

**HIDDENNESS**

*Michael J. Murray and David E. Taylor*

**The problem of hiddenness**

Very few people will claim that God's existence is an obvious feature of reality. Not only atheists and agnostics, but theists too generally acknowledge that God is, at least to some extent, hidden. The psalmist, for example, exclaims in apparent frustration, using words later uttered by Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day but you do not answer. . . ." (Psalm 22:1-2).

For theists divine hiddenness can be a source of anxiety or despair. Some atheists, on the other hand, view hiddenness as fodder for an argument against the existence of God. Recently, The Argument (for atheism) from Hiddenness has taken a new, more rigorous form, most notably in the works of philosopher John Schellenberg. The simplest version of Schellenberg's argument looks like this:

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief in the existence of God does not occur.
- (3) Reasonable non-belief in the existence of God does occur.
- (4) No perfectly loving God exists.
- (5) There is no God (Schellenberg 1993: 83).

Schellenberg argues that since premise (1) is true by definition and premises (4) and (5) follow from the earlier ones, the only controversial claims in the argument are (2) and

(3). Schellenberg accepts premise (3) because he takes it to be obvious that at least some non-belief, his own at any rate, is indeed reasonable.

What about (2)? Schellenberg claims that theists should be attracted to this premise. Most theistic traditions argue that ultimate human fulfillment is found by entering into a deep, personal relationship with God. Therefore, if God is truly loving, it is reasonable to think that he will seek to do whatever is necessary to bring his creatures into a position where such a relationship is possible. There are numerous conditions that are necessary to do this, but only one need concern us here, namely that God *make his existence known* to creatures in such a way that they could not reasonably fail to see it. It seems indubitable that person A cannot enter into a deep and personal loving relationship with person B unless person A knows that person B exists. Hence it is a minimally necessary condition of God's entering into such a relationship with *us* that he make his existence known to us. For this reason, we should expect that God would reveal himself to us in a way that rules out the possibility of reasonable non-belief.

But even if our expectations here are warranted, perhaps our acceptance of (2) is premature. What if God has good reason to withhold evidence for the truth of theism in spite of his similarly good reason to prevent reasonable non-belief? Since there might be such reason, premise (2) should be rejected in favor of the more cautious:

(2\*) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur, unless God has a morally sufficient reason to permit the occurrence of such reasonable non-belief.

Were we to revise the argument in this way, Schellenberg would need to adjust premise (3) of his argument as well to read:

(3\*) (a) Reasonable non-belief occurs, and (b) at least some of it occurs for no good reason.

Now the crux of the argument lies in (3\*) alone.

### **Objections to (3\*a)**

One way to argue against (3\*) is to attack its first conjunct and deny that reasonable non-belief actually occurs. There is a great deal of non-belief in the world, of course. Some of this non-belief occurs in the form of atheism and agnosticism. But even more of it occurs in the form of what religious believers are likely to regard as erroneous beliefs concerning the nature or identity of God. Many Christians, for example, regard Hindu belief in God as a form of non-belief since, by the Christian's lights, the god of Hinduism does not in fact exist. Could one reasonably take all such non-belief to be unreasonable or culpable? Some critics of the argument have argued that the answer is yes.

Taking inspiration from Jonathan Edwards, William Wainwright (2002) claims that God has provided us with sufficient objective evidence of his existence, and that it is only because of certain corrupt, faulty dispositions that we are blind to it. Furthermore, since we are ultimately responsible for these corrupt dispositions, our non-belief is *culpably unreasonable*. According to Schellenberg (1993: 62), *A*'s belief that *p* is inculpable (reasonable) if and only if "his evidence, inductive standards, and belief as to *p*'s probability on the evidence have been, in his own view at the time, adequately investigated." Wainwright agrees that these conditions are necessary for inculpable belief, but denies their sufficiency since there are situations in which one can meet all the above conditions and yet still *culpably* believe (or fail to believe). This can happen in one of two ways. First, *if* one can be held responsible for being in an epistemic environment in which relevant evidence is unavailable, or in which it is difficult to

cultivate the appropriate epistemic capacities, one can be culpable for one's belief (or non-belief) despite meeting Schellenberg's conditions. Second, Wainwright claims, *if* one can be held responsible for one's "passional nature," one can be held responsible for judgments about the relative weight of evidence, and hence will be culpable for beliefs based on that evidence, despite meeting Schellenberg's conditions. Hence, according to Wainwright, insofar as we can be culpable for the epistemic circumstances or passional nature that contributes to our non-belief, we can reasonably be held responsible for that non-belief. If each instance of what Schellenberg takes to be reasonable non-belief were to fall into one or both of these categories, then all theistic non-belief would be culpable.

