

Divine Hiddenness

1. The Problem of Divine Hiddenness: Given our concept of God as a personal being who is loving and morally perfect, we would EXPECT such a God to want to have a relationship with us. This is, in fact, the message of the Western religions. The problem is that a relationship requires communication—or at least some sort of PRESENCE of the one with whom you are in a relationship with. But, God doesn't seem to communicate with us or be present in any obvious ways. This is taken to be evidence against the existence of God. The argument might go something like this:

1. God is a morally perfect being, who loves us like a perfect parent.
2. If such a being existed, that being would not want to remain hidden (i.e., would want us to believe in Him), so long as there was no good reason for doing so.
3. God is hidden (i.e., the evidence for his existence is inconclusive, and conclusive religious experiences of God are either rare or non-existent).
4. There is no good reason for God to remain hidden.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

Premises 1: This seems pretty uncontroversial. At least, if we assume we are operating under the traditional concept of God, this is a given.

Premise 2: It seems that, if God is perfectly good, or the very SOURCE of goodness, it follows that knowledge of God or a relationship with God would be a VERY good thing. Perhaps it would be the BEST thing that could happen to us. Furthermore, KNOWLEDGE of the truth seems like a good thing; and knowledge of God's existence would be the ultimate or greatest sort of knowledge that one could have. Therefore, since a good God would want to promote good things, it seems that a good God would want to promote a relationship with himself, as well as give us knowledge of himself. This premise also seems pretty uncontroversial.

Premise 3: In premise 2, we saw that, if God existed, we would expect him to NOT be hidden. Rea notes that this would entail that either: (1) The evidence for God's existence would be conclusive, or (2) Experience of God's love and/or presence would be widespread and easily accessible. But, neither of these is the case.

Some theists might try to insist that there IS conclusive evidence for God's existence. But, why then do atheists find it so difficult to believe in God?

The theist might say that the only reason that they do not believe in God is that their hearts are hardened, or that they are not honestly seeking the truth, or that they are too stubborn to admit that God exists because they are too addicted to evil and sin. But, are these fair accusations? It SEEMS like there are many atheists who ARE honestly seeking the truth. Many atheists have devoted their whole lives to studying religion and investigating the best evidence for God's existence—and yet they find the evidence to be inconclusive. So, it seems fairly uncontroversial that premise 3 is true. God is hidden.

Premise 4: The premise that the theist will most likely want to reject, then, is premise 4. This is the most controversial premise of the 4 premises above. So: DOES God have any good reasons for remaining hidden?

2. Reasons For God's Hiddenness: Rea provides the following reasons that even a morally perfect and loving God might have for not revealing himself in obvious or compelling ways.

- (1) Freedom to choose: It seems like, in a loving relationship, love is only meaningful if it is FREE; that is, not coerced. But, if God revealed himself in an obvious way that made us CERTAIN of his existence, we couldn't help but believe in Him. Furthermore, our choice to have a relationship with him would almost be COMPULSORY, or done out of FEAR—since we'd know that if we rejected God, we could look forward to an eternity of hell. In order to give our choice to have a relationship with God the sort of freedom and integrity that is required for a meaningful decision, then, God has partially hidden himself.
- (2) Promoting us to "seek" God: If God were constantly present, or obviously in our lives, two things would happen: First, we wouldn't need to SEEK God. He would just BE there, with no effort on our part. Second, because of this, we might start to take God's presence for granted. If God were just always in our lives with no effort on our part, we might not fully appreciate him. These are both bad features of a relationship. A healthy relationship requires one to SEEK or HUNGER for the other person, as well as APPRECIATE them, not taking their presence for granted.
- (3) God's character: It is quite possible to have a very loving and meaningful bond with someone that does not always require constant conversation or communication. Picture two people walking quietly, side by side, who are just enjoying their surroundings together. Perhaps God's character is such that he is not the sort of being who needs to openly communicate constantly in order to get us to appreciate his presence.

One might say here, "But, God's silence is PAINFUL for a lot of people. Surely a good God doesn't want us to be in PAIN, right?"

Rea responds to this by pointing out that, sometimes it is the case that someone else's behavior is not actually BAD when it causes us pain. Perhaps they are not doing anything wrong, and the pain is OUR problem, not theirs. Perhaps there is some deficiency or immaturity IN US that causes us to be troubled by God's hiddenness. In fact, however, it might be a very good action on God's part.

3. Divine Hiddenness a Sub-Set of the Problem of Evil: This last response raises an interesting point that many theists also bring up in their response to the problem of evil. This is the point that a good parent is not a happiness-maximizer; that is, when one has a child, they do not spend every day feeding it ice cream, taking it to Disney World, and letting them do whatever they want. Rather, a good parent does what is best for the child NOT IN TERMS OF HAPPINESS, but IN TERMS OF CHARACTER.

