

The Problem of Manifestness

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The topic of divine hiddenness has received significant attention recently. In this paper I will review the problem and some compelling answers to it, then introduce an opposite and corresponding problem I find with theistic belief, addressing some objections to my argument along the way. I will be contending that, rather than the problem of hiddenness, it is the problem of manifestness about which theists should be concerned. I will show that belief in God threatens the moral value of humans' good works by aiming their motives at rewards or escape from punishment, rather than at the good. Given this, I argue that theists must explain why God would reveal himself at all or desire that humans believe in him. My argument will rest on Kantian grounds and will therefore be most convincing to those who already subscribe to Kant's fundamental ethical claims.

There are varied interpretations of what exactly is *problematic* about divine hiddenness, but Peter Van Inwagen's characterization is standard enough for our purposes and more clearly stated than most. Van Inwagen calls his version the doxastic argument, and it can be paraphrased in the following way: If God exists, then he wants all persons to believe in him. God has the power to ensure that

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all persons believe in him by showing them signs of the right sort. Some persons do not believe in God, so God must not exist (143). Van Inwagen attacks the problem premise by premise. In reviewing his argument, let us begin with the premise that tells us God has the power to cause all humans to believe in him by showing us the right sort of signs. Van Inwagen imagines a conversation between an atheist and a theist wherein the latter asks the former to describe what kind of signs would be required to convince him that God existed. They first agree that the stars rearranging themselves to spell out 'I am who I am' would be sufficient, but after further discussion, the exchange culminates in the theist's realization that "even the (apparent) rearrangement of the stars could be the work of a lesser being than God. We can imagine no sign that would have to be the work of a necessary, omnipresent, omnipotent being" (142).

This casts doubt on the premise that God could cause all humans to believe in him by showing signs; but is that enough? Van Inwagen has shown that miracles are logically insufficient as evidence for God, but wouldn't star-based, scripture-referencing messages be enough for non-philosophers? We turn to Jake H. O'Connell to answer this question. In his article "Divine Hiddenness: Would More Miracles Solve the Problem?" O'Connell lists real examples of persons who had encountered what they considered to be miraculous evidence of God but did not afterward believe in God. For instance, O'Connell writes that "Robert L. Dione . . . believes that the narratives of the Old Testament, including the miracles and the communications from 'God', actually happened essentially as the Old Testament portrays. However, Dione [believes that the being responsible for the miracles] was an alien" (263) and not God. It seems plausible that people react to perceived evidence of God-like supernatural events which they believe really happened—just as they would to actual evidence of God, so it's not necessary that the reader also believe these miracles really occurred in order to conclude from this and from O'Connell's numerous other examples that miracles would likely not cause humans in general to believe (even leaving out the few philosophically-minded persons who will realize that no miracle is logically sufficient to prove God's existence).

The preceding argument is sufficient for us to conclude that God may not have the power to cause humans in general to believe

in him through *miracles*, but it could be within God's power to cause belief in some other way. For example, Alvin Plantinga suggests that God may endow humans with a special sense of the divine that enables us to gain knowledge of God's existence in a way that sidesteps miraculous evidence.¹ This could be troubling for the theist: we have taken hiddenness to be problematic because it seems that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God *would* cause humans to believe in him. However, Van Inwagen is able to make plausible the idea that God chooses not to do so. While God may desire that humans believe in him, it does not follow that there is no conflicting state of affairs which God values above humans believing in him. Van Inwagen considers what the reaction of an atheist military general—whose strategy revolves around the use of bombs disguised as toys—might have to learning of God's existence. This despicable human being would regard a heavenly visitation as bad news. In the best case scenario, such newly-minted theists would alter their behavior to be in conformity with religious belief, but Van Inwagen asserts that "It's not going to convince him that *he* is a moral horror and that his only hope of being anything else is being united with God in bonds of love" (148). In the worst case, such persons would not change their behavior at all.