Before we can assess Wainwright's position, we need to know more about the notions of "epistemic situation" and "passional nature" at work in this argument. Generally, one's epistemic situation consists of the totality of the external circumstances relevant to the formation of belief in a certain domain. If I am a detective investigating the murder of Jones down by the river, it behooves me to examine the crime scene and other related sites near the river. These would be the appropriate epistemic circumstances in which to form beliefs about the murder. If I decided to investigate the crime by examining the restroom at the McDonald's across town instead, I would have put myself in epistemic circumstances that make it impossible for me to come to hold appropriate beliefs about the crime and its perpetrator. Wainwright's point is that we can, like a wayward detective, culpably place ourselves in epistemic circumstances that lead us to non-belief in the existence of God.

The phrase "passional nature" is adapted from William James, who uses it to refer (roughly) to a person's fundamental intuitions, desires and dispositions concerning an

issue under scrutiny prior to the evaluation of any objective evidence (Wainwright 1995: 96-107; 2002: 111). We all know people who, for example, are quick to attribute vicious motives to others. When they see someone cut them off in traffic, they immediately conclude that the action was done with malicious intent. Perhaps they readily form such judgments because of past ill treatment from others or because of their general uncharitable temperament. Whatever their explanation, they come to the world with a bias that leads them to assess evidence in a way that favors one explanation or conclusion over other equally (or more) plausible explanations. Insofar as we have control over our having these intuitions, desires and dispositions, we are responsible and thus potentially culpable for the beliefs they might yield, including non-belief in theism.

Wainwright thus holds that the non-belief which Schellenberg regards as reasonable is in fact a result of one's culpable epistemic situation or passional nature, and hence is itself culpable. It may seem reasonable to hold that at least *some* non-belief is culpably unreasonable in this way. But is it reasonable to believe that possibly *all* non-belief is of this sort? Critics will likely think that there are many non-believers whose epistemic environment and passional nature are both appropriate for the acquisition of religious belief, thus undercutting this criticism of (3\*a). It is difficult to know how the question can be confidently settled. Non-believers who take themselves to be properly situated and disposed to the evidence might be self-deceived or otherwise mistaken. And yet, there do seem to be honest, well-intentioned and fully informed non-believers.

### **Objections to (3\*b): invalid “noseeum” inference?**

Even if the theist grants (3\*a), Schellenberg must provide us with reason for thinking that some of the reasonable non-belief occurs *for no good reason*. Initially it seems that this burden will be easy to satisfy. For consider the agnostic who deeply wants to believe, and happily would believe if God would only provide him with a tiny bit more evidence, maybe even just a vague religious experience. Now the question is: What *possible* good could come out of God's permitting *this* person's continuing reasonable non-belief? It seems that in this case, and others like it, there simply is no greater good that could justify such reasonable non-belief. And in light of this, the reasonable conclusion to draw is that cases like this are, after all, instances of reasonable non-belief occurring for no good reason.

The defender of the Argument from Hiddenness is here arguing that she has looked long and hard for some possible greater good to which this non-belief might contribute, but has ultimately come up empty-handed. She sees no reason that God permit such suffering, and so it is reasonable for her to conclude that there is none. Arguments of this general sort have been labeled “noseeum arguments.”

Are *noseeum arguments* good arguments? Sometimes they are. For a noseeum inference to be good, two conditions must be met. First, it must be the case that I am looking in the right place for the thing in question. If my wife asks me if we have any milk and I look in the oven, I am looking in the wrong place. My failing to see it *there* would not be good evidence that we don't have any milk. Second, it must be the case that I would see the thing in question if it really were there. If my wife asks me if we have ants in our lawn and I look out the window and say, “Nope—I don't see any,” I

have made a bad noseum inference. I am looking in the right place, but ants are too small to be seen by me from this location even if they are there.

Is Schellenberg well-positioned to make a noseum inference to the claim that at least some instances of reasonable non-belief occur for no good reason? Some have argued that the answer is no (McKim 2001: 87-91, 104). Consider the first test. When looking for greater goods to justify reasonable non-belief, are we looking in the right place? Maybe we are, but we can't say for sure. We might well consider all the types of goods we can think of to see if any of them would justify reasonable non-belief. But how do we know that there are not many different types of goods that we either do not or cannot understand with our limited, creaturely intellectual and moral capacities? If there are such goods, perhaps we have been looking in the wrong place. So it is not clear that this noseum inference meets the first condition. This also shows us why this noseum inference does not clearly meet the second condition either. If there are some potentially justifying goods that we cannot fathom at all, then we will not come to know them even when looking in "the right places."

