

Examining Objections to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness

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I. Introduction

Many argue that God does not exist, for if he existed, his existence would be more obvious to us. They ask why he doesn't reveal himself to all humankind through some miraculous display of divine power. Many theologians and philosophers have objected to this argument against God's existence. In this paper, I will lay out a common God-Is-Hidden argument, then examine and refute several of the most prominent objections to it. I'll classify these into two groups: (1) Divine-transcendence/Human-deficiency arguments, and (2) arguments that God must be hidden to accomplish his purposes. I come to the conclusion that none of the objections to the God-Is-Hidden argument, in their current forms, are satisfactory; however, Michael J. Murray's objection, with slight changes, could work.

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A typical argument-from-hiddenness against God's existence might go something like this:

- 1.If God exists, then it is important for us to believe in him in order to receive salvation after death.
- 2.God is benevolent, so he desires our salvation, and he is omnipotent, so he could reveal his existence to us if he wanted to.
- 3.Because he desires our salvation, he will give ample evidence of his existence, so that belief in him will be a straight-forward matter.
- 4.There is no evidence of God's existence (God is hidden).
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

Proponents of this argument believe that many more people would receive salvation if God would simply reveal himself, or make his existence more apparent. Objections limiting the love or power of God could undermine this argument, but here I am accepting the second premise that God is both perfectly benevolent (he desires our salvation) and totally powerful (he can do whatever is metaphysically possible), as these qualities are attributed to the traditional Christian God, as well as to the God described by most Western philosophers.

II. Classifying the Objections

Christian philosophers and theologians have provided many objections to the above argument. Robert McKim classifies the objections into three basic categories, those that are based on:

- 1.*The defective nature of humanity*: "We are either too wicked, too ignorant, too stupid, or too limited in some other way to know much about God." (145).
- 2.*Divine transcendence*: "God is not the sort of being who could be understood very well by creatures like us" (145).

3. *Appropriateness*: “[Divine hiddenness] makes for a degree of moral or spiritual autonomy and maturity which would not be possible if we understood better the nature of God, or it promotes some other good” (145–146).

I would add a fourth kind of objection, which essentially states that God simply chooses to reveal himself to some and not to others, so he can seem completely knowable to some and completely hidden to others. This is an obviously Calvinistic view, which I find to be incompatible with the idea of a perfectly loving God. So while this objection might satisfy a Calvinist, I don’t think it would satisfy an honest, truth-seeking agnostic, or even a non-Calvinist Christian. An objection to this view would be an objection to Calvinism in general, which is outside the scope of this paper.¹

For the purposes of this paper, I’ll combine the first two into a single category: Divine transcendence/human deficiency, as they both highlight the disparity between the nature of God and the nature of man. McKim points out, and I agree, that all three of the categories often overlap and intertwine, but in this paper I’ll try to separate them for clarity and ease of understanding. I should note, however, that aspects of my objections to one argument can apply to aspects of other arguments, so neither the arguments nor their objections should be seen or treated as completely independent from one another.

III. Divine Transcendence/Human Deficiency (DTHD) Arguments

McKim says DTHD arguments can be seen as “ineradicable” or “eradicable” (146). In other words, some Christians believe that at some future point, God’s existence, will, and nature will be revealed to us, or at least to those who have proven worthy. Others believe that God will forever remain hidden, or in some way incomprehensible.

¹For objections to Calvinism, the writings of Methodist Bishop and theologian R. S. Foster, the bibliographical information of which can be found in the works cited, are a good place to start.

Either way, I find both of these arguments to be based on purely metaphysical assumptions that are impossible to disprove and not very persuasive, especially to an honest, truth-seeking agnostic. They seem like the kind of “Do it because I said so” arguments that children hate. If an agnostic were to present the God-Is-Hidden problem, and a theist were to respond that “He’s hidden because we are unable to see him because of our human nature (or our sinful nature)” or “He’s hidden because he is, by definition of his divine nature, mysterious and incomprehensible,” he or she probably wouldn’t convince the agnostic of anything other than to ask someone else. That said, I’ll examine one of the best of these kinds of arguments and show why it isn’t adequate.

Morris’s Objection

To preface, Thomas Morris would probably classify this as an appropriateness argument (given the criteria listed in this paper), as he states that, “we need some adumbration of divine goals, purposes, or intentions that would make divine hiddenness intelligible” (97). While there are aspects of his argument that make it a hybrid of the two classes of objection, I consider it a primarily DTHD argument, specifically a human deficiency one. Morris argues, based on his interpretation of writings by Blaise Pascal, that if God were to reveal himself to everyone in a way that left no room for doubt, we would become very prideful about this knowledge in the same way that we become prideful and boast when we meet a celebrity (he uses the example of meeting Michael Jordan and former basketball coach Dean Smith) (97–100). Therefore, God only reveals himself to those who have already developed certain qualities; those whom he knows will not become inflated with pride upon receiving a revelation from God (100–103). Essentially, God only reveals himself to those that are already humble, and to those who are prideful or would become prideful upon receiving such a revelation, he does not.

