**Epistemic Paradox as a Solution to Divine Hiddenness**

**Abstract:** I offer a new, limited solution to divine hiddenness based on a particular epistemic paradox: sometimes, agents knowing about a desired outcome or relevant features of that desired outcome would prevent the outcome in question from occurring. I call these cases *epistemically self-defeating situations.* This solution, in essence, says that divine hiddenness or silence is a *necessary feature* of at least some morally excellent or desirable states of affairs. Given the nature of the paradox, an omniscient being cannot completely eliminate hiddenness, just as an omnipotent being cannot create a rock so heavy that they cannot lift it. Epistemically self-defeating situations provide an undercutting defeater for the assumption that any nonresistant nonbeliever could *always*, at any time, be in conscious relationship with a perfectly loving God. Thankfully, silence is a temporary feature of epistemically self-defeating situations: once the outcome is achieved, agents can know in full.

*“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NASB)*

**I. Introduction**

Problems of divine hiddenness are taken to be at least *prima facie* reason to think that God does not exist. God, if such a being exists, is supposed to be perfectly loving. But there appear to be people who, through no fault of their own, do not have a relationship with God despite their best efforts. How could a perfectly loving God remain hidden from such non-resistant non-believers?

Proponents of hiddenness arguments against the existence of God assume that the answer is that God does not exist. If God is omnipotent and omniscient (a central assumption to many theists), the only impediments to divine-creaturely relationship could come from character defects, either human or divine. And since God has every perfection, the defect must not be God’s—a perfect being would not hide from people sincerely seeking a relationship. But since it seems that there are people who fail to believe through no fault of their own, proponents of this style of argument conclude that God does not exist (see Schellenberg 2007 & 2015 for some of the most famous arguments to this effect).

I agree that discussions about whether suffering individuals—reporting divine silence despite seeking God—truly *are* nonculpable or nonresistant is a deeply dangerous business and best avoided (brief citations needed here?). Theists who take the book of Job seriously are biblically warned against the danger of universally denying such self-reports—canonically, there *are* people who nonculpably and nonresistantly suffer from divine silence. (This appears to be true regardless of debates about the historicity of Job—the book is, importantly, part of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew bible. If Job is simply an “everyman” character, it is all the more reason to take the nonculpability of those suffering silence seriously.) I also wish to avoid the risky business of potentially reevaluating God’s character, and whether perfect love might look radically different than we might expect (for arguments that the requirements of perfection are radically different, see Murphy 2017 and Rea 2018).

I argue that discussions of hiddenness have overlooked something important: there are epistemic constraints that arise not due to the effort, openness, or moral structure of agents, but rather the limitations of states of affairs themselves—limitations that even an omniscient and omnipotent being couldn’t eliminate, on pain of contradiction. We have overlooked an important feature of human life and action: knowledge and abilities are time-indexed. Even if we have a general capacity—to know, relate to another, or some other relationship-relevant ability—these capacities are had or exercised *at a time*. Beliefs are held at a time; actions performed at a time.

With this time-indexing limitation in mind, I offer a new solution to divine hiddenness by focusing on a particular temporal epistemic paradox: sometimes, knowing about a desired outcome or relevant features of that desired outcome would actively prevent the outcome from occurring. For example, a camera-shy individual will not be able to act naturally for photographs, should they know pictures are being taken. I call these *epistemically self-defeating situations*.

I propose that the outcomes of some epistemically self-defeating situations are desirable or even morally excellent. If this is the case, then we have a partial solution to divine hiddenness: some instances of divine hiddenness or silence is a *necessary feature* of at least some morally excellent or desirable states of affairs. Thus, God is morally permitted (and possibly morally required) to remain silent in those cases. The necessity of God’s silence does not automatically tell against God’s omniscience or omnipotence; anything to the contrary would result in paradox. Our approach in these cases should be similar, I argue, to the impossibility of God’s creating a rock so heavy that God cannot lift it. What is at issue is not God or God’s power, but rather the contradictory requirements specified (i.e., *being able to create an unliftable rock* and *being able to lift anything*). So, too, for certain epistemic cases. Epistemically self-defeating situations show that there are some particular cases in which God could not always have us be aware of the desired outcome, and that there can be case-specific reasons for silence.