Schellenberg has offered three responses to the charge that he has deployed a fallacious noseum inference. First, he argues that, contrary to the claims made above, his noseum inferences *do* pass the tests. On Schellenberg's view, if the permission of divine hiddenness serves any sort of good at all, those goods would be (or would likely be) goods for *human beings*. Consequently, it is "unlikely that they, or their relation to [hiddenness], should be impossible for us to grasp" (Schellenberg 1993: 90). If this is right, then if we can see no connection between divine hiddenness and certain greater goods for human beings, we can conclude that there is no good reason for hiddenness.

We have, after all, looked in the right place, and we would have seen the goods we were looking for if they were there.

Unfortunately, this reply contains three undefended and highly controversial assumptions. We can unearth these by considering three questions. First, is it right to say that the goods at which hiddenness aims would have to be human goods? Why couldn't the outweighing goods be of another sort, say goods that contribute to an overall better universe? Schellenberg does not say. Second, why should we think that even if hiddenness does aim at human goods, that we would be aware of all *human* goods that God wants for us to enjoy? Some of these goods might, for example, be presently unimaginable goods that we are able to experience only in a post-mortem state of existence. Finally, why does Schellenberg think that if hiddenness is aimed at securing known goods, that it would be obvious to us what the connection between hiddenness and those goods would be? For all we know, certain painful experiences we undergo at one point or another contribute to the formation of a character of outweighing virtue in the distant future. If so, perhaps the connection between those experiences and that virtue would be impossible for us to understand before (or even after) the fact. The same, it seems, is true, for all we know, with the evil of hiddenness.

Schellenberg's second response is to claim that any good that would be secured through divine hiddenness could be equally secured by God's choosing to *relationally withdraw* from his creatures. Such withdrawal would serve to bring about any goods that hiddenness would be thought to achieve, and it could do this while still ruling out any reasonable non-belief. Thus, no unknown goods would justify hiddenness. Schellenberg (*ibid.*: 299-300) puts the point this way:

What I have in mind here is analogous to what has traditionally been called “the dark night of the soul”—a state in which there is evidence for God’s existence on which the believer may rely, but in which God is not felt as directly present to her experience, and may indeed feel absent. . . . this sort of hiddenness can produce the goods in question and is compatible with God being revealed to all who do not resist God. . . .

Can withdrawal bring about the same goods as hiddenness? It seems impossible to say in the abstract. To know, we would have to consider each good individually. But of course, if there are inscrutable goods, we have no way of considering *them* on a case-by-case basis, and hence cannot determine if withdrawal could bring them about.

In his final response Schellenberg (2005: 300-1) claims that the noseum objection is question begging. According to Schellenberg, anyone who holds that it is possible that there exist inscrutable goods for the sake of which God would permit reasonable non-belief is committed to the following: The possibility that such inscrutable goods might exist is *not ruled out by anything we know or justifiably believe*. But accepting this claim assumes that (2) from the original formulation of the argument is false. For (2) clearly *rules out* the possibility of there being *any* goods for the sake of which God would permit reasonable non-belief (for if there were any such goods, God might permit reasonable non-belief on behalf of them, and so (2) would be false). Hence, to claim that it is possible that there exist hidden goods of the sort in question is to assume that the crucial premise (2) is false, and this is to beg the question.

However, begging the question against (2) is not problematic since, as we saw earlier, one should not be moved to accept (2) in the first place, but rather only the more modest (2\*). Appeals to the possibility of inscrutable goods to explain hiddenness are unproblematic given (2\*) since (2\*) clearly leaves open this possibility. Schellenberg might object that such critics have altered his original argument to better their purposes.

But this reply fails since, as we saw, we should have never accepted (2) in the first place; only belief in (2\*) is warranted.

### **Objections to (3\*b): good reasons for hiddenness**

Rather than taking refuge in the possibility of inscrutable goods as a way of undermining (3\*b), some theists have instead argued that we can see at least some of the goods that constitute justifying reasons for hiddenness. We turn to the two most important such explanations in what follows.

#### *The good of filial knowledge*

Paul Moser (2002; 2004) argues that God remains hidden to some creatures because failure to so hide would prevent those creatures from coming to know God in the proper way. Moser's argument hinges on a distinction between two types of knowledge of God: (1) *propositional* knowledge that God exists, and (2) *filial* knowledge of God. The first is simply the belief that God exists. The second is a much deeper knowledge that consists of one's "humbly, faithfully, and lovingly standing in a relationship to God as our righteously gracious Father" (Moser 2004: 49). According to Moser, God's perfectly loving character requires that he promote and facilitate not just our propositional knowledge of God, but also our filial knowledge of God.

