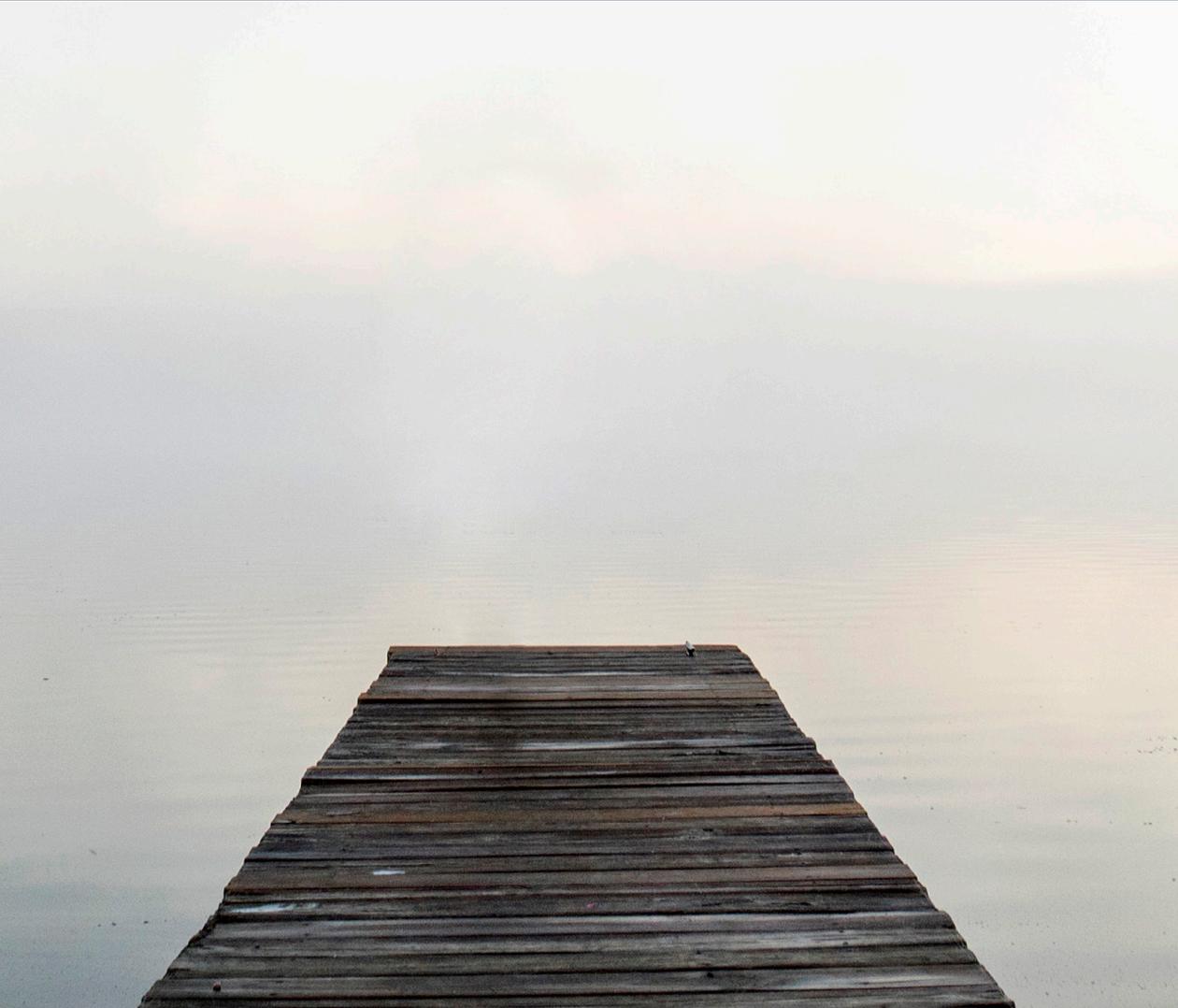


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Beholding the Face of a Hidden God: Assessing the Argument from Divine Hiddenness for Atheism

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Truly, you are a God who hides himself . . .—Is. 45:15 (NASB)

If God is all-loving and desires a relationship with human beings, why isn't God's existence more obvious to both believers and non-believers alike? Why does the evidence for his existence remain ambiguous and inconclusive to so many? Some philosophers have taken the hiddenness or elusiveness of the divine presence in the world as positive evidence that a perfectly loving God does not exist. With respect to the hiddenness of God, *absence of evidence for God is evidence of God's absence*.