I think this problem can easily be overcome if God had revealed himself and would reveal himself (miraculously or non-miraculously) to every single person who has ever lived and who is currently living. That way, an epistemically responsible knowledge that God exists would bring no more pride-worthy special status than would an

epistemically responsible knowledge that the sky is blue. Because of this, I don't think the DTHD portion of Morris's argument works.

Morris goes on to give an appropriateness objection as well. He argues that the God-seeking process is what helps foster the development of humility. For us to become sufficiently humble, God must remain hidden so that we have to seek him out (102–103). I'm not sure if Morris is saying that seeking out God is the only way to reach a certain level of humility, but if he is, then I think this is a bold claim, especially since we see many atheists and agnostics that are just as humble or more humble than theists (and admittedly vice versa). We'll assume he's not saying that, but rather saying that seeking for God is just one way among many to become humbler. To those honest, humble God-seekers, God, specifically by way of Jesus Christ, will reveal himself (103–104). James A. Keller provides a good objection to this reasoning:

Moreover, many morally and religiously sensitive non-Christian seekers seem, as far as we can tell, to seek God, and they often do not become Christians as a result of their seeking, calling into question either the promise that those who seek will find God or the Christian belief of Pascal and Morris that finding the truth about God includes finding Jesus Christ. (38)

So as Keller points out, Morris's reasoning would lead one to believe that all God-seekers would come to accept Christianity, which is obviously not the case. And even if we expanded his assertion to say that all honest God-seekers would arrive at some kind of religious belief, not just at Christian belief, the claim would still be demonstrably false. These problems with Morris's argument make it an inadequate objection to the problem of divine hiddenness.

IV. Appropriateness Objections

Van Inwagen's Objection

Peter Van Inwagen's is the first of the more purely appropriateness-based objections to the God-Is-Hidden argument that I'll examine. Van Inwagen's argument is based on a qualification of the first

premise of the argument in its form listed above. He claims that if belief in God came through some miraculous perception of him, then this belief would not be of the right sort to produce other qualities that God wants in us. So it is not just belief in God that's important for our salvation, but, according to Van Inwagen, belief produced in a particular way. Belief produced by "epistemically unobjectionable" means, according to Van Inwagen, would inhibit us from forming the kinds of qualities God wants, and would impede the formation of a proper relationship with God:

It is certainly conceivable that someone's believing in him for a certain reason (because, say, that person has witnessed signs and wonders) might make it difficult or even impossible for that person to acquire other features God wanted him or her to have. (146)

He later says that if God were to miraculously reveal himself to everyone, it would create "sullen resentment" within those who do not want to believe in God (151). I find problem with these assertions. To illustrate their shortcomings, I'll use a couple of analogies, one of which is very similar to one taken from Van Inwagen's text.

Van Inwagen uses a husband-wife analogy to illustrate his point that God desires his creations to do more than simply believe in him. Just as Van Inwagen wants more from his wife than a mere belief in his (Van Inwagen's) existence, God wants much more from us than a mere belief in his existence (149). Specifically, God wants us to develop good qualities and a good relationship with him (149). While I believe Van Inwagen is right on this point, I don't think an epistemically responsible belief in God would prevent us from forming good qualities or from forming a good relationship with him. Here's a similar analogy that casts some doubt on the plausibility of Van Inwagen's claim. I'll use a father-son analogy, (1) because I'm not married, and (2) because that's usually the kind of relationship Christians compare to their relationship with God. I saw my dad almost every day for the first 18 years of my life. I still talk to him on the phone pretty often. I visit him a few times a year. I have a justified, epistemically responsible belief that my dad exists. I love, trust, respect, and usually obey my dad. I've also developed (and am trying to develop) a lot of the qualities that my dad

wants me to. Knowing that my father exists through epistemically unobjectionable means did not inhibit me from developing a proper relationship (one of love, trust, respect, obedience, etc.) with him, nor did it prevent me from developing or at least wanting to develop good qualities (kindness, respect for others, honesty, etc.). My desire to develop these qualities also didn't originate solely due to a desire to please my dad, or solely due to a fear of him or of his punishment. At some point, I realized that these qualities were important to me too. In the same way, knowing that God exists through epistemically unobjectionable means would not prevent me from developing this kind of relationship with him, nor from developing the kinds of qualities that he wants me to develop. In fact, it would probably help.

