

DIVINE HIDDENNESS

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Introduction and background

Though others have spoken of ‘Divine hiddenness’ or the ‘hiddenness of God’ differently, contemporary philosophers who employ such expressions usually have in mind either (1) that the available relevant evidence makes the existence of God uncertain or (2) that many individuals or groups of people *feel* uncertain about the existence of God, or else never mentally engage the idea of God at all. The first sort of hiddenness may be called *objective* and the second *subjective*. Of course there are various possible connections between these two, and both may consistently be affirmed.

Many in philosophy’s history would have been prepared to admit the existence of objective or subjective Divine hiddenness or both. But only a few – see Nietzsche 1882 [1881] and Hepburn 1963 for the clearest examples – have noticed that such an admission can provide the basis for a distinctive objection to theistic belief. And only in recent years has serious discussion of this objection begun (Schellenberg 1993 contains the first fully worked-out and defended argument for atheism from hiddenness-related facts). Is it surprising that a thorough treatment of the hiddenness challenge to theism should have been so long delayed?

Perhaps this can be made unsurprising. First, notice that talk of ‘Divine hiddenness’ or the ‘hiddenness of God’ originates in contexts of unquestioning *belief* – think only of the Hebrew psalmist’s laments. In such contexts it is natural to take hiddenness talk literally, and thus to conjoin such propositions as (1) or (2) above with the claim that God is the *source* of the phenomenon in question. There can hardly be a challenge to theism from Divine hiddenness if the latter is thought of as entailing the existence of God! Second, until recently, many humans have been inclined to think of a certain relational distance as a perfectly unexceptionable

feature of masculinity, and also to think of God in exclusively masculine terms. This, together with the commonness of references in theology to God as hidden, has made it possible for thinkers to be unmoved by facts falling under (1) and (2) above. Third, although there have been suggestions in the history of philosophy as to how God's existence might be more fully revealed, these have usually been stated in fairly crude ways. An 'in your face' sort of God is imagined writing his name in the stars or performing some other hugely impressive feat aimed at making his existence overwhelmingly obvious (see, for example, Hume 1946 [1779] and Hanson 1976). These suggestions have been easy for critics to resist or even dismiss, and in their haste such critics have overlooked better, more sensitive suggestions as to what hiddenness is and how it might be removed. Fourth, the hiddenness problem is easily lost within the problem of evil; many have hazily assumed that discussion of the latter takes care of the former as well. Finally, we should remember the rising tide of secularism, which was not always with us. This complex phenomenon has brought with it much *more* uncertainty about the existence of God than once existed and, correspondingly, more of a chance for talk of 'hiddenness' to arise in new, nonliteral forms that *both* believers and nonbelievers utilize – from which usage the idea of a hiddenness argument for atheism can grow.

The contemporary scene: versions of the hiddenness problem

So where is the discussion today? Five main ways of developing the hiddenness problem in philosophy have been suggested so far, though attention has been concentrated on the first.

(1) *It has been suggested that an essential property of God is perfect love, and that a perfectly loving God would from relational motives prevent nonresistant nonbelief, which*

nonetheless exists (Schellenberg 1993, 2007). The suggestion here is that an unsurpassably great personal reality could not but be perfectly loving, and that perfect love is open to relationship in a manner whose consequences in the Divine case have not been appreciated. Possessed of perfect love and unconstrained by the limitations of finitude, a personal God would ensure that anyone capable of meaningful, conscious relationship with the Divine and not resistant to it was always in a position to enter into such relationship at some level. Now, this cannot be the case unless all creatures who are capable and nonresistant always *believe in the existence of God*, for such belief is a necessary condition of being in the position just described. (Their belief need not be a response to spectacular miracles but might, for example, be the natural consequence of inner experiences of God's presence of the sort theistic writers themselves describe and defend, generally distributed and modulated according to the needs of believers.) Hence the fact that there are instead, and always have been, many nonresistant *nonbelievers* is an indication that there is no God. Evidently it is subjective hiddenness that is front and center in this first version of the problem, and the argument form is deductive. The argument stakes a lot on its claim about the implications of Divine love, but if correct it yields considerable enlightenment concerning the nature and prospects of theism.

