

# A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF REA'S RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS

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**Abstract.** In an important discussion of the problem of hiddenness, Michael Rea briefly presents and defends an argument from divine hiddenness which he thinks encapsulates the problem of divine hiddenness, and then develops a detailed and nuanced response to this argument. Importantly, Rea claims that his response does *not* depend on the commonly held theistic view that God allows hiddenness to secure human goods. In this paper I offer a detailed criticism of Rea's account of what justifies God in allowing divine hiddenness, arguing that Rea's response to the argument from divine hiddenness is unsuccessful.

The problem of divine hiddenness is one of the most significant objections to belief in God. More precisely, the problem of hiddenness can be embodied in an *argument* from hiddenness which concludes that God doesn't, or likely doesn't, exist. While the literature discussing arguments from divine hiddenness has focused on the argument from inculpable nonbelief as defended by J. L. Schellenberg,<sup>1</sup> there have also been other important presentations of arguments from divine hiddenness.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); J. L. Schellenberg, 'Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism', in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), pp. 30–41; J. L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For examples, see Theodore M. Drange, 'The Argument from Non-Belief', *Religious Studies*, 29, no. 4 (1993), 417–432; Theodore M. Drange, *Nonbelief & Evil: Two Arguments*

common core of these arguments is that there is an incompatibility, or evidential tension, between the existence of a perfectly good God and the existence of cases where significant truths about God lack epistemic support for certain persons.

In a recent discussion of the problem of hiddenness, Michael Rea briefly presents and defends an argument from divine hiddenness which he thinks encapsulates the problem of divine hiddenness, and then develops a detailed and nuanced response to this argument.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Rea claims that his response to his argument from hiddenness does *not* depend on the commonly held theistic view that God allows hiddenness to secure human goods. Rea proposes that what justifies God in allowing hiddenness is the good of God acting in accord with the divine personality. Further, Rea contends that hiddenness is compatible with God's concern for all people because God has provided a widely and readily accessible way to experience his presence despite divine hiddenness – humans can have *mediated* experiences of God made available via Christian scripture and liturgy.

In this paper I argue that Rea's response to the argument from divine hiddenness is unsuccessful. In order to do this, in §1 I outline Rea's presentation of his version of the argument from divine hiddenness and then in §2 I summarize Rea's response to this argument from hiddenness. My critical evaluation is given in §3–§6. In §3, I argue that Rea's stated understanding of 'divine hiddenness' (or as he prefers 'divine silence') makes it such that the argument he presents fails to embody a plausible problem of hiddenness. Accordingly, I modify his account of divine silence, attempting to stay as true to his stipulative definition as is feasible while providing a definition that grounds a plausible argument from hiddenness. In §4 I critique Rea's appeal to the divine personality to justify divine hiddenness. In §5 I argue against Rea's claim that God provides a way for persons who experience divine silence to encounter him through mediated experiences made available in scripture and

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*for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998); James A. Keller, 'The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 37, no. 1 (1995), 13–24; Stephen Maitzen, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism', *Religious Studies*, 42 (2006), 177–191.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Rea, 'Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God', in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 76–96. References to this work in the remainder of this paper will be made parenthetically in the text.

liturgy. Finally, in §6 I challenge Rea's claim that the availability of mediated experiences of God makes divine silence compatible with God's concern for the well-being of all people.

### §1. REA'S ARGUMENT FROM HIDDENNESS

In order to offer a response to the problem of hiddenness, Rea begins by stating and defending an argument from hiddenness. His argument is presented as a *reductio*. If we assume that God exists, then the following mutually inconsistent claims also seem true:

P1: God has allowed himself to remain hidden from many people.

P2: It would be bad for an omnipotent, omniscient God to remain hidden from anyone.

P3: God, being perfectly good, cannot do anything that is bad.

I refer to this argument as *Rea's inconsistent triad* (RIT). (Unless I indicate otherwise, when I refer to the argument from hiddenness, I am referring to RIT.)

Rea doesn't give any defence of P3, nor does he need to, since neither proponents nor opponents of arguments from hiddenness question the claim that if God exists, he would be perfectly good, nor that God's goodness would entail that he cannot do anything that is bad.

Regarding support for P1, Rea claims that defences of the existence of hiddenness standardly cite something like the truth of the following two facts (p. 76):

**INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE:** For many people, the available a priori and empirical evidence in support of God's existence is inconclusive: one can be fully aware of it and at the same time rationally believe that God does not exist.

**ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE:** Many people – believers and unbelievers alike – have never had an experience that seems to them to be a direct experience or awareness of the love or presence of God; and those who do have such experiences have them rarely.

