiddenness really is any worse if conciliationism is correct. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that the problem of divine hiddenness is actually no worse of a problem if conciliationism is true. For one thing, conciliationism does not make any claims about what first-order evidence there is for believing that God exists, or how good or conclusive that first-order evidence is. First-order evidence for a proposition is evidence that directly pertains to the truth of that proposition, whereas higher-order evidence regarding a proposition is evidence about the evidence for that proposition. So, the perceptual appearance of a computer in front of me is first-order evidence that there is a computer in front of me, and my optometrist's testimony that my eyes are in good working order is higher-order evidence since it speaks to the quality of my first-order perceptual evidence. With this distinction in hand, we can see that conciliationism does not entail anything about the actual quantity or quality of the first-order evidence we have regarding God's existence. In other words, it is consistent with conciliationism that there is excellent and abundant first-order evidence that God exists. In fact, there may be all the first-order evidence we think that God would give us. According to conciliationism, what prevents us from having on balance reason to believe that God exists is the defeater we are given coming from our awareness of the disagreement about the quantity and quality of that first-order evidence. The controversy over the quantity and quality of that evidence has it that we should suspend judgment as to what that first-order evidence supports; so this higher-order evidence defeats the justificatory power of the first-order evidence.¹⁰ However, the existence of such disagreements does not itself impugn the actual quantity or quality of that first-order evidence, only what we are reasonable in believing about it. It could be that God gave us more than enough evidence of his existence, but we have a somewhat self-imposed problem given our disagreements over the issue, and we are thus left unable to have a reasonable religious belief.

To better see this, it will be helpful to revisit David Christensen's familiar Restaurant Check case.

Restaurant Check

Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It's time to pay the check, so the question we're interested in is how much we each owe. We can all see the bill total clearly, we all agree to give a 20 percent tip, and we further agree to split the whole cost evenly, not worrying over who asked for imported water, or skipped dessert, or drank more of the wine. I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our

10. For a more detailed defense of this account of defeat, see Jonathan Matheson, "Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 269–79.

shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$45 each.¹¹

Christensen's Restaurant Check case helps motivate conciliationism since intuitively both parties should significantly reduce their confidence in the shares of the bill. This case is often used to support a Conciliatory view of disagreement according to which neither party is reasonable in maintaining their original belief in the shares owed, at least not until some further evidence is acquired. So, the Restaurant Check case motivates a skeptical conclusion by way of the parties' awareness of the disagreement. Since both parties are justified in suspending judgment about what the first-order evidence in fact supports, they are also justified in suspending judgment about the shares. It is important to note here, that this skeptical conclusion does not imply that there is anything defective about the bill or the server that provided it. The bill gives a clear total and while there is a problem that leads to a skeptical conclusion, the problem is not with the bill itself. The bill contains sufficient evidence to determine the shares. The problem, and the skeptical result, comes from the fact that the dining parties disagree about what that evidence supports, but this does not show that the first-order evidence does not decisively support a particular conclusion about the shares. Given the nature of mathematics, it does. What leads to the skeptical conclusion is that the dining parties are rational in suspending judgment about what their shared evidence supports regarding the shares. Since they are reasonable in suspending judgment about what their evidence supports, neither party is rational in maintaining their belief about the shares of the bill. But there still is a fact of the matter about what the shares are, and about what that first-order evidence supports, even if the fact of disagreement prevents either party from reasonably believing these things. Further, while the server could have done more to make the shares clearer (for example, giving separate checks, providing a calculator), the server should not be thought of as giving inconclusive evidence regarding the shares. So, the moral of the story here is that conciliationism arrives at its skeptical consequences not by way of rejecting the quantity or quality of the relevant first-order evidence. Rather, the disagreement over the first-order evidence leads to a justified suspension of judgment regarding what that evidence supports. So, disagreement can lead to skeptical conclusions even when the first-order evidence is quite decisive.¹²

Applied to religious disagreement and divine hiddenness, it is true that God could have done more to make his existence more evident. However, this is just to say that the original problem of divine hiddenness is indeed a

11. David Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 193.

12. Further, when there is decisive first-order evidence it does not entail that one of the disagreeing parties had an irrational belief (only right reasons view has such a consequence).

problem that needs to be addressed. The fact that extensive disagreement regarding God's existence leaves us in a skeptical state does not entail that the first-order evidence regarding God's existence is defective or even that it is not in fact conclusive evidence. Given the extensive disagreement about quantity and quality of such evidence, it is not reasonable for us to believe that the relevant first-order evidence conclusively supports God's existence, but such a state is compatible with the first-order evidence doing just that. So, simply because we cannot know or reasonably believe that God exists due to the extensive disagreement, it does not follow that God did not give sufficient evidence of his existence. It may be that conclusive evidence exists, but our awareness of the human state of disagreement defeats its epistemic impact. So, it is plausible that (8) is not any more plausible than (4), at least if the reason for the increased scope and severity of hiddenness comes from disagreement.