A feature (or bug) of this view is that it is epistemically self-insulating: for any specific case in which we ask why God might have to remain silent, there are likely further reasons why God must remain silent about God’s silence. A benefit of the view is that it avoids the objection that our skepticism about God’s reasons undermines our reason in ordinary moral cases (see Almeida and Oppy 2003). Human moral responsibilities, reasoning, and actions should remain the same—if this were not the case, the desirable outcomes described in the paradox would also not exist. Our ordinary moral reasoning and action—and God’s silence—are what we should expect in such cases.

To make this case, I will proceed as follows. First, I will describe epistemically self-defeating situations, demonstrating both their existence and their application to problems of divine hiddenness. I will motivate their application to divine hiddenness in two stages: first, to particular example cases and then more generally, showing how epistemically self-defeating situations are an undercutting defeater to a key premise in Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument. The possibility of epistemically self-defeating situations demonstrates that always being open to a [certain kind of?] relationship with someone does not entail that one is, at a particular time, in [that kind of?] relationship even if both parties desire it.

Essential, time-limiting and time-indexed features of relationships are also offered by many theists in response to hiddenness arguments, such as examples of parental relationships with children (citation), mending broken relationships (citation), or getting to know someone (citation). The solution I provide can, potentially, be a helpful framework for understanding the application of these sorts of examples.

I conclude by answering objections to my view and noting some important shortcomings.

Mad at me note here :)

The defense/solution must be tackled in two stages:

1. Demonstration of the type of paradox in question (and the necessity of silence/hiddenness)
2. A defense of the (moral) permissibility of these cases’

**II. Epistemically Self-Defeating Situations**

**What they are and what they aren’t**

I argue that a general epistemic paradox helps explain why God might remain hidden. This solution is limited, as it does not obviously apply to every case. But this epistemic paradox affects knowers in more ordinary contexts, and I will argue that this paradox applies even in divine cases.

*Epistemically self-defeating* situations are ones in which particular outcomes are impossible to achieve if the relevant agents know about them. The heart of this paradox is the following: even if something is foreseeable [by an agent], it is not necessarily communicable [to other agents]. This problem is the inverse of self-fulfilling prophecies, wherein knowing about a particular outcome is the very thing which brings the outcome about.[[1]](#footnote-1) In epistemically self-defeating situations, knowing about a particular outcome—or key details related to that outcome—actively prevents that desired outcome from occurring.

For example, suppose I make you this offer: “I will give you one million dollars as long as you don’t think about pink elephants within the next few seconds.” In this situation, it is impossible for you to both (a) understand my offer and (b) receive the million dollars. Understanding my offer entails (at least briefly) thinking about pink elephants.

The above offer appears unacceptably arbitrary, especially if applied to a divine being who supposedly wants a relationship with their creation. Surely an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being who *wanted* us to have good things would not make our receipt of such things dependent on “pink elephant”-style conditions.

However, some directives or situations appear to be epistemically or pragmatically self-defeating by their very nature (e.g., “Act natural” said to someone not used to the camera or “Calm down!” uttered in the heat of an argument). A photographer who truly wants an amateur subject to “act natural” will often not inform their subjects that they’re taking candid photos. The knowledge that the photos are being taken would make the individual unable to properly relax.

Making salient some features of success can ensure success is not presently achievable in a way that is broader than mere performative contradiction. This is, arguably, part of what is behind the phenomenon of “choking” in professional sports—focus is drawn to the wrong thing at the wrong time. Cases of this nature need not be relegated to the individual, either. Suppose there is an incredibly accurate predictor, who can assess the outcomes of, say, basketball games. It seems possible that the predictor can be in the following situation: After Jones scores, with a minute to go, the predictor knows “that was the winning point of the game”. But the predictor also knows that no players of the game can be made aware of this. Jones is currently full of energy; her opponents are flagging. But if Jones were to know that was the winning point, she would relax, and her opponents would score.

This phenomenon exists even if we assume that predictions are probabilistic, rather than infallible. Politicians, for example, are greatly concerned with depressed voter turn-out. Letting voters know that it looks like Candidate Y will win can make it so Candidate Y loses, due to lower voter turn-out from their supporters.

