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GOD’S SILENCE AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCERN¹

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Throughout history, many people have been perplexed or even angry that God seems to be silent or hiding. For example, Nietzsche writes:

A god who is all-knowing and all-powerful and who does not even make sure that his creatures understand his intention – could that be a god of goodness? Who allows countless doubts and dubieties to persist, for thousands of years, as though the salvation of mankind were unaffected by them Would he not be a cruel god if he possessed the truth and could behold mankind miserably tormenting itself over the truth?²

Because they seek a personal and loving relationship with God, some of the people who have been the most troubled by the problem of divine silence include some devout Christians. For example, when Mother Teresa’s private writings were released, many people were shocked to read the following comment: “Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? . . . I call, I cling, I want – and there is no One to answer What are You doing My God to one so small?”³

¹ I would like to thank an anonymous referee and Thaddeus Metz for providing helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52-53.

³ Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, Brian Kolodiejchuk (ed.), (London: Doubleday, 2007), 186-187.

If humanity was created by God as a means to fulfilling a purpose, as Christians believe, how do we explain God's silence? Is there a good reason why God would be silent towards us or is this silence evidence that God did not create humanity to fulfill a purpose? Is this silence evidence that God does not even exist, as some have argued?

The problem of "divine silence" or "divine hiddenness" has been discussed since Biblical times and, ironically, is even discussed in the Bible.⁴ J. L. Schellenberg's argument that divine hiddenness is evidence that God does not exist has renewed interest in this topic and generated considerable debate.⁵ Schellenberg's version of the "argument from non-belief," as it is called, is as follows. If there is a perfectly loving God, he would want a reciprocal personal relationship between himself and every human being capable of such a relationship. But, for such a relationship to occur, human beings would first need to believe that God exists. God, therefore, would ensure that everyone possessed sufficient evidence to believe in his existence. However, there are many people capable of having a relationship with God who are non-believers. Therefore, this perfectly loving God does not exist. Theists have responded in a variety of ways to this argument, one of which is by arguing that God would permit non-belief so that people would not feel coerced into entering into a relationship with him.⁶

If there is a personal, loving God, what type of encounter with him should we expect? Michael Rea, a philosopher of religion, argues that we should expect, at a minimum, that the evidence for the existence of God would be conclusive or that the experience of God's love and presence would be widely

⁴ See, for example, New Revised Standard Version: Psalm 10:1, Psalm 22:1-2, Psalm 44:23-24, and Psalm 88:13-14.

⁵ J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁶ For responses to the argument from non-belief, see Daniel Howard-Synder and Paul K. Moser (eds.), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

available.⁷ However, he writes: “Our evidence is inconclusive; religious experience – of the interesting and unambiguous sort – is rare. And it’s really hard to see any good reason why God might leave matters this way.”⁸ Rea ends up suggesting a few reasons why God might choose to remain silent, including that silence might be God’s preferred mode of interaction, which I will examine in a later section.

I will not seek to explore the “argument from non-belief” here. Instead, I will point out another puzzling aspect of the problem of divine silence. What puzzles me is why God, if he created humanity as a means to carrying out a purpose, has not sought to clarify his purpose or our role. As will be discussed, there are conflicting interpretations of the passages in the Bible, yet God has not provided any clarification. For God to have a possibility of achieving his purpose, we would need to understand our role. Does humanity have a clear understanding of God’s purpose and our role in carrying out this purpose? If not, as I believe, then one would think that God would have provided us with clarification by now if we had such a role. By remaining silent, it would seem that God would be engaging in self-defeating behavior. I will argue that God’s continuing silence towards us is evidence that we were not created as a means to fulfilling a purpose of God.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARGUMENT

God, if he created humanity, could have created us as a means to achieving another goal or as an end itself with no further goal in mind. If he created us as a means to an end, then he presumably cares about achieving this goal. Thus, he would want us to be able to help him realize this goal. But for this to occur, we would first need to understand our role in carrying out this purpose. Without this basic understanding, it would not be possible for us to carry out our role and, consequently, it would not be possible for God to achieve his goal.