Those who raise the problem of divine hiddenness assume, rather arrogantly or human-centrally, that God is concerned only with making us as happy as he can—as if our pleasure were the only good thing in the universe that God should devote himself to. Perhaps there are other good things that God does, however. And perhaps making us as happy as possible is not the greatest good even for us; i.e., God’s revealing himself in obvious ways is not what is best for us.

Of course, the problem is not IDENTICAL to the problem of evil, for, as van Inwagen points out, we can imagine a terrible world full of suffering but where God’s presence is fully felt; and also a blissful utopian world where God’s presence is not felt.

4. Can God NOT Be Hidden?: Peter van Inwagen provides two responses, one of which is very similar to Rea’s. The idea behind his response is this:

MERE belief in God is of no value. Van Inwagen mentions his wife: Sure, what he desires from his wife REQUIRES that she believe he (Peter) exists. But, what he REALLY wants is something much more: Love, devotion, and so on. But, even if she lost these things, surely she would still believe THAT Peter van Inwagen exists. But, that would be of no value to him in itself.

If God were able to show Himself to give us uncontroversial proof of His existence, it would give us MERELY that: Belief in His existence. But, God has a much bigger plan for humanity: Atonement and reconciliation. Proof of God’s existence would not ensure this (e.g., even the devil knows THAT God exists). What is more, van Inwagen actually says that sure proof of God’s existence would be DAMAGING to these goals.

He gives an example: Imagine that women were born with birthmarks which read, “Women are NOT inferior to men. Signed, God.” We might all be compelled to believe this, and in fact it may have prevented a lot of terrible acts in history. But, those with an inclination toward sexism would believe it IN WORD ONLY. They would begrudgingly act in accordance with the general belief that men and women were equal—but this would not be very helpful toward their TRULY coming to believe it. He writes,

“Might it not be that external, miraculous evidence for the equality of the sexes would simply raise such emotional barriers, such waves of sullen resentment among the self-deceived, that there would be no hope of their gradually coming to listen to what their senses were saying to them?”

God’s plan is like that, van Inwagen says. He doesn’t put a stamp on every atom that says, “Made by God” or write “I am God. I exist” in the stars because this would compel belief in God in WORD ONLY. What God truly wants is something much more than that; repentance, atonement, love, and reconciliation. He writes,

“If there is, as St. Paul has said, a natural tendency in us to see the existence and power and deity of the maker of the world in the things around us, and if many people do not see this because they do not want to see it, is it not possible that grains of sand bearing the legend ‘Made by God’ (or articulate thunder or a rearrangement of the stars bearing a similar message) would simply raise such emotional barriers, such waves of sullen resentment among the self-deceived, that there would be no hope of their eventually coming to perceive the power and deity of God in the ordinary, everyday operations of the things he has made?”

Objection: Note that van Inwagen is implying two things: (1) That there IS evidence of God’s existence all around us, and (2) That everyone who does not believe in God, deep down, does not WANT to believe in God.

Reply: But, what would van Inwagen say about people who REALLY do, GENUINELY WANT there to be a God, and have very thoroughly investigated the matter, and tried as hard as they can to take the (meager amount of) evidence for God’s existence to be proof enough, but simply cannot rationally bring themselves to believe? Would van Inwagen say that such people do not exist? Or that they are radically self-deceived?

Can God Show Himself?: Whereas Rea (and part of van Inwagen’s response) treats the problem as a problem of evil, and so tries to JUSTIFY God’s choice to remain hidden, van Inwagen seems to be claiming something much stronger: Namely, that it is impossible for God NOT to remain hidden. He states the argument from divine hiddenness like this:

1. If God exists, He would want us all to believe in Him.
2. There is something that God could do to make us all believe in Him (namely, display certain supernatural signs and wonders for us to observe).
3. But, there are many people who do not believe in God (because such signs and wonders are absent).
4. Therefore, God does not exist.

Thus, the atheist takes the absence of certain signs and wonders (“special effects”) being easily available and observable to all human beings as an indication that God simply does not exist. Even if the theist points out that some miraculous things DO occur, or HAVE occurred, they are surely so rare (or so distant in the past), the atheist will point out that they are not enough to be very convincing.

But, here is a question: IS there some evidence that God could present us with such that all rational human beings would come to accept the existence of God? Ask yourself:

What would it take to be absolutely SURE that God existed? A booming voice from the heavens? The stars swirling around in the sky to form “God exists”? Scientists discovering that every strand of DNA contained a code that spelled “Made by God”?

Van Inwagen rejects premise 2, and contends that your first inclination would be to dismiss these things after a day or two as a hallucination or false memory. Or, even if you DID come to believe, belief is not enough. What God wants is true love and devotion, not begrudging compliance. It is certainly possible that providing so much proof that it FORCES one to believe in God will actually work AGAINST God’s goal of faith and atonement for us, because we might respond with sullen resentment. In short, **even if God could provide evidence which compelled us to believe THAT God exists, this would not entail that we would believe IN God**—in fact, that former might actually be destructive to the latter.