Epistemically self-defeating situations are thus a particular brand of self-defeating prophecy. I give the situations I discuss their own label for two reasons. First, some self-defeating prophecies arise in contexts in which we *want* the relevant agents to know about the potential outcome in question because we want to prevent the outcome from occurring. For instance, a doctor will tell their patient about their cancer diagnosis in the hopes that the prediction that cancer will kill them is false—with the goal that cancer treatment will prevent the otherwise foreseen outcome which would have occurred without the knowledge being imparted. When the ultimate outcome of a self-defeating prophecy is negative, we aim to tell the agent in order to prevent the outcome. I focus instead on cases in which the outcome is positive. In these cases, the agent(s) aren’t told in order to (help) ensure that the positive outcome is achieved—if they knew of the outcome at particular times, this knowledge would ensure the outcome did not happen. It's not entirely apt to call these cases self-defeating prophecies, then, since the whole goal is to not communicate information at a time in the hope that the foreseen outcome might occur.

Second, I want to focus on the epistemic status of the individuals in epistemic situations, rather than the objects or agents which could provide prophecies. Epistemically self-defeating situations result from the realities of knowers at times—they do not result simply from performative contradictions (such as a self-refuting idea or liar paradox). The foreseen state of affairs is possible; it’s simply that some actors cannot know the full state of affairs (or even key portions of it) at some times.

Example applied more generally: always open to having a party thrown for me does not entail that, at every time, I know whether there is a party (example: friends having a surprise party for me. If I knew about it at all times, wouldn’t be a surprise)

**Permissibility of ESDS:**

Consequentialists (and perhaps those generally in favor of greater goods defenses) will see the appeal of such a solution. If it is not possible for an exceedingly good (or perhaps best) outcome to occur without ɸ occurring, then it is morally permissible to a allow ɸ. However, at this point some general concerns which apply to greater goods defenses might also surface here: it is not enough that a greater good come about if it is at the expense of agents who never see the benefit of that good.

But paying attention to the nature of epistemically self-defeating situations shows that the agents involved can (eventually) directly benefit. God is not necessarily hidden or silent forever, and in these sorts of cases the agent may very likely agree that it was better that they did not know at the time and that it is indeed worth it in the end. Thus, the silence that is a necessary feature of epistemically self-defeating situations fits well with the responses to the problem of evil in which God makes it up to the individual sufferer in question (Stump, 2018). Specifically, divine silence can be in integral part of an organic unity of goodness, to which the sufferer ultimately assents and desires (fulfilling the condition set forth in Adams (1999)).

For example, suppose you feel led to become good friends with Jack. Due to this friendship, you eventually begin to see Jack’s workplace harassment of his co-worker James. You become friends with James through Jack, and James confides in you. Without a friendship of the very specific nature you have with Jack, you would have never been in a position to witness the harassment, nor been in a situation to report it and make it cease. This process causes you to lose your original friendship with Jack.

Had you known the type of person Jack was originally, you never would have become friends with him in the first place. And this would have prevented your friendship with, and ultimately helping, James. But you may, in the end, be glad for your initial ignorance due to the good outcome.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Parenthetical comment here: there are more convincing cases that can be made, but which make use of stories which are not mine to tell. I trust that a charitable reader will be able to think of convincing enough cases from their own experiences—at least, convincing enough to initially entertain the defense in question.)

**Making the case more plausible:**

[Intricacies of human action – cannot befriend someone you already believe to be morally abominable (at least, not as long as you’re not abominable yourself!). Could try to act as if, but that gets back into the “act natural” problem – spy craft is difficult!]

**Put this above or below?**

Not enough attention has been given to the fact that beliefs are held *at a time* (time-indexed nature of belief)

Mathematical truths comparison: always or atemporally true (depending on your theory) but my beliefs about them aren’t

[A solution, not the solution

A particular, limited application (not general or comprehensive)

Not comprehensive solution but responding to a key motivation of Schellenberg (which can apply to other arguments, possibly with problem of evil, too)

**Biblical Case:** The story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) is arguably this sort of case. If Joseph’s brothers had known the true meaning of Joseph’s dreams—that he would save them from famine—the story would have never happened. It’s also one interpretation of the explanation (or lack thereof) that God gives Job (Job 38-41).