Rea grants that these two facts are true. He argues, however, that the fact that **INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE** and **ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE** both obtain is better understood as 'divine silence' rather than 'divine hiddenness' (see pp. 78-81). Rea then stipulates that when he speaks of

divine silence he ‘will be speaking simply of the fact that INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE both obtain’ (p. 81). Though Rea doesn’t update RIT after arguing for the terminological change from ‘divine hiddenness’ to ‘divine silence,’ it will aid in understanding the argument to update RIT as follows:<sup>4</sup>

P1\*: God has allowed INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

P2\*: It would be bad for an omnipotent, omniscient God to allow INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

P3: God, being perfectly good, cannot do anything that is bad.

(Since I don’t find the terminological preference for divine silence rather than divine hiddenness as important as Rea does, I use divine silence and divine hiddenness interchangeably. Unless I indicate otherwise, I use these terms in the way that Rea has stipulated.)

Concerning support for P2\*, Rea claims that the basic problem with divine silence is that it seems inconsistent with the following thesis (a thesis that seems entailed by God’s perfect goodness):

DIVINE CONCERN: God strongly desires to promote the well-being of all his rational creatures, both now and in the afterlife. (p. 77)

Rea rightly notes, however, that P2\* is true only if divine hiddenness does *not* promote any good the promotion of which would justify God in permitting hiddenness. So the proponent of the argument from hiddenness claims that divine silence is all-things-considered bad for God to allow, because it is inconsistent with DIVINE CONCERN. The opponent of the argument (assuming that he grants the existence of divine silence) must defend a God-justifying good which ‘would justify God in permitting whatever bad things come from divine hiddenness’ (p. 77).

## §2. REA’S RESPONSE TO RIT

Rea’s intentions in responding to the RIT can be summarized as follows. Rea notes that most attempts to identify God-justifying goods assume

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<sup>4</sup> This change is also supported by Rea’s statement that the proponent of the hiddenness argument can ‘replace talk about divine hiddenness with talk about the obtaining of INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE’ and the argument ‘would then proceed with much the same force as the original’ (p. 77).

that the good (or goods) which justify hiddenness must be a *human* good. Rea aims to buck this trend, intending 'to defend a response to the problem of divine hiddenness that is consistent with the following claim' (p. 78):

NO HUMAN GOOD: It is not the case that God permits INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE in order to secure human goods.

Rea will then argue that 'even if NO HUMAN GOOD is true, divine hiddenness does not cast doubt on DIVINE CONCERN' (p. 78). He thinks this is so if the following is true:

DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE: God has provided some widely and readily accessible way of finding him and experiencing his presence despite silence.

Rea will then argue that DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is in fact true.

I think that Rea's response can be stated as a defence of the following three separate theses (these are my statements of Rea's theses, not his):

T1: The good of divine acts which express God's personality justifies divine silence (making Rea's greater good account compatible with NO HUMAN GOOD).

T2: Even if God does not permit divine silence in order to secure human goods, divine silence is compatible with DIVINE CONCERN so long as DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true.

T3: DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true: Biblical narratives and liturgical acts are means by which we might find and experience the presence of God in the midst of divine silence.

### *§2.1. Defending T1*

Rea recognizes that 'it is easy to see why one might think' divine silence is incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN (p. 81). Consider the experience of Mother Teresa, who longed to experience God's presence but (according to her private writings) did not experience God's presence at many times in her life. How could a compassionate God refrain from answering the cries of Mother Teresa and others like her? (pp. 81-2) A human parent would surely draw near to his child and offer words of comfort and affection; shouldn't we expect at least as much from a perfectly loving divine being?

In response, Rea claims that inferring that divine silence is incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN commits an error often committed in complaints about the behaviour of humans; it ‘depends on a particular interpretation of behaviour that can in fact be interpreted in any of a number of different ways, depending upon what assumptions we make about the person’s beliefs, desires, motives, and overall personality’ (p. 82). To make an accurate interpretation of someone’s behaviour, one must know things like the person’s cultural background, what sort of social norms she is likely to know and respect, her views about what various kinds of behaviours communicate, and so on. And if we need this kind of information to interpret *human behaviour*, then we should be slow to interpret the behaviour of the God of the universe. Even with the witness of Christian Scripture, Rea thinks ‘we have precious little by way of clear and reliable information about God’s personality and about his general style of interacting with others’ (p. 82).

Since we don’t know these key facts about God necessary for interpreting his behaviour, divine silence may simply be the result of an expression of God’s unique personality and/or God’s preferences about how to interact with creatures like us. This possibility becomes Rea’s proposed God-justifying good: ‘... divine silence is an outgrowth of the divine personality or of God’s preferences about how to interact with creatures like us ...’ (p. 86) Since it is intrinsically good for God to live out God’s personality, this intrinsic good justifies God allowing divine silence. Further, the good of God acting according to his personality is not a human good, so Rea’s proposed God-justifying good is compatible with NO HUMAN GOOD.