Now in this case, it may seem that nothing has been lost, but, Van Inwagen assures us, it could be that something has been. "It is certainly conceivable," he writes, "that someone's believing in [God] for a certain reason (because, say, that person has witnessed signs and wonders)² might make it difficult or even impossible for that person to acquire other features God wanted him or her to have" (146). If God were to cause miracles frequently enough that many or all persons would witness one, or provide humans with a special sense of the divine which would cause us to believe in him, we might assume that *belief* is all that God wanted from us. I take this as a compelling answer to the problem of hiddenness: theistic

¹ See his book *Knowledge and Christian Belief*.

² While Van Inwagen specifically cites miracles, I believe this statement would also apply to Plantinga's sense of the divine.

belief produces no *important*³ positive changes in persons (i.e., no positive *moral* change in persons), and can negatively affect persons' morality by misdirecting their motivations. So it seems plausible that God would choose to refrain for the most part from making himself known to humans, and the problem of hiddenness is defeated. But now a new problem arises: that of manifestness.

Immanuel Kant writes that "Apart from good life-conduct, anything which the human being supposes that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious delusion and counterfeit service of God" (Religion). Van Inwagen never indicates this and may not notice, but his argument is in line with this view of religion and morality. The intended point of his discussion on the atheistic general was that there is no compelling reason for God to show miracles to unbelievers. However, the point is made by reliance on the idea that God cares about a person's motivation for action and does not consider fear of punishment an acceptable motive. Discussing the general's new theistic way of life, Van Inwagen expresses doubt that any change in behavior would last: "The effect of hellfire sermons—on those who are affected by them at all—is in general a repentance and an attempt at amendment of life that are transitory indeed" (147–8), but then dismisses this as irrelevant: "Whether he *does or doesn't continue to believe*⁴ that the miracle he witnessed was real, it's not going to produce any change in his behavior that God would be interested in" (148). In earlier discussion, Van Inwagen assumes that so long as the general believed he had witnessed a genuine miracle, he would avoid committing heinous acts like luring unsuspecting children to set off bombs. If the difference between the state of affairs which includes murdered children and the state of affairs which does not, is such a difference that does not interest God, then what could God be interested in other than morality determined not by acts but by motives? It cannot be that God cares about the acts committed by the agent, since it makes no difference to God whether the general murders children or not. So it seems

³Of course it will produce positive changes along the lines of "x person's beliefs are closer to the truth" (always assuming that God does in fact exist).

⁴Emphasis mine.

that Van Inwagen presupposes a view wherein God's purpose for humans must not include moral behavior that is motivated by fear of punishment or desire for a reward.⁵

We are now in a position to see that Van Inwagen's argument for why God may choose to remain hidden rests on the idea that knowledge of God would distract humans and so we are in a position to ask 'distract from *what?*' From whatever it is that God cares about, of course, but what is that? We have seen that it is not the right state of affairs or right actions, but right motives. Given the options that present themselves here, it does not seem to be too great a leap to assume that Van Inwagen means to imply that the right motive is either desire to please God or respect for duty. The former reduces to the latter if one accepts common arguments against divine command ethics. My ethical alignment is with Kant, but I think that to assent to this point the reader need not be specifically Kantian so long as they reject divine command ethics. With this in mind, we can conclude that Van Inwagen's solution to the problem of hiddenness implies that God cares about humans' motivations and wants us to act from duty, or in other words, to do good for the sake of goodness, just as Kant would. I take this as a basis for considering Van Inwagen's solution to the problem of hiddenness to be essentially Kantian, so I believe that the following account of the problem of manifestness will be convincing to those who accept Van Inwagen's solution:

1. God's purpose for us is for us to become perfectly moral.
2. Morality requires acting from no motive but duty.

⁵While Van Inwagen does not explicitly mention the desire for a reward as a possible motivation for the general's change of behavior, I find it unlikely that a theory which rejects the one would accept the other; it seems that the desire for a reward is the same in kind as the fear of punishment, which is really also the desire to avoid punishment. I take the position that these desires are not sufficiently distinguished from each other to merit further investigation (at least in this paper) in service of my claim that reward-seeking, like punishment-avoiding, is not an acceptable motive to God.