Propositional knowledge is a necessary condition for filial knowledge, but alone it can prove detrimental to one's relationship with the divine. Simply knowing "that God exists" in the way that we know any other true proposition about the world objectifies and trivializes God and his purposes. Not only is this an evil in itself, but those with mere propositional knowledge might respond to God with an indifferent, hateful,

impersonal, or presumptuous attitude. Since God wants nothing more than for us to lovingly respond to him, he will not promote propositional knowledge except insofar as this is a component of our filial knowledge of him.

So why hasn't God bestowed upon us the means to know him *filially*? That is, why does he remain hidden with respect to *this* type of knowledge? Moser claims that in order for one to know God filially, one must turn towards God in a "morally serious" manner. We cannot respond to God in the appropriate loving manner unless we are open to moral transformation—distancing ourselves from our material and selfish values. Further, we cannot know God in a filial way unless we recognize him as Lord and Father. According to Moser, if we open our hearts to God in this way, then God will make himself known to us through his morally transforming love. This love is the "*cognitive* foundation for genuine filial knowledge of God," and when one possesses it, one is unable to deny God's existence and all-loving character.

Schellenberg (2004: 55-6) argues that this response fails since there are clearly individuals who fully seek God in the way that is required for filial knowledge and yet have neither it nor propositional knowledge. One might, of course, raise doubts about how Schellenberg could know that there are such individuals. Moser further responds that even if there are such cases, we can presume that God is waiting for his "appointed time" to bestow the grace of filial knowledge in such cases, and that there is no way to show that this filial knowledge will not be forthcoming.

#### *The good of morally significant freedom*

Some philosophers (Swinburne 1979; Murray 2002) have argued that hiddenness is rather a necessary condition for a world containing human creatures that enjoy morally

significant free choice. Such a world must meet certain conditions: it must contain human beings, endowed with the power of free choice, who are presented with alternative courses of action between which it is genuinely possible for them to select. For a world to meet these conditions, it must be configured in particular ways. Most relevant among these ways in this context is this: the world must be set up in such a way that the free creatures in it often have genuine incentives for doing both good and bad actions. In order for one to be free, one must be able to choose between alternative courses of action, and in order to have such an ability, one must possess incentives or desires for each of the alternatives.

The claim that genuine “dual incentives” are a necessary condition for morally significant freedom rests on a certain plausible though controversial principle: in order for it to be possible for me to voluntarily perform an action, it must be that I have some significant desire or other positive attitude towards performing that action. If I have absolutely no desire (or a desire that is overwhelmed by contrary desires) to perform a certain action, say pull out my favorite dahlias from my garden, and furthermore have desires to leave them right where they are, then it is psychologically *impossible* for me to choose to pull them. Part of the reason this principle seems right is that it is hard to imagine what I would say to explain my pulling the dahlias after the fact if I did in fact do it. I would have to say something like: “Although I had no (or a negligible) desire to pull the dahlias and strong desires to leave them in place, I pulled them nonetheless.” If we heard someone say something like this, we would conclude that they were confused, deluded or deranged. We just can’t bring ourselves to perform an act of will when we have no (or a negligible) desire to perform that action and strong desires to refrain from

performing it. We can take a more general lesson from this, namely, that if the world does not contain incentives for us to choose both good and evil actions, then we will not be truly free to choose between them.

There is more than one way that such dual incentives can be eliminated from our world. One way would be for God to set up the world so that we are subjected to coercive threats to behave in accordance with the dictates of morality at all times. We can imagine God setting up the world in such a way that we are followed around by moral “highway patrolmen,” ready to punish us whenever we make a morally evil choice. In this case, any incentives for doing evil would be eliminated or at least overwhelmed by the presence of the moral patrolman, and we would be psychologically unable to choose evil.

Such freedom-removing conditions could be established in other ways as well. For example, if God were to make his existence clearly and powerfully known to us, the impact would be no less than the moral patrolmen. If we knew that God was there, watching over us continuously, all incentives to choose evil would be lost along with our ability to choose between good and evil actions. Our moral free choice would have been eliminated. Some have argued that this need to prevent pervasive coercion is one reason why God must remain hidden, at least to the extent that his existence is not as obvious as a patrol car following us on the highway.