Rea acknowledges that God acting in accord with his personality does result in suffering, which seems to indicate that God is unconcerned for those who experience divine silence. But he defends as plausible the following claim:

It might be that our suffering in the face of divine silence is unreasonable, due more to our own immaturity or dysfunction than to any lack of kindness on God’s part. Perhaps it results from our own untrusting, uncharitable interpretations of divine silence, or from an inappropriate refusal to accept God for who God is and to accept God’s preferences about when and in what ways to communicate with us.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rea’s defends this claim at length (pp. 84-85, 87).

### §2.2. *Defending T2*

Rea acknowledges, however, that if 'God had provided no way for us to find him or experience his presence in the midst of his silence', divine silence would be incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN (p. 83). Rea thinks, however, that DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true.

DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE: God has provided some widely and readily accessible way of finding him and experiencing his presence despite silence.

Rea seems to take it as obvious that T2 is true: *if* there is a 'widely and readily accessible way' of experiencing God despite divine silence, then divine silence would not conflict with DIVINE CONCERN.

### §2.3. *Defending T3*

Rea avers that most discussions of divine hiddenness assume that God has provided some widely and readily accessible way of finding him only if one or both of INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE are false. This position, however, 'ignores ... the possibility of *mediated experiences* of the presence of God through media that are themselves widely and readily available' (p. 88).

Very roughly, Rea's mediated experiences are not direct experiences of the object experienced, but provide a person with much if not all of the propositional and non-propositional information one would get via direct experience. Rea builds on the work of Eleonore Stump to argue that mediated experiences of God are available through the biblical narrative.<sup>6</sup> Stump's account is summarized by Rea as follows. A *second-person experience* is a conscious experience of another person *as a person*, rather than as a mere object. Turning to the biblical narrative, Stump claims that many biblical narratives are *second-person accounts*, by which she means they are narratives that communicate the content of a second person experience. Most importantly for Rea's purposes, Stump claims that second-person accounts can communicate roughly the same kind of information that one gets from a second-person experience of God

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<sup>6</sup> Rea cites Eleonore Stump, 'The Problem of Evil: Analytic Philosophy and Narrative', in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 251–264; Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

by making the original experience available through the narrative to the reader. Put in his own terms, Rea claims that the biblical second-person accounts *mediate* second-person experiences of God. The upshot for Rea is that if this account is right, through reading the biblical narrative, a person can have a *mediated experience* of God.

Rea also thinks that something similar can be said about liturgical actions. The Eucharist and baptism are commemorative of past events, and can possibly be ways of making present the things commemorated, perhaps offering mediated experience of God. (Rea has less to say about how this works in liturgical actions, and seems less confident that mediated experiences are made available through liturgical actions.)

Rea concludes that if his account of mediated experiences is correct, ‘then (given that Biblical narrative and the right sorts of liturgical forms ... are readily available) DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true.’ He then reiterates that ‘if DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true, then ... divine silence is unproblematic’ (p. 93).

### §3. EVALUATING REA’S PRESENTATION OF THE ARGUMENT FROM DIVINE HIDDENNESS

Below I will offer critical evaluations of T1, T2, and T3. But before doing that, I must evaluate Rea’s presentation of the argument from hiddenness. Rea’s presentation of the argument from hiddenness is not dependent on any extant version of an argument from hiddenness in the literature, so it’s important to consider whether the argument he’s presented is plausible. To begin, I overview the support Rea gives for the key premise of the argument. I then argue that Rea’s stipulative definition of divine silence results in his presentation of the argument from hiddenness failing to embody a plausible problem of hiddenness for theism.

Recall the updated version of RIT:

P1\*: God has allowed INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

P2\*: It would be bad for an omnipotent, omniscient God to allow INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

P3: God, being perfectly good, cannot do anything that is bad.

According to Rea, the key premise P2\* is supported by the apparent inconsistency of INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS



EXPERIENCE with DIVINE CONCERN. Rea gives two lines of reasoning for thinking that divine silence is incompatible with divine concern. I'll refer to these as A and B:

A: All of the major theistic religions agree that belief in God is vital for our present and future well-being. But a world in which God is hidden is one in which God is doing far less than he could (if he is omnipotent and omniscient) to promote rational theistic belief. Hence, it is one in which God is doing far less than he could to promote our well-being. (p. 77)

B: Divine hiddenness is a source of suffering in believers, who often feel abandoned, neglected, unloved, or rejected by the being to whom they have devoted their lives and whom they have been taught to regard as their loving heavenly Father. (p. 77)

As an initial comment, B seems unduly narrow. It should include not just believers, but also nonbelievers who desire to believe in God but experience divine silence. Their suffering can be as serious as the suffering of believers who experience divine silence.<sup>7</sup> So this line of support can be made more precise as:

B\*: Divine silence is a source of suffering in believers who feel abandoned, neglected, unloved, or rejected by God, and is a source of suffering for unbelievers because they lack the belief in God they desire.