⁷ Michael Rea, “Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence,” *Philosophy of Religion* (6th edition), Louis P. Pojman & Michael Rea (eds.), (United States: Wadsworth, 2011), 268.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

If we had been created by God as a means to fulfilling a purpose, then it would seem that God would have provided us with sufficient evidence to believe in his existence and would have clearly informed us of our role in carrying out his purpose. However, as I will argue, God has not clearly informed us of our role, nor has he sought to clarify our role. By remaining silent, it would seem that God would be *undermining himself* in achieving the purpose *he conceived*, which would not make sense. Would God, who some Christians believe is all-knowing, engage in this self-defeating behavior? If not, as I believe, then this suggests that God did not create humanity as a means to achieving a purpose.

Above I have sketched a new argument seeking to demonstrate that humanity was not created as a means to an end by God. In the following sections, I will seek to provide support to the premises of the argument. In response to my assertion that God has not clearly informed us of our role, some theists will argue that God has made his existence and his mission for humankind very clear. If so, then one would expect that there would be only one religion in the world and that there would be few, if any, non-believers in God. However, what we find is just the opposite.⁹ There are many different religions throughout the world and some of them even worship different gods. Furthermore, there are numerous non-believers throughout the world.

Other theists might agree that God has not clearly informed us of our role, but they will argue that God has provided us with enough evidence such that we can, *on our own*, figure out God's purpose for humanity and our role by carefully studying the Bible or by philosophical reflection on an ultimate being. They will likely point out that students often obtain a better understanding of a subject if they are not given the answers to difficult questions, but they are required to search for the answers on their own.

⁹ For a discussion of the uneven distribution of theistic belief, see Stephen Maitzen, "Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006), 177-191.

LEARNING ABOUT A PURPOSE THROUGH BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

John Cottingham, a philosopher and theist, argues that the Bible contains a different kind of truth from “bald” scientific truth. Scientific truth, he writes: “is *there*, in a way that is entirely neutral with respect to what kind of agent . . . is able to apprehend it.”¹⁰ In contrast, he argues that there are other kinds of truth, such as those in the novels of Tolstoy, that “may be entirely inaccessible to the bored or insensitive or corrupt reader.”¹¹ Regarding the events described in the Bible, Cottingham writes:

The events will be clear enough, but not in a ‘bald’ way; they will be objective, but their objective reality will be grasped not by everyone, only by those who have ‘eyes to see’ and ‘ears to hear’. Just as much of the teaching of Jesus was in parables – so that their truth requires proper *discernment* rather than being presented ‘bang in front of us’ in an unequivocal way – so the various recorded events . . . are very often more reminiscent of a text that has to be interpreted than an occurrence in a test-tube waiting to be checked and measured.¹²

One significant problem with believing that God revealed a purpose of life in the Bible has to do with timing. Human beings existed for tens of thousands of years before the Bible was written. If God revealed a purpose of life at the time the Bible was written, then it would be necessary to explain why God waited so long to tell humanity its purpose. It would also be necessary to explain why God chose to tell some human beings the purpose, but not those who lived in pre-Biblical times.

Philip Quinn, in referring to the Roman Catholic Church’s *Baltimore Catechism*, indicates that “God’s chief purpose for humans is that they should come to enjoy the beatific vision in the afterlife, and

¹⁰ John Cottingham, *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102-103.

God's subsidiary purposes for humans are that they should in this life know, love, and serve him."¹³ However, he also writes: "Nor should Christians exaggerate the certainty about life's meanings to be derived from their narratives. The gospel narratives permit, and historically have received, diverse and often conflicting interpretations. When reasonable interpretations clash, confidence in the exclusive rightness of any one of them should diminish."¹⁴

If God is omnipresent and watches over humanity, as many Christians believe, then God has observed the uneven distribution of theistic belief, and the conflicting interpretations of the passages in the Bible, for the last 2000 years. As God observed this, and reflected on the goal for which he purportedly created humanity to help realize, what would it make sense for him to do? Would it make sense for him to remain silent or would it make more sense for him to clarify his purpose and our role? Which approach would make it more likely for him to realize his goal?