More than anyone in the last twenty years, philosopher J.L. Schellenberg has pressed the argument against the existence of a perfectly loving God from the phenomenon of divine hiddenness.¹ If an all-loving God existed and created us to be in relationship with Him, then we would expect that He provide the necessary conditions for believing in Him, namely *clear* and *decisive* evidence that He is, in fact, there. The mere fact that persons can maintain reasonable non-belief in the existence of God suggests the lack of such evidence, and thereby the non-existence of a perfectly loving God.

My aim here is to introduce the reader to the philosophical discussion surrounding the argument for atheism from divine hiddenness. As the literature on divine hiddenness is wide-ranging, my aim here is only to offer a sampling of the various theistic responses and counter responses to the argument, along with some thoughts on the relevant strengths and weaknesses of the replies available to the theist.

1. The Evidential Problem Stated

For our purposes going forward, it will be helpful to have before us a formalized statement of the argument from divine hiddenness for atheism. I will work with the rather straightforward formulation of Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness as follows:

¹ See J.L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

1. If God exists, he is perfectly loving.
2. If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur.
3. Reasonable non-belief does occur.
4. Therefore, no perfectly loving God exists.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.²

Premise 1 makes it evident that the argument is aimed at a *certain kind of God*, namely the Judeo-Christian concept of God as a morally perfect being; whatever else might characterize the divine attribute of omnibenevolence, it is certainly nothing less than God's willing the good of each and every one of His creatures.

The key premises of the argument are 2 and 3. Presumably, part of Schellenberg's justification for premise 3 rests on what he takes to be his *own* reasonable non-belief in the existence of God. But one can easily generalize to include what appear to be well-informed and intellectually responsible atheists or agnostics who maintain their non-belief in light of the evidence for God's existence. To Schellenberg, it's simply obvious that the world consists of at least *some* non-belief that is reasonable or rational.

Turning to premise 2, Schellenberg argues that even the theist ought to find it unobjectionable. The force of premise 2 turns on the idea that a perfectly loving God—a God who wills the good for his creatures—would provide sufficient evidence for belief in His existence to all persons who are willing and able to form such a belief.

According to the Christian scheme, loving union with God is the *summum bonum* of human existence, the highest good that constitutes human well-being and flourishing in this life and the life to come. And surely the theist and non-theist alike will affirm that being related to God in this way is not possible unless a person first believes *that God exists*. If God is truly perfectly loving, then it seems reasonable to think that he will aim to do whatever is necessary to bring His creatures into a position where the conditions for such a relationship are realized. It seems reasonable to think that if a perfectly loving God exists, then He would ensure that no one would fail to believe that He exists on the basis of insufficient evidence; God would, at the very least, do what is minimally necessary for creatures to enjoy a loving relationship with Him and therein to achieve their highest or ultimate good in both this life and the next.

2. An Excursus on Epistemic Defeaters

Before we delve into the fine-grained details of the major theistic responses to the argument from divine hiddenness, it will be helpful to take

²J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 83.

a moment to paint with a broad brush and get before us some important concepts in epistemology, concepts that will help us get clear on the various options available to the theist in response to the argument from hiddenness.

One's belief in the truth of propositions as mundane as "Joe had coffee this morning" or "South Bend is colder than San Diego" often acquire what philosophers call "epistemic defeaters," that is, evidence that prevents one's belief from being rationally justified—epistemically "up to snuff," we might say. There are two kinds of epistemic defeaters that will be relevant to getting a handle on the different types of theistic strategies in responding to the argument from divine hiddenness.

We can begin by distinguishing between a *rebutting* and an *undercutting* defeater for one's belief in some proposition P, say *that all of the apples in the basket are red*. Suppose you have good epistemic grounds for believing P. Your epistemic grounds for believing P may take a variety of forms, whether *perceptual experience* (you may have a direct perceptual experience of the basket of apples in front of you), *memory* (you may remember inspecting the basket at one time and discovering that all of the apples were red), or even reliable *testimony* (you've been told on good authority that all of the apples in the basket are red).