Having clarified the support for P2\*, I now turn to a problem for that premise. The problem with P2\* is this: it is possible that INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE both obtain without there being any clear incompatibility or even evidential tension with DIVINE CONCERN. Here's why. INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE states that *many people* lack a priori and empirical evidence sufficient to justify belief in God; ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE asserts that *many people* have never had a direct religious experience which could justify belief in God. But the truth of these two facts is compatible with every person in the world having evidence sufficient for knowledge-level justification for belief in God and knowledge-level justification for belief that God is concerned for their well-being and actively involved in their lives.

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<sup>7</sup> For a good description of the suffering that some nonbelievers seem to experience because of divine silence, see Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, pp. 227–235.

Consider the following possible scenario. The many people who lack a priori and empirical evidence to justify belief that God exists (i.e., who make INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE true) have frequent experiences of the loving presence of God. These people have direct evidence for God's existence via their direct experiences of God, and because of their frequent religious experiences they could not reasonably feel neglected or abandoned by God. Additionally, the many people who fail to have direct experiences of God (i.e., who make ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE true) have knowledge-level justification via their available a priori and empirical evidence. Further, their a priori and empirical evidence provides knowledge-level justification for beliefs about God's love for them and continual involvement in their life.

If it is possible that divine silence is true *while* every person has knowledge-level justification for belief that God exists and that God loves them and is active in their life, then the truth of INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE in itself is not in any way in tension with DIVINE CONCERN. So the problem with Rea's definition of divine silence is that it does not entail any problem of hiddenness. Since this is the case, a response to RIT, with divine silence understood as Rea stipulates, doesn't require the account of the God-justifying good that Rea develops, or any account of a God-justifying good. Rather, one can simply deny P2\*.

If Rea's presentation of the argument from hiddenness is to embody the problem of hiddenness in a plausible way, his account of divine silence needs to be modified such that it's plausible to think that silence is *pro tanto* bad because of its tension with DIVINE CONCERN. Seeking to modify Rea's account as little as possible, I propose the following revised account of divine silence:

INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & LACK OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\*:  
For many people, their available a priori and empirical evidence in support of God's existence is inconclusive (they can be fully aware of it and at the same time rationally believe that God does not exist), *and* they have never had an experience that seems to them to be a direct experience or awareness of the love or presence of God.

If divine silence is understood as INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & LACK OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\*, then there is a plausible case to be made for the inconsistency of divine silence and DIVINE CONCERN. Additionally, while it's the case that this modified account of divine silence asserts

more than Rea's initial account, it would be somewhat surprising to think that Rea's INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE both obtain but deny that INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & LACK OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\* obtains. So hereafter, to make plausible Rea's argument from divine hiddenness, divine silence will be understood as INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & LACK OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\*. Because of this, RIT must be modified as:

P1#: God has allowed INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\*.

P2#: It would be bad for an omniscient, omnipotent God to allow INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\*.

P3: God, being perfectly good, cannot do anything that is bad.

#### §4. EVALUATING T1

Recall that Rea intends for his account of what justifies hiddenness to be compatible with NO HUMAN GOOD, which says that *it is not the case that God permits divine silence in order to secure human goods*. I summarized Rea's account of the non-human good that justifies divine silence as

T1: The good of divine acts which express God's personality justifies divine silence (making Rea's greater good account compatible with NO HUMAN GOOD).

Rea's argument for T1 has two components. First, Rea attempts to undercut the inference from divine silence to the conclusion that God is unloving or unconcerned for humanity. Second, Rea puts forward the hypothesis that divine silence is a result of divine action that expresses God's personality, and since God expressing his personality is intrinsically good, this good might justify divine silence without any reference to human goods. Here I offer brief criticism of both steps (§4.1 and §4.2) and then point out a further problem for Rea's account of what justifies God in allowing divine silence (§4.3).

##### §4.1. *Interpreting divine silence*

Rea's case against inferring from divine hiddenness that God is unloving or unconcerned can be summarized as follows (hereafter the INTERPRETATION SCEPTICISM ARGUMENT):

IS1: In order to understand someone's behaviour, one must know substantial information about the person's beliefs, desires, motives, dispositions, and overall personality.

IS2: But when it comes to God, we know very little about these factors.

IS3: So we cannot understand why God is silent.

IS4: So we shouldn't interpret divine silence as expressing lack of love or concern.