3. Belief in God does not increase and in at least some cases decreases acting from no motive but duty.
4. So God should act to prevent belief in God, or at least God should refrain from acting to cause belief.
5. Therefore, (5a) what is supposed to be evidence for God does not come from God and (5b) either theists who act to promote belief in God are working at cross-purposes with God *or* God does not exist.

It will be clear by this point that I take 1 and 2 as uncontroversial and direct my argument, at least in this paper, to those who already agree, but in case I have held the attention of any readers who are unsure regarding these points, I will say a few words in support of both. First, I have argued that Van Inwagen's solution to the problem of hiddenness presupposes that morality is God's chief concern for humanity: by now it is clear that whether Van Inwagen's answer truly solves the problem of hiddenness turns on whether God's first priority, surpassing even the avoidance of terrible states of affairs (specifically the state of an increased number of children being murdered) is a person's morality. If this is not our purpose in God's eyes, then Van Inwagen has not defeated the problem of hiddenness, and it seems doubtful that anyone can.

Other than morality, what concern of God's could he prioritize over the truth? At any rate, the argument I have presented will work just as well if formulated to say only that it is God's first priority regarding humans that we be morally good. Second, I would echo Immanuel Kant in saying that "in the case of what is to be morally good it is not enough that it with the moral law, but it also must be done *for its sake*; if not, that conformity is only very contingent and precarious, because the immoral ground will . . . in many cases [produce] actions that are contrary to it" (Groundwork 51-52). Once again, the argument works just as well if, rather than specifying duty, we claim only that morality requires acting from certain motives which do not include those which require or are increased by

knowledge of or belief in God. In these less specific forms, both 1 and 2 are assumed in Van Inwagen's argument.

Premise 3 is most in need of defense and clarification, and 4 is a preliminary conclusion which supports the ultimate conclusion. I begin with a defense of premise 3. It should first be made clear that I am not claiming religious persons cannot be motivated by duty; I am personally acquainted with many theists whom I regard as morally good persons. I have no way to confirm that their actions are motivated by duty, but neither have I any way to show that anyone's actions are motivated by personal gain, except perhaps that person's saying so. (It seems that, while persons have reason to lie and deny that they are motivated by personal gain, they do not have reason to lie and confirm this. Therefore, I will take persons' claims as evidence that they are motivated by personal gain but not as evidence that they are motivated by duty). I make no pretense of being a biblical scholar, but I can summon the support of a few passages of scripture that show that religious belief encourages humans to act motivated by fear. Ecclesiastes 12:13 tells us to "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man," and Psalms 2:11 instructs the reader to "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling." Proverbs 3:7 commands that we "Fear the Lord and depart from evil."

In each of these scriptures, theistic authors present fear as the correct motive for action, and this is a major theme of the bible. The same is true of heavenly reward: Proverbs 13:13 states "he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded" and in Matthew 5:12 Jesus tells a man that if he gives to the poor he will "have treasure in heaven." I cannot speak for every faith, but in the particular Christian denomination in which I was raised, there was a great deal of talk about the reward for the righteous in heaven. I believe that belief in God will generally lead humans to do good with the motive of reward or escape from punishment. Perhaps the reader will object to my use of biblical passages and personal experience to generalize it is true that this evidence will only apply to those who take seriously the claims and commandments of the bible. However, it is not necessary for my argument to show that theism will *generally* detract from morality, only that it does in some cases.

Belief in God will never lead a person, who otherwise would not, to act morally (remember, an action is moral only if it is done with the motive of duty). Given this, a belief in God's existence can add nothing to our ability to act morally, but it can in some cases *detract* from our ability to act morally. Van Inwagen's general will not be made a better person because he believes, and moral persons may become less so if distracted from duty by promises of reward or punishment. Since theism can only do harm to persons' moral character, and God's purpose for us is to become perfectly moral, God must not encourage theism. Thus it seems that what theists have taken as signs or communications from God do not really come from God. Further, either God does not exist or those who promote belief in him are unintentionally working against him.