Just as believing that God exists for epistemically responsible reasons would not inhibit the development of these things, it would not create sullen resentment in us, at least not in very many of us. To illustrate this, I'll use another analogy: Essentially all people who live in the United States believe, by epistemically responsible means, that there is a national governing body whose headquarters are located in Washington, D.C. It has the power to create and enforce laws for the citizens of the U.S., but it is also responsible for providing them with protection, a currency system, and other basic necessities. For most of these citizens, the knowledge that such a body has issued laws that designate murder as illegal has no effect on their disposition to murder people or not. In other words, the knowledge of this governing body and the laws that it has created creates no sullen resentment for most people. In the same way, knowledge of a God that has issued certain laws or commandments would not, within most people, create sullen resentment. And although most people have some complaints about the government, the majority of U.S. citizens would probably consider themselves grateful for such a body. There is, after all, a spirit of patriotism present in the country that isn't impeded by knowledge of the government.

Perhaps a better example is speeding while driving, something that isn't intrinsically morally wrong like murder is. Although we often find ourselves frustrated that we can't drive faster on the freeway, most of us realize that speeding laws are for our benefit and safety, and ultimately are willing to comply with such laws. Our

epistemically responsible belief that there exist police officers who could pull us over and give us a speeding ticket doesn't create sullen resentment within us. If we are pulled over, it can sometimes create momentary frustration, but it is often because we know we were speeding and deserve the ticket. The only times we feel sullen resentment toward police officers is when they punish us (or someone we care about) unjustly or for some unjust reasons. Similarly, knowing that there is a God that can punish us for violating his laws would not create sullen resentment within us, but rather creates more of an awareness when we do something we know would violate such laws. We don't have to worry about God punishing us unjustly, as we would with some human police officer, because the God we're talking about is perfectly benevolent, and therefore perfectly just.

So it is very plausible to say that an epistemically unobjectionable belief in God would not impede us from developing the kinds of qualities that God wants us to have, nor would it create within us a sullen resentment toward God. Perhaps if God were to suddenly and miraculously reveal himself today, to the many atheists and agnostics in the world, Van Inwagen's theory would be right, and many of these people would feel some sort of resentment toward God, or they might simply dismiss it as some phenomenon of nature or as a hallucination. But if God were to have always revealed himself since the dawn of rational human beings, constantly and to every generation, so that all people would know of his existence with the same certainty with which modern U.S. citizens know a national government exists or with which I know my father exists, this problem would not arise.

Adams's Objection

Marilyn McCord Adams argues that God is hidden because his hiddenness is necessary for us to develop trust in him. She states that God's hiddenness is by his own

. . . deliberate design, since it is necessary to make possible the relationships he wants with us and for which we were created. For what God wants most from us is wholehearted trust and obedience. Yet it is conceptually impossible to trust someone if

you know in advance every move that he will make.
(251)

While Adams's objection is similar to Van Inwagen's, they are different enough to be treated separately. Adams claims that God wants, more than anything else, trust and obedience from us, whereas Van Inwagen believes that God desires us to develop morally good qualities as a result of our relationship with him. (Although he does not diminish the importance of a relationship of trust and obedience with God) (Van Inwagen 146, 149). To understand Adams's objection, we must understand her implicit definition of trust, or at least the kind of trust God wants. She seems to classify "trust" as a kind of relationship between two parties that necessarily requires uncertainty on part of the trustee. Let's say that my neighbor told me that every time I knock on her door at 4:30 pm, she'll open up and give me a piece of chocolate, then 100/100 times I knocked on my neighbor's door at 4:30 pm, she immediately answered and gave me a piece of chocolate. Under Adams's definition, I wouldn't be able to say that "I trust that if I knock on my neighbor's door at 4:30, she will open the door and give me chocolate," because I would be (effectively) certain that she would give me chocolate. There wouldn't be the necessary level of uncertainty required for Adams's definition of trust. However, there is inherent uncertainty in any relationship between two parties, because, as good Humeans, we can't assume that the future will be like the past. So that's one objection to Adams's explanation: that there is uncertainty inherent in any relationship, so even if we were certain that God existed and observed him always rewarding a given good deed in the exact same way, there would still be a possibility that he could act differently in the future. So it would not be necessary for God's existence to be hidden or epistemically questionable for there to be uncertainty in his actions. However, I'll grant Adams's definition of "trust" in this case, because she is assuming a God that is perfectly benevolent and wouldn't break any of his promises. If God was my chocolate-giving neighbor, I would actually be certain that I'd get the chocolate every time I knocked at the right time. Therefore, according to Adams, God's will and subsequent actions must be hidden, because if he were to immediately reward good behavior with temporal goods, it would just make it too easy to do what God wants us to, thus