**III. Schellenberg Revisited**

**From earlier:**

But there are multiple problems of divine hiddenness, and particularly pressing is a more general concern: Why do people who want a relationship with God lack their desired relationship with God, or even awareness that God exists? On the assumption that God does not exist, this silence or absence is not puzzling. But if God exists and is perfectly good, then it is puzzling.

J.L. Schellenberg is the standard-bearer for those who think that a perfect being *couldn’t* remain hidden or silent from those who are seeking them—due to God’s perfections, God would always be open to relationship with their creation, such that any created being who wanted relationship with God could have it just by trying.[[3]](#footnote-3) (CITATION!) I call this the *no hiddenness intuition.* Epistemically self-defeating situations can be used more generally, to provide an undercutting defeater to the no hiddenness intuition: a general desire for relationship or openness does not entail that, for every time, every willing individual believes that God exists and has a conscious relationship with God.

Notably, this solution does not necessarily soften pastoral problems of divine hiddenness felt at a particular time, nor lessen the pain of the sufferer. But it does offer one way in which a sufferer might ultimately assent to the state of affairs in question, perhaps when they eventually understand the reasons for divine hiddenness or silence (this is of particular importance to the view Adams 2006 and 1999 presents, which I discuss in the last section). Any purported solution to divine hiddenness may be upsetting, in virtue of the kind of discussion that it is. I thus invite the reader to get angry with me, as I speak without solving some pastoral problems. But if I’m right, any resultant anger contributes to or is a part of a good-making feature of the world as well.

One advantage of this focus, however, is that it avoids potential pitfalls of previous conversations. Responses to hiddenness arguments against the existence of God are now well-trodden ground. Perhaps God is not always open to relationship in the way that we would desire or think (see Rea 2018). There is also debate about whether there truly are non-resistant non-believers (see CITATIONS).

I have no desire to dispute either the assumption that God, as a perfect being, would always be open to relationship with creation nor that there are non-culpable non-believers; they strike me as eminently plausible.[[4]](#footnote-4) I will thus assume that a divine perfection is being perfectly loving, which entails openness to relationship with created beings, and that some people fail to have a relationship with God through no fault of their own.

Adopting these assumptions allows us to bypass entirely the fraught business of making particularly contentious rulings on individuals’ character—human or divine. I have a special desire to heed the warnings of the book of Job, which both explicitly affirms that people who have done no wrong are not always able to have the particular relationship with God they desire and shows that giving answers on behalf of God is a dangerous business indeed. (Job 1 tells us that Job is blameless, but Job is not granted his desired audience with God until the end of the book. All of Job’s friends have given incorrect accounts which require repentance, see Job 42:7-9). I thus enter the project with fear and trembling and desire to avoid any answer which may have hints of victim-blaming.

Schellenberg frames a key intuition, which I’ll label the “no hiddenness intuition” as follows: “If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists” (2015: 103).[[5]](#footnote-5) Since there appear to be people in nonresistant states of nonbelief—that is, people who fail to believe or have a relationship with God through no fault of their own—proponents of hiddenness arguments think we can run a quick modus tollens against the existence of God.

**Beginning of original material for this section:**

Here, it seems reasonable to raise the classic concern: Doesn’t this just push the problem back a step? James was helped in the example above. But far better for there never to have been a situation in which Jack was abusive! Surely, God could have prevented that?

I reply: The account is meant to apply specifically to hiddenness. I do not claim that making some observations from epistemic paradoxes solves every issue related to the problem of evil—though it does not seem implausible that something like this sort of case might eventually arise due to the intricacies and interconnectedness of human free agency. To the extent that human action is interconnected, more silence might be required.

An important, plausible premise of Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument against the existence of God is, “If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists” (2015, p. 103).