Rea motivates IS1 with a couple of examples and explanations of our inability to understand human behaviour. Here's one of his examples, which I will refer to as 'Hallway Silence':

HALLWAY SILENCE: A senior member of your department doesn't greet you in the hallway. Is he offended by you? Does he think you're beneath him? Is he depressed and having a bad day? Or is that *just him*, a little preoccupied and not really noticing his surroundings? (p. 82)

Rea is correct that on the evidence that I have here, any of the options explaining my colleague's behaviour are viable. So there is something that I cannot understand about my colleague's behaviour. But there are still reasonable interpretations of my colleague's behaviour that I can make in this case. We can have a fair bit of knowledge upon which to build interpretations of a person's actions by knowing that a person is a normally functioning human being. Human beings are motivated by love, fear, physical pleasure, moral considerations, and a host of other psychological factors, and they have practical reasoning skills that enable them to act on their motivational states. So concerning HALLWAY SILENCE, for example, I seem perfectly justified in interpreting my colleague's behaviour as *not* intended to ascertain how my day is going.

Further, the reasons for not interpreting the silence in HALLWAY SILENCE as an expression of unconcern or disdain go beyond mere lack of information about the other person. It's not simply that I don't have enough information about my colleague's personality, beliefs, or cultural expectations; rather, it's reasonable to withhold interpreting his behaviour in part because we can think of multiple *plausible* explanations for his behaviour (as shown in the options Rea gives in the case). We know that people are sometimes preoccupied when walking down the hall. We know that some people are introverted, or that some people aren't comfortable talking with people in passing, etc. Contrast this with a case like the following:

NON-INTERVENING COLLEAGUE: You meet a colleague in the hall, look him in the eye, and say 'I have an important question I need to ask you.' He ignores you and looks the other way. Just then, you feel severe pain in your chest, and collapse to the floor. You look at your colleague again and ask 'please call for help!' but again he ignores you and looks the other way.

Assume that you know this person has a conversational knowledge of English, and you have good reason to believe that he hears you and sees you. Perhaps you shouldn't attribute this behaviour to a *particular* malicious intention. But no matter how little I know about this person, I am justified in believing that his behaviour is incompatible with his concern for me. This is so because, whatever the details of a person's background and personality, actions that are hurtful or undermine another's well being are not loving, unless we have a reason to think that the action (though undermining my well being) is necessary for a good purpose.

It's true that substantial information about the person's beliefs, desires, motives, dispositions, and overall personality is necessary for a *full* understanding of a person's behaviour. But we can make reasonable interpretations providing a *partial* understanding of a person's behaviour even if we lack some information about these characteristics of the person. The parallel of this point with interpreting divine hiddenness is important. The proponent of the argument from hiddenness claims that divine silence is incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN. She can recognize that to give a *specific* interpretation of a person's action we may need to know a good bit about a person, but also think that it's reasonable to believe an action is incompatible with promoting the well-being of another without knowing much about the person. And I take it that the proponent of the hiddenness argument sees divine silence as more like the case of NON-INTERVENING COLLEAGUE rather than the case of HALLWAY SILENCE.

Perhaps what does the heavy lifting in Rea's argument is IS2. Rea stresses that we know very little about the factors of God's personality that would allow us to understand his interaction with us. Consider the following statements:

Even granting the complete reliability and transparency of Biblical testimony about God, we have precious little by way of clear and reliable information about God's personality and about his general 'style' of

interacting with others; and to ask about God's 'culture' or about what sorts of social norms God would likely recognize and respect seems to border on the overly anthropomorphic. God is as alien and 'wholly other' from as it is possible for another person to be. (p. 83)

... the most enigmatic, eccentric, and complicated people we might ever encounter in literature or in real life are, by comparison with God, utterly familiar and mundane. (p. 85)

While what Rea says here is in part correct, the case seems overstated. Consider first that Rea acknowledges that we *do* know an important truth about God's personality; namely, DIVINE CONCERN:

DIVINE CONCERN: God strongly desires to promote the well-being of all his rational creatures, both now and in the afterlife.

If DIVINE CONCERN is true, then we have a solid understanding of one of God's fundamental desires and motives. So when we attempt to interpret divine silence (or other of God's actions) it's not the case that we know little of importance concerning God's beliefs and desires. Rather we interpret divine silence in light of the truth that if there is a God, he has perfect love for all humans and desires their ultimate well-being. Even if there is much we don't know about the beliefs, desires, motives, and dispositions of a perfect Divine being, if divine silence seems to clearly not promote human well-being, then we have some reason to interpret it as incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN.<sup>8</sup>

Rea thinks that the considerations he gives against interpreting the actions of persons support a strong agnosticism concerning the interpretation of divine silence:

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<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Rea overstates his case when he claims that even with Christian Scripture, there is little we can know about the way God would interact with humans. The Christian Scriptures give many affirmations from which one would be able to know something about God's beliefs, desires, and overall personality. To take just one example, Scripture commends that God's personality and interaction with humans can be understood analogously with what a human parent would do in dealing with a child. Consider this statement of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!' (Matthew 7:7-11 ESV)

Silence is an interpretable kind of behaviour; and, as with any other person, God's behaviour doesn't wear its interpretation on its sleeve – it can be understood only in the light of substantial background information. To be sure, divine silence could be an indication of divine rejection or lack of concern. But *that interpretation is entirely optional, given our evidence.* (p. 83, my emphasis)