One response by theists to the problem of divine silence has been to argue that there is sufficient evidence for God's existence, but that people dismiss or discount this evidence. A few theists have sought to blame human beings for non-belief.¹⁵ In contrast, Thomas Dicken indicates: "It is not necessarily a fault of humans when God's presence is not experienced."¹⁶ He also indicates that "It is clearly also true that many people experience God as lacking or absent in their lives, even when they seek God."¹⁷

¹³ Philip L. Quinn, "How Christianity Secures Life's Meanings," *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin (eds.), (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵ For more on this discussion, see Howard-Synder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 15-16. They discuss the views of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), which are defended by William Wainwright in "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God" in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 98-119.

¹⁶ Thomas M. Dicken, "The Homeless God," *The Journal of Religion* 91, no. 2 (2011), 136.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

LEARNING ABOUT A PURPOSE THROUGH NATURAL THEOLOGY

Supporters of natural theology might argue that we can learn about the nature of God and his purpose for us through the power of reason, unaided by supernatural revelation. However, some Christians are doubtful that one can obtain knowledge about God from the natural world or through philosophical reflection. For example, Andrew Moore argues that “although natural theology might lead us to believe *that* a God exists, since there is no *prima facie* reason to think that the God to which natural theology leads is the self-revealing, personal, loving God of the gospel, it is not clear that it will lead to a fiduciary relationship with (belief *in*) that God”¹⁸ In his critique of natural theology, Moore quotes Pascal, who wrote: “Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves. Thus without Scripture, whose only object is Christ, we know nothing, and can see nothing but obscurity and confusion in the nature of God and in nature itself.”¹⁹

When scientists conduct their investigations, they do not search for a purpose of life. Nonetheless, scientists have extensively studied physical and biological processes and, in doing so, have not come across a purpose of life. In discussing the absence of teleological explanations in the natural sciences, Kurt Baier had indicated: “It should, moreover, be borne in mind that teleological explanations are not, in any sense, unscientific. They are rightly rejected in the natural sciences, not however because they are unscientific, but because no intelligences or purposes are found to be involved there.”²⁰

Proponents of intelligent design argue that certain purported features of human biology, such as

¹⁸ Andrew Moore, “Should Christians do Natural Theology?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 2 (2010), 134.

¹⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, A. J. Krailsheimer (trans.), (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 121.

²⁰ Kurt Baier, “The Meaning of Life,” *The Meaning of Life*, E. D. Klemke (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

“irreducible complexity”²¹ or the structure of the DNA molecule,²² are best explained by an “intelligent cause.” Suppose that we could agree on what would count as evidence of intelligent design and that we somehow had determined that humanity had been intended by an intelligent designer. We would then want to know “Why was human life created?” Thus, learning that we had been designed does not tell us anything about the nature of the purpose. We could have been designed as an end itself with no further goal in mind, in which case we would have no role to fulfill. Alternatively, we could have been designed as a means to an end. If so, how could we carry out our role if we do not know the nature of that role?

WHY GOD WOULD HAVE PROVIDED US WITH FEEDBACK IF WE HAD A ROLE

Because of the conflicting interpretations of the Bible, and for other reasons I will explain below, if humanity had been created by God to fulfill a purpose, God would have provided us with feedback by now. What is meant by “feedback” and what type of feedback would we have expected from God if he did create humanity as a means to an end? In a systematic review of research that has been conducted on feedback, educational researchers John Hattie and Helen Timperley conclude that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on human achievement. They define feedback as “information provided by an agent . . . regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding.”²³ They distinguish between providing instruction and providing feedback. For example, information would be communicated to

²¹ See Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York, 1996; rpt. New York: Free Press, 2006).

²² See Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

²³ John Hattie and Helen Timperley, “The Power of Feedback,” *Review of Educational Research* 77 (2007), 81.

students, and then in response to the questions of students about the lecture material, the instructor would provide feedback to address any faulty interpretations or misunderstanding by the students.

Through biblical interpretation or philosophical reflection, some people already claim that they know God's purpose and our role in carrying out this purpose, but how could we verify the truth of their claim unless God provided us with feedback? There is an additional reason, as discussed below, why God, if he created us as a means to an end, would have provided us with feedback by now.