(2) *It has been suggested that, instead of reasoning from nonresistant nonbelief in general, and on grounds of perfect love alone, the atheist can argue from any or all of at least four distinguishable types of nonresistant nonbelief, appealing to various aspects of the perfect moral character a God must display* (Schellenberg 2007). Some nonresistant nonbelievers are former believers; some lifelong seekers. Others are converts to nontheistic religion; and still others isolated nontheists. And drawing on considerations about responsiveness and caring, noncapriciousness and justice, faithfulness, generosity, truthfulness, nondeceptiveness, and

providence, so this argument claims, we can show the difficulty of squaring the existence of God with each of these types of nonresistant nonbelief. For why, if a God of perfect moral character exists, should we have onetime believers trying to make their way home without being able to do so; or dedicated seekers failing to find, or taking themselves to have found a truth that only enmeshes them in a meaning system distortive of what must, if God exists, *be* the truth; or individuals being entirely formed by a fundamentally misleading meaning system? Some of the arguments involved here are deductive, and some proceed inductively – for example, by analogy with the behaviour of human parents.

(3) *It has been suggested, in an argument directed specifically to evangelical Christian theism, that if the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, all, or almost all, humans since the time of Jesus would have come to believe the gospel message by the time of their physical deaths, and yet many have not* (this is the central argument of Drange 1998). Here too it is a kind of subjective hiddenness that is considered problematic, and the form of argument is deductive, as under (1). The suspicion is that a hiddenness argument will be most effective if directed to a specific theological tradition. Given its influence in the world, it is perhaps not surprising that Drange concentrates on evangelical Christianity. On this approach, one may note, it is unnecessary to argue for perfect love as an essential property of God or for a connection between such love and the availability of Divine-creature relationship or for a connection between such relationship and creaturely belief in God. All that is needed are some evangelical assumptions. On the other hand, this argument – like other, similar arguments Drange supplies for different theological traditions – makes itself a hostage to religious assumptions and to religious reinterpretations thereof.

(4) *It has been suggested that hiddenness considerations may be added to, and might turn out to strengthen, a wide cumulative case meant inductively to confirm the nonexistence of God* (Draper 2002). Though Draper has Schellenberg's argument in mind when contemplating the implications of hiddenness, he is really thinking about *objective* hiddenness rather than subjective. On his view, the evidence relevant to the dispute between theism and the (atheism-entailing) position of naturalism is objectively indecisive; each side has clear evidence that is "offset" by clear evidence on the other side. This indecisiveness Draper describes in terms of the "ambiguity" of the total available evidence. Now, such objective hiddenness may be more difficult to establish than the subjective variety, for ambiguity judgments will be contested even where nonresistant doubt and nonbelief are admitted. But if it can be established, a new form of reasoning is possible. This is what interests Draper. He takes Schellenberg to be saying (as Hepburn 1963 in fact does) that objective hiddenness is self-removing: that if we add ambiguity itself to our evidence, the latter will no longer be ambiguous but rather evidence overall confirming atheism. Draper does not himself believe that this move works, for even after assuming – as reason may not force us to do – that ambiguity is less likely on the assumption of theism than on the assumption of naturalism and adding this supposed evidence to the mix, it remains unclear, so he claims, that the evidence on the one side is stronger than the evidence on the other, and thus we are still left, overall, with ambiguity. Nonetheless, Draper identifies a distinctive manner in which a hiddenness argument might be deployed, whether within such a broader atheistic case as he describes or alone, and whether as a decisive or only as a contributing factor in the defense of atheism: the way to proceed, he suggests, is to show how much more likely it is that hiddenness-related facts should be found on the assumption of naturalism than it is on the assumption of theism.