This is too strong a conclusion. It doesn't follow from the truth that the behaviour of persons is interpretable and our lack of robust knowledge of the divine personality that there is no good reason to interpret divine silence as incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN. Rea's considerations concerning interpreting agential behaviour should remind us to be careful and circumspect in inferring God's intentions in allowing divine silence. But it seems clear that we know enough about what a perfect being would do such that divine silence is a *pro tanto* bad state of affairs, such that if one wants to deny P2# (as Rea is attempting to do), then one needs to provide a reason to think that divine silence promotes a good 'the promotion of which would justify God in permitting whatever bad things come from divine hiddenness' (p. 77). As Richard Swinburne (an influential *opponent* of the argument from hiddenness) states

All knowledge is good, but especially knowledge of deep truths about the Universe and our place in it, who or what is the source of our being, and more truths about our duties and the good actions beyond duty which we can do ... As our creator, God will seek to interact with us. He will want us to feel his presence, to tell him things and ask him to do things; and he will want to tell us things ... and to do good things with us, to cooperate with us in producing further goods.<sup>9</sup>

Swinburne thinks it's clear that 'God will, for these and other reasons ... want us to know that he exists.'<sup>10</sup> This is why theists like Swinburne give accounts of plausible goods which could justify God allowing divine silence – they recognize that God would not withhold evidence of his existence unless he had a good reason to do so. So I now turn to consider Rea's account of what justifies God in allowing hiddenness.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 112–113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

#### *§4.2. Rea's Defence of his God-justifying Good*

Recall that Rea states that he intends to 'defend a response to the problem of divine hiddenness that is consistent with [NO HUMAN GOOD]' (p. 78). This can be understood in a couple of different ways. One might think that Rea intends to provide an account of a God-justifying good and argue that this account is plausibly true. Rea does not, however, give any argument to support the conclusion that his God-justifying good is *true*, or even reasonable to believe. Rather, the structure of his defence for his God-justifying good is given in the following passage:

To be sure, divine silence could be an indication of divine rejection or lack of concern. But that interpretation is entirely optional, given our evidence. Divine silence might instead simply be a reflection of the fact that God prefers to communicate with us and to draw us into his presence in ways other than ones that would render [divine silence] false. It might just be a reflection of God's personality, so to speak. (p. 83)

Another point concerning Rea's defence of his God-justifying good is important to note. Rea nowhere gives an account of what divine belief, desire, or motive might motivate God acting in such a way that divine silence occurs. His appeal is to an *unknown* aspect of the divine personality.

Here's why I think this is inadequate. Proponents of arguments from hiddenness have provided reasons to think that P2# is true. They argue that God allowing divine silence is bad. If the interpretation of divine silence as bad was 'entirely optional, given our evidence', then putting forward a God-justifying good that's merely possible may be sufficient for thinking that P2# is false. But I've argued that though divine silence is an interpretable behaviour, this doesn't undermine the case that divine silence is a *pro tanto* bad state of affairs. Rea needs to give a reason to think that divine silence, though *pro tanto* bad, is not *all-things-considered* bad by developing a plausible account of why God allows divine silence. Rea's claim – that possibly God has an unknown part of his personality that is such that acting from his personality leads to divine silence – doesn't give a reason to think that divine silence is not all-things-considered bad. In other words, since reasons have been given for the claim that divine silence is incompatible with DIVINE CONCERN (see A and B\* above), and because Rea's INTERPRETATION SCEPTICISM ARGUMENT is not successful, the onus is on the opponent of the argument from hiddenness to give some reason to think that there is a good that justifies God in allowing



hiddenness. Simply appealing to the possibility of an unknown divine motivation fails to count as a defence of a God-justifying good.<sup>11</sup>

#### §4.3. Another Problem for Rea's God-justifying Good

I have argued that Rea's case against inferring that God is unloving/unconcerned from divine silence and his positing of God's actions expressing the divine personality as his account of the God-justifying good both have problems. However, even if my account here is unsuccessful, there is another problem for T1. Rea admits that the good of God acting from the divine personality justifies hiddenness *only if* DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is also true:

DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE: God has provided some widely and readily accessible way of finding him and experiencing his presence despite silence.

But if DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is a necessary condition for justifying divine silence, then it seems inaccurate to claim that what justifies divine silence is the good of God living out the divine personality. Rather, for Rea what justifies divine silence is the good of God living out the divine personality *in conjunction with* the availability of means to find God and experience him despite divine silence. So even if my criticism of T1 is unsuccessful, Rea's account of what justifies God in allowing divine silence is only as good as his case for T2 and T3. I accordingly evaluate these two theses in the next two sections.

### §5. AGAINST T3

Recall T3:

T3: DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true: Biblical narratives and liturgical acts are means by which we might find and experience the presence of God in the midst of divine silence.