Epistemically self-defeating situations offer some reason to resist this premise. Let us assume God wants relationship with every finite person and is always open to that relationship. God’s continual openness to such a relationship does not entail that the finite person in question is *always aware of* God, even if the person is nonresistant. They may be in an epistemically self-defeating situation: knowing of God’s existence at a particular time might prevent either their continual, future knowledge of God or prevent some other deeply cherished good that the individual desires. And God desires we ultimately be in everlasting relationship with him.

This solution may strike us as implausible—would knowing of God’s existence at an earlier time really prevent these great goods? But on this point, the epistemically self-defeating situations solution is self-insulating: our inability to know the second-order reason for divine silence may itself be due to another epistemically defeating situation. If we knew the reason, the desired outcome would not occur.

**IV. Further Application**

The epistemic solution I offer focuses on an epistemic gap between God and creation. Marilyn McCord Adams argued that sin and suffering are a *metaphysically* necessary consequence of the natures of God and human beings—sin is a function of our created state, and results from our radical limitations in comparison to God (1999, pp. 94-95). The metaphysical size gap is (at least, initially) too great for creatures to act in any way towards God other than sinfully.

Adams’s necessity account avoids a classic objection raised to greater goods or free will theodicies and defenses: “Surely, a perfect being could have created things in another way!” For even an omnipotent being cannot accomplish the logically impossible. But a drawback of this kind of view is that it commits its adherents to a specific metaphysical and theological position which many might find morally or theologically objectionable—Adams famously thought the metaphysical consequences of this gap might require divine apology (2006).

I argue that a different type of necessity account—focused on our epistemic limitations—offers a new solution to instances of divine hiddenness, while avoiding some of the potentially morally objectionable consequences of Adams’s view. Skeptical theist responses have focused on our *general* epistemic limitations as compared to God’s—in virtue of being omniscient, God knows more than us and God’s reasons are beyond our ken (Wykstra, 1986; Howard-Snyder, 1996; Alston, 1996; Bergmann, 2001). Almeida & Oppy (2003) objected that focus on this limitation undermines our ordinary ethical reasoning.

[Is God too much for us to handle (at least, right now?) – ending of book of Job again

Romantic relationships or friendships: “I would have hated you if we’d met earlier”

Certain kind of cognitive relationship: parents have to wait until their children are older and in certain positions]

Put this bit with the objections and replies?:

After all, a supposedly loving parent would not hide from a hurt child desperately and repeatedly crying for them.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Advantages: can assume there are nonculpable nonbelievers; escape any story which might have hints of victim-blaming

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1. The issue at hand also differs from a simple self-defeating prophecy, such as a doctor predicting a cancerous death and thus causing a patient to receive life-saving care. Additionally, these cases differ from epistemic paradoxes like the surprise exam paradox, though they are related. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Others have pressed problems of divine hiddenness, and so my defense is not limited to Schellenberg alone. But since he is considered the standard bearer for this sort of argument, interaction with him will be most illuminating. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interpretations of the openness assumption, however, are more fraught than it might initially seem. There are perhaps good theological reasons for thinking that God’s continual openness to relationship doesn’t entail that we can be in relationship with God just by trying. The defense I offer can be read as one way of rejecting this “just by trying” interpretation of divine openness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schellenberg puts this point in terms of finite persons, which I will use interchangeably with created persons. I am not the first to use these terms interchangeably, see (Howard-Snyder 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Even here, the case needs to be filled out more. There are countless cases in which a parent ignoring their child’s cries would indeed be considered monstrous. But there are some cases in which the parent is not only absolved but considered a good parent. Consider a child with separation anxiety who is being left with another caregiver. Suppose, too, that the best child therapists agree that the best thing to do for this child, long-term, is for the parent to leave despite the child’s cries. It is in the child’s best interests and long-term flourishing, in this case, for the parent to hear and not heed the child’s call not to leave. (Note that this example is not endorsing anything like a “cry it out” strategy.) (CITE SAMEER PAPER?) The proponent of Schellenberg-style hiddenness arguments can respond: Surely, there is a temporal limit here. If the child continues to desperately cry for a prolonged period, something must be done. But note that this response (a) makes use of time and (b) says that hiddenness should not last forever. I agree with both general requirements, and my solution importantly states that hiddenness is a temporally limited phenomenon. (Other theists also argue that hiddenness is temporally limited, see CITATIONS.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)