(5) *It has been suggested, in a special instance of the Draper-style approach, that the uneven distribution of theistic belief in the world is much more likely on naturalism than on theism* (Maitzen 2006). Here subjective hiddenness is once more at issue, but Maitzen abstracts from individuals to large-scale facts about nonbelief. Why, he asks, should the demographics of theism be such that (e.g.) residents of Thailand experience twenty times the rate of nonbelief experienced by residents of Saudi Arabia? This is rather difficult to explain on theism, with its loving and (so) relationship-seeking God, but it is just what we would expect if such natural forces as culture and politics alone were at work. His argument, Maitzen suggests, is immune to the usual objections. For example, human defectiveness – often appealed to by theists to explain hiddenness – could hardly be expected to vary so dramatically with cultural and geographical boundaries. Moreover, here we can identify a clear difference between the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil: the usual responses to the problem of evil mention features quite uniformly distributed among the human populace, such as free will, and arguably predict a similar uniformity for what they seek to explain, such as the subjective experience of suffering. But nonbelief is anything but uniformly distributed, and so it is hard to see how responses like the free will theodicy can effectively come to grips with it. How strong a conclusion Maitzen's reasoning will support is not yet clear, but his work reminds us of the variety of forms hiddenness argumentation can take – a variety that may yet have more of itself to reveal.

The hiddenness problem and the problem of evil

As indicated above, the hiddenness problem has seemed to some to be assimilable to the problem of evil. We have also just encountered a suggestion to the effect that these two problems are importantly distinguishable. So what *are* the relations between the two problems? Does the

concern of hiddenness arguers, for example, come down to a concern about evil by reducing to concern over some form of pain or suffering? Pretty clearly, no. Even where nonresistant nonbelief takes the form of doubt (it doesn't always), and where doubt is distressing, it need not be this *distress* that captures the attention of the hiddenness arguer. It may just as well be the conflict between doubt and belief, and the motivations of love that would lead God to facilitate belief and prevent doubt, whether distress is occasioned by the latter or not.

Could we still say, a bit more generally, that both the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil focus on the *badness* of certain things in a way that makes the former assimilable to the latter? This may initially seem plausible, but reflection suggests otherwise. A theist may keenly feel the value of (what she takes to be) an existing relationship with God and may therefore be inclined to view anything contributing to its absence, such as nonbelief, as a bad thing. But the atheist would be quite content were we all to recognize that, given certain definitional facts about 'love', the situation of hiddenness is in conflict with the idea that a God of *fullest love* exists, as opposed to feeling that hiddenness represents something bad that a benevolent or morally perfect God would resist. (A similar distinction is made by Drange [1998] in his discussion of differences between the two problems.) If love is an essential property of God, then such a recognition is all we need to ground a hiddenness argument against the existence of God. What is distinctive about the argument from evil is that it instead appeals to the existence of things we would not expect from benevolence or moral impeccability *because they are bad*. Hence, it is not appropriate to regard these two problems as sharing a focus on badness.

It is important that we see this, if only to avoid the confusion exemplified by those who wonder why anyone would put forward an argument from, say, nonresistant nonbelief when it is

obvious that God can be revealed to all of us in a happy afterlife and can be good to us even now in ways not involving self-revelation. The wonderment here depends on supposing that the hiddenness arguer is saying there is something deeply *bad* about a life even temporarily bereft of the opportunity for conscious acquaintance with God. And that is not what she is saying. Rather, she appeals, again, to facts about love, which by its very nature, so she may claim, opens itself to relationship with those loved.

But the assimilationist still has one more trick up her sleeve: surely both problems do focus on things apparently contrary to the moral character of God, and thus they are broadly of the same type! Suppose so. By this point we have arrived at a similarity *so* general as to be useless to the assimilationist's case. To say that because the hiddenness argument argues from things apparently contrary to the moral character of God, the hiddenness argument is reducible to the argument from evil, would be like saying that because the theistic teleological argument argues from things contingent, the teleological argument is reducible to the cosmological argument. The latter claim is unconvincing, and so – for the same reason – is the former.