Two preliminary points. First, I limit my discussion of Rea's case for DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE being met through mediated experiences of

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<sup>11</sup> There are clear parallels between Rea's appeal to an unknown component of the divine personality and the sceptical theist's response to the argument from evil. The issue of sceptical theism has been discussed extensively in the recent literature, and I can't do justice to that discussion here.

God made available through biblical narratives. My criticisms, however, could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to what Rea says about mediated experiences via liturgy.

Second, in order for Rea's account of mediated experiences of God to be plausible, Stump's position that second person accounts of God given in certain biblical narratives make available second-person experiences of God must be true. Rea gives no argument for the truth of this position; he simply assumes it in developing his account of how DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true. To evaluate Stump's position, however, is beyond the scope of this paper, so I will grant this part of Rea's account.

The fundamental problem for T3 is that people who experience divine silence seem to not be in the epistemic position necessary to have mediated experiences of God via biblical narratives. Concerning what is required to have a mediated experience of God through biblical narratives, Rea states:

A certain kind of 'seeing as' is a necessary condition for experiencing the presence of another person as such: one has to consciously regard the other *as a person* ... Likewise, then, one would expect that a similar sort of 'seeing as' would be involved in having mediated experiences of the presence of another person. Thus, for example, if one were to read a story about Fred's second-person experiences of Wilma while failing to see Wilma as a (real) person ... the experiences conveyed by the narrative would be different and, in that event, there would be no reason to think that the narrative would in any sense be mediating Wilma's presence. If this is right, then *whether Biblical narratives mediate the presence of God will depend importantly upon whether one takes those narratives to be reporting real experiences of God.* (p. 91, emphasis mine)

So in order to have a mediated experience of God through the biblical narrative, one must take those narratives to be reporting real experiences of God. The most plausible way to understand this requirement is that one would have to believe that the biblical narrative reports real experiences of God. But I argued in §3 that in order for Rea's argument from hiddenness to be plausible, divine silence must be understood as INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & LACK OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE\*. Those who experience divine silence are such that 'their available a priori and empirical evidence in support of God's existence is inconclusive (they can be fully aware of it and at the same time rationally believe that God does not exist), and they have never had an experience that seems to them

to be a direct experience or awareness of the love or presence of God. So people who experience divine silence do not have epistemic reason to justify belief that God exists, which means they don't have reason to take the biblical narratives as reporting real experiences of God. Since this is so, those who experience divine silence should not believe that the biblical narratives are reporting real experiences of God. And this, according to Rea's own account, would keep them from being able to have a mediated experience of God via the biblical narratives.

Rea has responded to this criticism in correspondence as follows.<sup>12</sup> Consider a person who lacks evidence for God's existence *because* he accepts an argument from hiddenness against God's existence; i.e., if he did not accept the argument from hiddenness he would justifiably believe in God. This person then comes to believe that biblical narratives (if true) could provide mediated experiences of God. This could provide a defeater for the reasons he had for accepting the argument from hiddenness, such that he would be open to experiencing the presence of God via the biblical narrative.

This is an interesting response, but it fails to undercut the general point I'm trying to make. First, this reply only shows that those who (i) experience divine silence because of hiddenness and then (ii) come to see that it's possibly true that one can have a mediated experience of God have reason to believe the biblical narratives are true, and thus be open to mediated experiences of God. But it seems implausible to think that most people who experience divine silence fail to believe in God because of the argument from hiddenness. So for those who lack a priori, empirical, or experiential evidence for God's existence for reasons other than an argument from hiddenness, they still lack a reason to believe that the biblical narratives are true and thus fail to be in an epistemic position to have a mediated experience of God via scripture. Second, for the person whose reason for unbelief is defeated by considering the possibility of mediated experiences of God, it is not true that this person has the possibility of experiencing God despite silence (which is the claim of T3). Rather, this person now has the reason that was keeping him from justifiably believing in God defeated. So he no longer experiences divine silence – he has a justified belief in God.

Another possible response that Rea could make is as follows: while the person who experiences divine silence *epistemically* ought not

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<sup>12</sup> Personal e-mail correspondence, June 26, 2013.

believe that the biblical narratives are reporting real experiences of God, he could have *pragmatic* reasons to believe that the biblical narratives are reporting real experiences of God. In response, believing that the biblical narratives are reporting real experiences of God for pragmatic reasons when one has insufficient evidence to justify this belief seems psychologically implausible. Most accounts of belief agree that belief is *synchronically* involuntary. As Swinburne states, ‘In general, a person cannot choose what to believe there and then. Believing is something that happens to someone, not something that he does.’<sup>13</sup> If this is the case, one cannot *choose* to believe that the biblical narratives are reporting real experiences of God at time *t* on the basis of pragmatic reasons. So in order to believe that biblical narratives are reporting real experiences of God, one would have to act in such a way that over time (a) one convinces oneself that the biblical narratives are true when one doesn’t have good evidence for this, or (b) one comes to have evidence that supports this proposition. If (a), then it seems like the person has done something irrational, and it seems problematic that a perfectly loving God would require people who experience divine silence to be irrational in order to be able to experience God despite divine silence. If (b), then by having evidence for believing that the biblical narratives are true the person would have evidence that supports belief in God, which would mean that she would no longer experience divine silence. So I conclude that even if Rea’s account of mediated experiences of God is correct, only those for whom God is *not* hidden will be able to have mediated experiences of God, which means that we should deny T3.