ruining the chance for us to actually develop a relationship of trust with him (251). For example, if God told me that he would cause \$100 to appear in my pocket every time I visited sick children in the hospital, it would become very easy for me to visit those children, and I wouldn't have to "trust" God, I would just be certain that \$100 would appear in my pocket as soon as I visited them. My motives would also be tainted, because I would be going for selfish reasons, rather than to benefit the sick children. This second problem seems to fall under Van Inwagen's objection, because my ability to develop charity would be impeded. Either way, I don't need to be uncertain that God exists to develop trust in him (or some other good quality) or to obey him, I just need to be uncertain about his consequences for good (or bad) behavior. So I agree with Adams that there must be a level of uncertainty or hiddenness about God's will in order for us to develop certain desirable qualities; however, there need not be any uncertainty about God's existence in order to develop these qualities. In fact, being certain about God's existence would probably help me develop trust in him. There are plenty of people I am certain exist in whom I trust, like my dad. For these reasons, I don't think Adams's objection to the God-Is-Hidden problem is satisfactory.

Murray's Objection

Michael J. Murray presents another version of the appropriateness argument. He believes God desires to bring about "the greatest amount of moral good with respect to moral evil" (36). To do so, his creations must be able to make "morally significant decisions" (28). He argues that if God were to reveal himself in an epistemically unobjectionable way, he would prevent us from making such decisions, or from exercising our free will in a "morally significant way" (28).² He compares this situation to a robber holding a gun to a man's head and demanding his money (29). While the man is still technically free to act as he pleases, the "strength" and "imminence" of the

² Alvin Plantinga offers a similar objection, but his is in response to the problem of evil. I'm covering Murray's argument because it is specifically in response to the problem of divine hiddenness.

robber's threat are so great that it effectively limits the man's free will (29–31). He argues that God has to be hidden, because if he weren't, the imminence and strength of the threat of eternal damnation would effectively limit our free will (34). He would probably agree that the converse is true: that the promise of eternal salvation would limit our free will (the sick children scenario I presented above is a good analogy for this). For these reasons, God causes his own existence to be "epistemically ambiguous" to us (34). Otherwise, God would be coercing or compelling us in a certain way, something that would undermine his desire for us to make morally significant decisions. Making such decisions helps us achieve some sort of good we could not if we were unable to make them. As I did with Adams, I agree with Murray that if God were to compel us to believe in him, and subsequently compel us to behave in a certain way, it would have negative consequences on our characters.

I think Murray's argument works better than Adams's, however, because not only does it require a lack of certainty about God's will or actions, but also it requires a lack of certainty about his existence; something Adams's failed to do. This is so because if God exists, so do such things (at least for Christians) as eternal salvation and eternal damnation. Therefore, if we knew by epistemically responsible means that God exists, we would also know that certain actions on our part would result in eternal damnation, and certain other ones would result in eternal salvation. This knowledge of imminent and strong consequences would limit our ability to make morally responsible decisions. There is a problem with Murray's objection, however, that Adams's doesn't run into. Adams's argument necessarily requires that there be a God, because her assumption is that what God desires most is "wholehearted trust and obedience" (251). Murray's argument does not require the existence of a God, because for him, the main objective of God's creation is to bring about moral goodness, and, subsequently, allow his creations to make morally significant decisions. If that's the case, then why has God revealed himself or his will at all? There are numerous obvious cases in the Bible (that I'm sure Murray would accept) of God giving some sort of revelation about his will, character, or existence to certain chosen people (not to mention all of the extra-biblical claimed occurrences of such revelation). If God's main objective is for us to bring about

moral good, unrestrained or uninfluenced by any sort of threat of damnation or promise of salvation, why would he ever reveal to anyone that there is a heaven or a hell or a God? Why wouldn't he just endow all humans with a sense of morality and let them go about their business without ever revealing that he was the source of this sense of morality? Millions of morally decent agnostics and atheists are evidence that this sort of situation works. One might claim that humans still need moral guidance from God, a moral code to follow, because our naturally endowed morality isn't enough. If that's the case, then why doesn't God just cause some influential people to design laws of morality, and cause them to think that they themselves were the original authors of such laws? Under Murray's system, it wouldn't make much sense for God to miraculously engrave the Ten Commandments with his finger in front of Moses; instead, he should've made Moses or some other important figure give them as if they were his or her own invention. Under these circumstances, we would have no imminent or strong threats that would affect the free exercise of our moral agency.

One might say that perhaps Murray would respond to this objection by saying that God should reveal himself for some other reason. In other words, that it would be important to believe in and worship God for reasons that outweigh the benefits of his complete hiddenness. However, like Van Inwagen, Murray believes that for God, belief in him is less important than bringing about moral good, and subsequently, the ability to make morally significant decisions (36). So as his argument stands now, I think my objection works. If he were to come out and explain that God must be believed in and worshipped for reasons that make his complete hiddenness impossible, and if his explanation were compatible with what he has already said about the problem of divine hiddenness, then I think that of all the appropriateness objections that I have considered, his objection would be the one that could satisfactorily explain God's hiddenness.

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