Philosophers of religion debate whether God is outside of time or whether he has temporal location and extension. Stephen Davis is one of many philosophers who support the latter view. Davis writes: "Second, a timeless being cannot be the personal, caring, involved God we read about in the Bible. The God of the Bible is, above all, a God who cares deeply about what happens in history and who acts to bring about his will. He makes plans. He responds to what human beings, do, e.g. their evil deeds or their acts of repentance."²⁴

Biblical scholar Robert Chisholm argues that in certain circumstances God can change his mind. He writes: "if God has issued a decree, He will not change His mind or deviate from it. However, the majority of God's statements of intention are not decrees. And God can and often does deviate from such announcements. In these cases He 'changes His mind' in the sense that He decides, at least for the time being, not to do what He had planned or announced as His intention."²⁵

If it is true, as these scholars believe, that God makes plans and can alter his plans, then God might reprioritize his goals occasionally, as do human beings. God purportedly created humanity to realize a goal. Christians assume that this goal is still important to God, but how do we know that it is still important? God purportedly can alter his plans and so he might have done so long ago. Thus, unless God

²⁴ Stephen Davis, "Temporal Eternity," *Philosophy of Religion* (6th edition), Louis P. Pojman & Michael Rea (eds.), (United States: Wadsworth, 2011), 68.

²⁵ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God Change His Mind?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995), 388.

provided us with feedback, we would never know if the purpose for which God created humanity still matters to him.

Leaders of organizations understand the importance of establishing clear goals and of providing feedback to employees. A leader, who wanted to be effective, would not set forth an unclear objective and then expect that his or her employees would understand and be committed to this objective. Rather, effective leaders go to great lengths to make sure that their employees clearly understand the mission of the organization and their role in carrying out this mission. For example, they create a mission statement and provide ongoing feedback to the employees in an attempt to keep them focused on the mission and their role.

Because feedback can have a powerful influence on motivation and achievement, if God had given us a role in carrying out a purpose, then God would have provided us with feedback to clarify his purpose and to ensure that we clearly understood our role in carrying out his purpose. Despite the lack of clarity in the Bible and elsewhere regarding God's purpose and our role, and the fact that God has had plenty of opportunity to communicate with us, we have received no feedback from God - just a long period of silence.

Since gospel narratives have often been interpreted in conflicting ways, as Quinn indicates, if God's purpose for humanity is for human beings to enter into a personal, loving relationship with him, as Christians believe, then God would have reiterated and clarified his purpose and our role. Providing feedback would have fostered a loving relationship with human beings and thereby would have helped God realize his purpose. In contrast, failing to clarify our role and his purpose raises considerable doubt about whether there is such a purpose, which would be counterproductive if God did in fact want to have a personal relationship with human beings. Therefore, if we had such a purpose, God would have provided us with feedback by now.

A FORMAL STATEMENT OF THE ARGUMENT

God's ongoing silence towards us is evidence that we were not given a role to play in carrying out a purpose of God. A formal statement of the argument is as follows:

- (1) If humankind was created for a purpose by God and had a role to play in carrying out this purpose, then God would want us to have a possibility of achieving our role so that he would have a possibility of achieving his goal.
- (2) For us to have a possibility of achieving the purpose for which we were created, we would need to understand our role in carrying out this purpose.
- (3) The purpose for which humanity was created is unclear in the Bible and elsewhere.
- (4) Despite the lack of clarity regarding the purpose of life, God has not provided any clarification about his purpose or our role.
- (5) God would not have chosen to remain silent about our role in carrying out his purpose because, following from the first premise, this would be self-defeating.
- (6) Therefore, humankind was not given a role to play in carrying out a purpose of God.

Schellenberg's argument from non-belief is an attempt to demonstrate that God does not exist. In contrast, the above argument is an attempt to demonstrate that God (if he exists) did not create humanity as a means to an end. God, who some theists claim is all-knowing, would not have engaged in the unwise, irrational, and self-defeating conduct of creating humanity for a purpose, but then choose to remain silent about our role in carrying out his purpose. The argument from non-belief applies only to the God of Christianity. Although the argument outlined above refers to God, the argument would be applicable to *any supreme being*. If a supreme being created humanity as a means to an end, and did so with good

intentions in mind,²⁶ then it would be self-defeating and irrational for this supreme being to remain silent about our role.