#### §6. AGAINST T2

In the previous sections I argued against T1 and T3. In this section I argue that even if we grant these two theses (which again, I have argued against), there is a fundamental problem for T2:

T2: Even if God does not permit divine silence in order to secure human goods, divine silence is compatible with DIVINE CONCERN so long as DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is true.

The problem is that a gap exists between DIVINE CONCERN and DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE. DIVINE CONCERN claims that ‘God strongly desires to

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 24.

promote the well-being of *all* of his rational creatures'. But DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE only claims that God has made a way to experience him that is 'widely and readily accessible'.

In order for DIVINE CONCERN to be compatible with divine silence, the way made available to experience God needs to make God accessible to *all* those who experience divine silence. Rea seems to acknowledge this, stating that

If we have been entirely cut off from God's presence, God then has done or permitted something that is both devastatingly harmful to us and totally out of our control, and it is much harder to make plausible the suggestion that God has taken reasonable steps to be compassionate towards us in the midst of our suffering. (p. 88)

If God desires the well-being of *all* his rational creatures (including those who experience divine silence), then it seems that he would provide *all* who experience divine silence access to mediated experiences of God. Rea's position is that the widely and readily accessible way of finding God and experiencing his presence despite silence is mediated experiences of God made available by Christian Scripture and liturgy. It seems implausible, however, to think that *all people* for whom God is hidden currently have access to Christian Scripture and liturgy (to say nothing of people in the past). It is an uncontroversial fact that *many* people have no access to Christian Scripture or the Christian church. Further, many instances of divine hiddenness cited by proponents of arguments from hiddenness are people who do not have access to these means of indirect experience of God. In Schellenberg's initial defence of the argument from hiddenness, for example, he puts forward as examples of divine hiddenness 'individuals – primarily from non-Western cultures – who have never so much as entertained the proposition "God exists"'.<sup>14</sup>

So even if people who experience divine silence can find God and have mediated experiences of his presence via Scripture and liturgy (contra my case above), divine silence is not thereby shown to be compatible with DIVINE CONCERN if there are people who experience divine silence and who don't have access to Christian Scripture or liturgy. For Rea to defend the compatibility of divine silence and DIVINE CONCERN, the means of mediated experiences of God must be available for *all* who experience hiddenness; otherwise there will be individuals who 'have been entirely cut off from God's presence', and for whom God 'has done or permitted

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<sup>14</sup> Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, p. 58.

something that is both devastatingly harmful ... and totally out of [their] control'. Rea has not, however, given any defence of the claim that all who experience hiddenness have access to Christian scripture and liturgy; further, to defend this claim would be a difficult task in light of the experience of many who have no access to Christian Scripture and liturgy and seem to be exemplar cases of divine hiddenness.

## §7. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to show that the response to the problem of hiddenness given by Rea is unsuccessful for a number of reasons. This is not to say that the argument from hiddenness Rea develops gives evidential support for the conclusion that a perfectly good God doesn't exist. There are a number of other theistic responses to the problem of hiddenness on offer.<sup>15</sup> But theists looking for an adequate response to the problem of hiddenness will need to look to one or more of these other accounts, rather than the one critiqued here.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> To begin looking at theistic responses to the problem of hiddenness, here are some suggestions (this list is not meant to be exhaustive): Thomas V. Morris, 'The Hidden God', *Philosophical Topics*, XVI, no. 2 (1988), 5–21; Michael Murray, 'Coercion and the Hiddenness of God', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 30, no. 1 (1993), 27–38; Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'The Argument from Divine Hiddenness', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26, no. 3 (1996), 433–453; Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*; Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); C. Stephen Evans, 'Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections', *Faith and Philosophy*, 23, no. 3 (2006), 241–253; Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), 183–198; Andrew Cullison, 'Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 47, no. 2 (2010), 119–134; Travis Dumsday, 'Divine Hiddenness as Divine Mercy', *Religious Studies*, 48 (2012), 183–198; Travis Dumsday, 'Divine Hiddenness and Creaturely Resentment', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 77 (2012), 41–51; Justin McBrayer and Philip Swenson, 'Scepticism About the Argument from Divine Hiddenness', *Religious Studies*, 48 (2012), 129–150.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank Michael Rea for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.