Two other possible relations between the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil may briefly be explored. Notice, first, how it may be thought that the problem of evil *generates* the hiddenness problem. After all, evil is often taken as evidence against theism contributing to evidential ambiguity, and many are in doubt about God precisely because of facts about evil. But we should be careful here not to conflate nonresistant nonbelief with one of its species: *conscious, reflective nonresistant doubt or disbelief*. We are overintellectualizing if we do, forgetting the types of nonresistant nonbelief, mentioned earlier, that do not involve reflection and so do not involve reflection on the problem of evil. Turning to objective hiddenness: if there were no evil, or no unjustified evil, the possibility of indecisive evidence might remain because

of the force of *other* arguments against the existence of God (including arguments from subjective hiddenness!) or because of the failure of arguments *for* the existence of God. Any connection here between the problem of evil and the problem of hiddenness is contingent and limited.

Must evil be much stronger evidence for atheism than hiddenness? Some have been inclined to say so (see, for example, Howard-Snyder 2005). But their assumption seems to be that, in this context, strength of evidence can be measured along but one dimension: degree of badness. And this assumption is false. Horrific suffering is indeed worse than hiddenness. Indeed, as we have seen, the atheist need not regard the latter as bad at all. But something not at all bad or even good might prove the nonexistence of God if God's existence were incompatible with it, thus representing atheistic evidence as strong as there could be. Imagine knowing that God necessarily would create a world with a certain good characteristic A and that this rules out God's creating a world with a certain good characteristic B. Now suppose you discover that our world has goodness B. You would then have a basis from which to mount an impeccable deductive argument from goodness B to the nonexistence of God. Thus the lack of any opportunity of appealing to things horrifying when developing the hiddenness argument does not in any way reveal that argument to be weaker than the argument from evil. (For more on the relations between the problem of evil and the hiddenness discussion, see Schellenberg, forthcoming.)

The contemporary scene: attempts to solve the hiddenness problem

The hiddenness problem in its various forms is, as we have seen, its own problem, requiring its own solutions, and there is no shortage of suggestions as to what the latter might be. (Actually,

most of the suggestions that have been raised so far are aimed at the original, Schellenberg version of the problem, and it would take additional argument to show that they apply to the other versions as well.) Though few historical figures have recognized the atheistic potential of hiddenness, a number – Pascal, Kierkegaard, Butler, and others – developed ideas that have seemed to some of those seeking a solution to the hiddenness problem to be worthy of adapting for this purpose. The solutions explicitly developed so far, whether from some such historical source of inspiration or otherwise, fall into four broad categories. Each has a central idea that follows naturally on that of the previous category.

(1) *Attempts to show that hiddenness does not obtain in the first place.* Some writers think we accede too easily to the idea that there really are nonresistant nonbelievers in the world. They argue that sinful rejection of God, sometimes cleverly disguised, may be quite common (Henry 2001, Moser 2002, Wainwright 2002, Lehe 2004, Evans 2006). One response is that such a solution overlooks the nonresistant nonbelief of individuals and groups, in various places and times, who do not have so much as a good grasp of the concept of Divinity involved here; another is that many doubters deeply wish to believe in a manner that makes hidden resistance quite unlikely (Schellenberg 2004 and 2005b). Considered somewhat differently, this first approach might be seen as applying to objective hiddenness; one could, for example, question whether Draper's objective ambiguity obtains. However it is hard to see how it might seriously be thought to undermine our acceptance of the distinctive subjective facts appealed to by Drange and Maitzen.

(2) *Attempts to show that, even if it does obtain, hiddenness need not be a barrier to personal relationship with God, since such relationship can exist in the absence of our belief in God.* Some arguments in this category develop the idea – an application of conceptual work on

religious attitudes done by Alston (1996) and by Schellenberg himself (2005a) – that a beliefless sort of acceptance or faith might, in a relationship with God, substitute for belief, so that such relationship is not really ruled out by the unavailability of belief (Jordan 2006, Dougherty & Poston 2007, Aijaz & Weidler 2007). Others (see Cullison, forthcoming) suggest ways in which even a belief-*like* state may be unnecessary. A possible response is that such maneuvers are in danger of equivocating on ‘personal relationship,’ at critical moments ignoring what this term really means in the context of hiddenness argumentation (for what it really means, see version 1 of the hiddenness problem above). A related point is that they are in danger of missing the connection between hiddenness concerns and the motives of love, substituting for the latter a purely instrumental concern with the well-being of creatures and mistakenly thinking they can reach their goal simply by showing one form of relationship to be as *beneficial* as another. For such reasons, it can be argued that the present solution is unable to stand on its own two feet but needs to be propped up by a solution of the sort outlined under (3) below, which faces the task of showing that God might at some time settle for something less than what genuine love will naturally seek to facilitate (Schellenberg 2007).