As I have discussed this view with others, the objection that we need God to know what is morally good has frequently been raised. In the previous paragraph I claim that "belief in God's existence can add nothing to our ability to act morally" but some may object to this by (rightly) pointing out that right motivation, while necessary for morality, is not sufficient without right action. It is possible to do "bad things for good reasons" and not just to do good things for bad reasons. I wish to first remind the reader that if we truly need God to know what is right, then the problem of hiddenness is not satisfactorily resolved by Van Inwagen (or at all, to my knowledge).

That aside, I will argue that God need not reveal himself to us to make it possible for us to discern right from wrong. I believe that reason is sufficient to reveal to us what is moral, and I take my usual line of referring the reader to Kant for further argument in support of this. However, one need not agree with Kant that reason is sufficient to reveal morality to humans, one must only believe that it *could* be, in order to take this point. If God *could* give humans sufficient intellectual power to find out what is moral, then there is still no reason to suppose that our hypothetical inability to do so is grounds for God's revealing himself. But perhaps some will say that morality is not something which can be understood, or that it is not intellectual in nature, or something to the effect that reason, no matter how well developed, could not possibly reveal to us what is moral. For those who consider morality to be something we recognize in a non-cognitive way or something we create—take David

Hume, who said that “taste [as opposed to reason] has a productive faculty, and gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation” (Hume) and takes moral principles to be that sort of new creation—I will attempt to give a parallel answer. First, could God not endow us with a sense of good and evil in lieu of the cognitive power which rationalist ethicists claim? And second, I will attempt to disabuse the reader of the notion that *telling* persons what is moral could be better than giving us power to tell for ourselves in some way. To the former point, I make an analogy with the sense of the divine I referenced near the beginning of this paper. Alvin Plantinga reads Calvin as suggesting that “there is a kind of faculty (like sight or hearing) or a cognitive mechanism—what he calls a ‘sensus divinitatis’ or sense of divinity—which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God” (33). This is part of Plantinga’s attempt to justify (or rather, to warrant) belief in God, but it seems we could imagine a parallel sense of *the moral*, which would function to produce in us beliefs about morality rather than about God.⁶ This moral sense would suffice to show us the way we ought to act without threatening to misdirect our motivations.

Now to the latter point, that God’s *telling* persons what is moral could not be better than giving us power to tell for ourselves in some way, whether intellectually or sensibly. Kant’s discussion of Abraham⁷ illustrates this point well when we receive what we take to be communication from God, we have no way to confirm the identity of the being with whom we are communicating. Supposing such a communication carried with it a moral directive, we would be responsible to determine whether it were right before we could act on the directive or risk doing wrong. If a presumably heavenly message instructed us to do what we know is wrong, we would know

⁶Some will complain that I use Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* as an analogy when he clearly interprets this sense as cognitive, but there are certainly non-cognitive accounts which work in a similar way. I chose to cite Plantinga because his meaning is clear even from a brief quotation, but for a noncognitivist account, the reader can see the Lord Shaftesbury’s “Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times.”

⁷See *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 1798.

it was not from God. But there is no way to prove that a message does in fact come from God. In parallel to the point Van Inwagen makes regarding the insufficiency of signs to demonstrate omnipotence, even the stars rearranging themselves to spell out ‘murder is morally permissible’ is not enough to cause humans to know that murder is alright by God. We can imagine no identifying signal that would have to be the work of a necessary, omnipresent, omnipotent, and I will add, omnibenevolent being. Ultimately, humans cannot receive moral knowledge as communication from others, not even from God.⁸ Therefore, humans could not accept supposedly divine guidance regarding morality without a way to confirm that the guidance was indeed in correspondence with their own moral knowledge. If they have that moral knowledge to use for purposes of confirmation, then the guidance from God is unnecessary.

Van Inwagen’s answer to the problem of hiddenness implies that God cares about right motivation, which I take to be duty, over actions or states of affairs. Since belief in God is unnecessary to and sometimes adversarial towards right motivation, God has no reason to reveal himself and some reason to remain hidden. Van Inwagen’s solution to the problem of hiddenness leads us to this new problem of manifestness, which theists must account for or give up their efforts to persuade others of God’s existence—otherwise they will risk working against their God.

⁸Although, God could empower humans to discover moral truths, making him indirectly responsible for our knowledge.

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