Critics of this explanation of hiddenness have argued that it fails for three reasons. First, Schellenberg (2002: 37) argues that there are no implications for freedom or incentives for choosing evil if God merely makes his *existence* known to us. Such implications would follow only if God were also to reveal his *moral will*. Hence God

could eliminate reasonable non-belief while safeguarding moral freedom. Second, defenders of the Argument from Hiddenness (Schellenberg 1993: 129) note that there are many religious individuals who are completely convinced of the existence of a God watching over their every move, perhaps because of powerful religious experiences, and who still seem to be capable of doing both good and evil. Given this, it is hard to believe that God's becoming evident to someone undermines the possibility of genuine freedom. Finally, Schellenberg (2005: 293-6) argues that even if human beings were subject to coercive pressure of this sort, they would still be able to choose between two morally significant alternatives: doing good *out of a sense of duty* or *merely out of a sense of fear* of divine punishment. Doing the first would be morally good and indeed vastly morally superior to the second. Thus human beings in these circumstances would face genuinely distinct and morally significant alternatives.

It is not clear, however, that any of these replies succeed. We have already seen that Moser argues that the first does not. On his view, providing creatures with evidence sufficient to generate "propositional knowledge" alone is indeed *harmful* to creatures. As a result, God's love entails that were God to make himself known to us, he would reveal something beyond his mere existence. In addition or instead, God would make known those things necessary for "filial knowledge," including his moral will. Thus, the content of what a loving God would reveal to us would indeed have the potentially freedom-compromising practical implications.

The second criticism points to cases which show that powerful divine manifestations do not always undermine the possibility of morally significant freedom. But this alone is not a problem for this explanation of hiddenness. One can grant that

different people will have different levels of “threat indifference.” Some individuals are coerced by the slightest perceived threat while others seem to resist nearly all attempts at coercion. To preserve creaturely freedom God must remain largely hidden to individuals of the former type, though he can present powerful evidence of his existence to those of the latter type. For all we know, those individuals who believe in the existence of God because of these powerful religious experiences and who yet retain morally significant freedom are all of this latter sort.

With regard to the third criticism, it is not at all clear that we can choose between acting on the different sorts of motives that Schellenberg imagines, or if we could, know that we have. Imagine that in a spirit of holiday good will I decide to go drop a one hundred dollar bill in the bucket of the Salvation Army volunteer standing outside of my local Wal-Mart. As I step out of my car with the bill in my hand, the Salvation Army worker sees me coming and assumes I am another self-indulgent Wal-Mart customer about to go into the store and blow another hundred dollars on senseless trinkets. As I arrive at his bucket his anger finally boils over. He pulls out a gun and says, “Hand me the money!” Stunned, I quickly drop the bill in the bucket and run.

Why did I hand him the bill? At that moment I had two possible motives on which I could have acted: charity and fear. But which one did I actually choose to act on? The concern for my own safety ran so high at that moment that I don’t see how I could have decided to act merely on the motive of charity. But even if it were possible for me to have acted on charity alone, I am not sure I could know after the fact which motive was actually the one acted on. In light of this, it is doubtful that morally

significant freedom, even of the sort Schellenberg proposes here, would survive in a world in which God makes his existence plain and obvious to us.

*See also* William James (Chapter 17), The Problem of Evil (Chapter 37), Faith Hope and Doubt (Chapter 56).

### References

- McKim, R. (2005) *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moser, P.K. (2002) "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2004) "Divine Hiddenness Does Not Justify Atheism," in M. Peterson and R. VanArragon (eds) *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Murray, M. (2002) "Deus Absconditus," in D. Howard-Snyder and P.K. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schellenberg, J. (1993) *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- (2002) "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals," in D. Howard-Snyder and P.K. Moser (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2004) "Reply to Moser," in M. Peterson and R. VanArragon (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- (2005) "The hiddenness argument revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41: .
- Swinburne, R. (1979) *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wainwright, W. (1995) *Reason and the Heart*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- (2002) "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God," in D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Further reading

- Adams, R. (1985) "Involuntary Sins," *The Philosophical Review* 94/1: 3-31. (Explores culpability for various involuntary states including the holding of certain beliefs.)
- Howard-Snyder, D. (1996) "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26/3: 433-54. (Presents an alternative objection to (3\*b).)

- Howard-Snyder, D. and P.K. Moser (eds) (2002) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Eleven essays in response to Schellenberg's *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.)
- Schellenberg, J. (2005) "The hiddenness argument revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41/2: 201-15. (The first of two essays in response to Howard-Snyder and Moser's *Divine Hiddenness*.)