(3) *Attempts to show that, even supposing it is a barrier to relationship with God, a perfectly loving God would have good reasons for permitting hiddenness to occur.* Discussion of this strategy is much in evidence in the contemporary literature. It begins in earnest with Schellenberg 1993, which systematically and with attention to historical precedent discusses some fifteen such replies to the hiddenness argument, finding none successful, and it continues in the attempts of various critics to deepen or extend these replies. Representative of the goods that have been suggested by critics as sufficient to move even a perfectly loving God to remain distant, at least for a time, are the following: avoidance of rebuff from the nonresistant but ill-

disposed, who by responding negatively to God upon coming to believe would only confirm themselves in bad dispositions (Howard-Snyder 1996; see also Garcia 2002 and Tucker 2008); the possibility of discovering God's existence through individual and cooperative investigation, as well as genuine freedom to choose the bad (Swinburne 1998, Murray 2002); the opportunity for humans to develop past immaturity to the point where a revelation of God would do individuals more personal good than it can do us now (McKim 2001); a chance to develop deep longing for God as well as the motivation, supplied by struggling with doubt, to remove deficiencies in oneself (Lehe 2004); and the opportunity to exhibit a noble sort of courage or love that sacrifices itself for the good even where no belief in the possibility of a happy afterlife exists to diminish its value (Cullison, forthcoming).

All of the reasons for hiddenness here identified are in some way about moral or spiritual or intellectual development. One response with which they must contend is that there seem to be many ways in which, given the infinite richness and depth of any God there may be, the goods associated with such development can be accommodated *within* explicit relationship with God – which would itself be capable of an indefinite degree of development, with always more to discover and overcome for one who participated in it (Schellenberg 2007). What the points here listed provide us with reason to suppose God would value are invariably broad *types* of things – such as courage – that can be tokened in various ways, and also in relationship with God; and given the connection between love and openness to relationship, we should not expect God to give up the latter unless these types cannot otherwise be tokened. There is also a way of deepening this response, one which enables the hiddenness arguer to deal even with those goods from the list that most seem to require the absence of belief in God's existence. This returns us to the original meaning of 'Divine hiddenness,' reminding us that there is a kind of Divine

withdrawal that can occur within relationship with God – the ‘dark night of the soul’ *after* belief which, especially in its emotional effects, may readily substitute for doubt *prior* to belief in the production of such goods (Schellenberg, 1993, 2007).

It should also be noted that reasons for hiddenness such as those given here are apparently not so much as applicable to the data emphasized by the Maitzen demographics argument. We would expect these reasons to apply evenly to human beings, if at all, so they are poorly suited to an explanation of the dramatically *uneven* distribution of theistic believers.

(4) *Attempts to show that, even if the available reasons for hiddenness fail, there may yet be good reasons we don't know about for God to permit hiddenness.* Lacking convincing goods we know about, theistic critics sometimes turn to goods we don't know about (see, for example, McKim 2001, Howard-Snyder 2005), thus evincing what Draper (1996) has called skeptical theism. Would it really be surprising if there were such unknown goods, given our cognitive limitations? But it is hard to avoid begging the question here. If a case has been made, say, for the claim that a perfectly loving God would necessarily be open to explicit relationship in the manner that a hiddenness argument emphasizes, then unknown reasons *would* be surprising, for their absence is implied by what has been shown. Thus it appears that the solution in question must assume that such a case has not been made – which is to beg the question. Perhaps such a reply is not available to nondeductive versions of the hiddenness argument, but other replies that are relevant have been suggested in the ongoing dispute over skeptical theism in connection with the problem of evil (see, for example, Draper 1996 and Drange 1998).

All in all, it is clear that the hiddenness problem has become a focus of exciting and lively discussion in philosophy of religion. Featuring a discussion less than two decades old, this whole area is ripe for new developments.

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