Another difference between the two arguments is that the argument from non-belief assumes that God created humanity to enter into a loving relationship with us. The argument set forth above does not make this assumption. The argument applies regardless of the purported reason that we were created. For example, if someone would claim that we were created by a supreme being for the purpose of exploring planet Mars to determine if it would be habitable for life, then the argument applies. If this supreme being created humanity for this purpose, then we would need clear guidance from this supreme being regarding the nature of this purpose. If insufficient or no guidance was provided, then this would raise serious doubt regarding the person's claim that we were created by a supreme being to explore Mars.

Some theists have argued that non-believers are being unreasonable in their demand for God to provide sufficient evidence of his existence.²⁷ In response to this argument, Schellenberg writes: "the evidence that God may choose to provide to bring it [i.e., belief in God] about need not be overwhelming or crass – stupefying visions or stars forming worlds!"²⁸

It is reasonable to expect that God would provide feedback regarding his purported purpose for humankind. If a teacher provided instructions to his or her students, but the students did not clearly

²⁶ If a supreme being created human life, not for good intentions, but as part of an evil plan, then it might be in the interest of the supreme being to deceive us. Thus, under this scenario, it would not be self-defeating for the supreme being to withhold information from us.

²⁷For these arguments, see Peter van Inwagen, "What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?" in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 28-29 and Paul K. Moser, "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding" in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 121.

²⁸ J. L. Schellenberg, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 205.

understand the instructions, it would be reasonable for the students to seek clarification. Not only would this be a reasonable request, a good teacher *would want* the students to seek clarification and would want to provide this clarification. Failing to provide feedback would be counterproductive to the goal of learning. In addition, the teacher would not want the students to become frustrated or angry or to abandon their studies.

What if God exists and he created humanity not as a means to an end, but as an end with no further goal in mind? In that case, because we would not have a role to play in carrying out a purpose, it would not be self-defeating for God to fail to provide us with feedback. God would have realized his goal simply by creating humanity. However, if this God was compassionate and loving, then the question would still arise regarding why he has not bothered to explain to us that we were created as an end with no further purpose in mind. By taking this step, he would have alleviated much uncertainty and anguish, as he would recognize. Thus, even if humanity were created by God as an end itself, divine silence would continue to pose a problem, although the problem would not be as serious as it would be if humanity had been created as a means to carrying out a goal.

Michael Rea suggests that “divine silence might just be an expression of God’s preferred mode of interaction, and that we need not experience his silence as *absence* – especially if we see Biblical narratives and liturgies as things that in some sense mediate the presence of God to us”²⁹ Suppose that God believes that he has provided us with sufficient and clear evidence of his existence and of his purpose for humankind and that he wants us to discover our role on our own. Suppose also that he prefers to remain silent, as Rea suggests. If God watches over us, then he sees that his preference for silence has resulted in anguish and anger among some human beings. For example, he would have observed that his preference for silence was very distressing to Mother Teresa.

God is often thought of analogously to a loving parent. Indeed, he is often referred to as “God the

²⁹ Rea, 273.

Father” or “Heavenly Father.” Human parents might want their child to be independent, to study on his or her own, and the parents might prefer to be silent. However, *loving* parents would explain their expectations, and the reasoning behind these expectations, to their child. Loving parents would not just leave their child to wonder why they are being silent. If God does exist and is loving, as Christians believe, then one would think that, *at a minimum*, he would have informed us that he prefers to be silent. However, he has not done so which suggests that God is inconsiderate and disrespectful to human beings or that he does not exist.

CONCLUSION

Christians believe that God created humanity as a means to fulfilling a purpose. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, God’s continuing silence about his purpose and our role is evidence that we were not created by God to fulfill a purpose. God, if he exists, would have provided us with feedback by now if he had created humanity as a means to fulfilling an end.