The second reason to doubt that the problem of divine hiddenness is worse if conciliationism is correct, is that it seems plausible that a number of the response strategies to the original problem of divine hiddenness will apply equally well to the amplified problem. Even if conciliationism has it that the scope and severity of divine hiddenness is increased, these proposed solutions to the more traditional problem of divine hiddenness, if good, are equally capable of responding to this strengthened version of the problem. Put differently, many objections to (4) work equally well as objections to (8). That the solutions would end up 'doing more' (in some sense) if conciliationism is true is of no real significance in this respect. The amplified problem of divine hiddenness is amplified in appearance only.

To see this, let's consider two broad responses to the problem of divine hiddenness: a skeptical theist response, and a "God owes us nothing" response. Let's consider these in reverse order. According to the "God owes us nothing" response, God has no obligations whatsoever in terms of how he must reveal himself to his creatures. If God owes nothing to his creatures, then the traditional problem of divine hiddenness is solved. God need not make his existence more evident since God need not do anything with respect to his creatures. On this view, premise (4) is simply false. However, if correct, this response would equally solve the amplified problem of divine hiddenness. If God owes his creatures nothing, then there is no particular amount of evidence that God must provide, nor must God ensure that believing in his existence is rational; so (8) is also false. It may be that Conciliatory views of disagreement have it that God is more hidden, but if God owes us nothing on this front, then such greater hiddenness is not problematic. So, this first response to the problem of divine hiddenness, if successful, also diffuses the amplified problem.

According to the skeptical theist response to the problem of divine hiddenness, we humans are in no position to judge whether God would have a

justifying reason to remain hidden. On this response, human cognitive limitations make us unable to come to justified beliefs about what God would have, on balance, reason to do. So, our cognitive limitations leave us unable to form a justified belief about what God has, on balance, reasons to do. On this view, premise (4) is left unmotivated. However, if this response to the traditional problem of divine hiddenness succeeds, then it will also address (8) in the amplified version of this problem. If humans cannot form justified beliefs about what God would have on balance reason to do, then we cannot form justified beliefs about how evident God would need to make his existence to how many people. So, on this second response to the problem of divine hiddenness, conciliationism doesn't make the problem any worse.¹³

My task here is not to evaluate these broad responses to the problem of divine hiddenness. Rather, my point is that if such responses to the problem of divine hiddenness work, then they answer the amplified version of the problem as well. The reasons that God would have to be hidden apply equally well to have us be epistemically justified in suspending judgment as to whether God exists. This is particularly clear when we take into account that conciliationism makes no claims about what first-order evidence God may have provided us with. In addition, if we are not in an epistemic position to judge what reasons God would have to reveal or not reveal God's existence, or how they add up, then we are not in a position to judge whether God would not have the world be such that creatures are epistemically justified in suspending judgment about God's existence.

Finally, it is worth noting that conciliationism also provides the resources to respond to the problem of divine hiddenness (both the traditional and amplified version). After all, whether the problem of divine hiddenness is in fact a real problem is itself a deeply contentious philosophical issue. Plausibly, the issue is suitably contentious, and conciliationism would have us suspend judgment about whether these arguments for atheism are successful. While the amplified problem of divine hiddenness uses the skeptical consequences of conciliationism to strengthen an argument for atheism, the controversy (or at least reasonably expected controversy) surrounding the success of this amplified argument also undermines the success of it. So, if conciliationism is correct, then there is a new avenue of response to the problem of divine hiddenness opened up. Since the successfulness of argument

13. Further, the skeptical theist's motivation for his view fits quite nicely with conciliationism. For more on this connection, see Jonathan Matheson, "Skeptical Theism and Phenomenal Conservatism," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, ed. Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–20. Both views emphasize intellectual humility and place great weight on human epistemic fallibility. While conciliationism motivates its skeptical conclusions by way of disagreement, skeptical theists typically motivate their skeptical conclusion by noting the limited cognitive capabilities of human agents. The skeptical motivation for conciliationism is more social in nature (the problems lie in the distribution of opinions), whereas the skeptical motivation for skeptical theism is more individualistic (the problems lie internal to the cognizer), but they each motivate a skeptical conclusion for similar reasons.

from divine hiddenness is itself a deeply contentious issue, conciliationism has it that we are not rational in believing that such an argument is successful. In this way, conciliationism also provides a defense to the problem of divine hiddenness (in both its forms).

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined a novel objection to conciliationism. According to this objection, conciliationism exacerbates the problem of divine hiddenness, making God hidden to a degree that would make his existence implausible. However, we have seen that there are resources within conciliationism to respond to such a worry; this moral or religious objection to conciliationism fails.¹⁴

14. Thanks to Chad Bogosian, Paul Copan, Kirk Lougheed, and Ted Poston for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.