On the one hand, P can acquire a *rebutting defeater*, that is, evidence for supposing that your belief that P is false. So suppose that upon forming the belief that all of the apples in the basket are red on the basis of reliable testimony, you decide to inspect the basket firsthand, only to discover three green apples buried at the bottom of the basket; in this case, you have acquired a reason to think that your belief is false; your belief that "all of the apples in the basket are red" has acquired a rebutting defeater.

On the other hand, beliefs can also acquire what are called *undercutting defeaters* in the following sense. Suppose one day, while sorting apples in the factory adjacent to the apple farm, you form the belief that P—"that all of the apples in the basket are red"—on the grounds of perceptual experience; your reason for believing P is grounded in your directly perceiving that all of the apples in the basket are red. But suppose that after forming this belief, you learn that John, your fellow employee who is known for playing practical jokes on the job, is working the same shift as you. In particular, you learn that John has rigged the lighting directly over the basket of apples such that they are all being illuminated by a red light. In such a case, your particular evidence in support of P, namely the evidence given in your perceptual experience, has acquired an undercutting defeater. Upon learning of John's scheme, you do not thereby acquire evidence for thinking that your belief in P is false (a rebutting defeater), rather, you acquire evidence for thinking that your grounds for believing P have been undercut.

With the above distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters in hand, we are now in a position to unpack the two overarching theistic strategies in approaching the argument from divine hiddenness. In the most general of terms, there are two broad strategies available to the the-

ist in response to the argument above, what I will call the “rebutting strategies” and the “undercutting strategies.” Rebutting strategies aim to provide *rebutting defeaters* for the truth of one of the premises of the argument, most likely 2 or 3; that is to say, positive reasons for thinking that either premise 2 or 3 is false.

By contrast, an undercutting strategy embraces a more modest aim in that it offers an *undercutting defeater* for the truth of one of the premises of the argument. This strategy claims *not* that we have positive reason to reject one of the premises, but rather, that *we have no good reason to accept* one of the premises of the argument from divine hiddenness. Just like your rational justification (via perception) for believing “that all of the apples in the basket are red” was undercut by your learning that the basket of apples was illuminated by a red light, so too the atheist’s justification for affirming one of the premises of the argument can acquire an undercutting defeater in a way that we will examine in more detail below.

In what follows, my aim is to offer a sampling of the central theistic replies to the argument from divine hiddenness in favor of atheism, along with what I take to be their dialectical strengths and weaknesses. While each theistic response to the argument has its relevant strengths and weaknesses, the theist has good grounds for affirming that divine hiddenness fails to justify atheism. Let us turn to examine the various forms of each strategy in turn.

3. Rebutting Strategies

Rebutting Strategy #1: The Way of Counterbalancing Evidence

The rebutting strategy has taken a variety of forms in the philosophical literature on divine hiddenness. The first rebutting strategy on offer sets its sights on premise 3: *that reasonable non-belief occurs*. This particular rebutting strategy claims that in so far as we have reasonable grounds for thinking that a certain kind of God exists from arguments stemming from natural theology, we therein have positive reasons for thinking that premise 3 is false. Call this particular rebutting strategy *the way of counterbalancing evidence*.

The theist who attempts to rebut premise 3 via *the way of counterbalancing evidence* argues from the truth of premise 2 above as follows:

2. If a perfectly loving God exists, then reasonable non-belief does not occur.

The proponent of *the way of counterbalancing evidence* will then offer rational justification for belief in a perfectly loving God, in either the form of communicable or incommunicable evidence.³

³ Here I borrow the terminology of “communicable” and “incommunicable” evidence from Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22–23, a distinction that largely corresponds to John Wesley’s distinction between “external” and “internal” evidence for Christianity.

Take first the notion of *communicable evidence*, evidential factors that can be straightforwardly shared with the objector that are subject to direct intellectual evaluation. Traditionally, communicable evidence for theism has taken the form of theistic arguments (e.g., cosmological, teleological, ontological, moral) for the existence of a necessary, supremely powerful, intelligent, benevolent creator. *Incommunicable evidence* for theism, by contrast, consists of evidential factors that are incapable of being directly shared and subject to direct intellectual evaluation. Traditionally, the primary form of incommunicable evidence in support of theism has taken the form of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:16). As a form of divine testimony, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit is a genuine form of testimonial evidence that can evidentially support theism, even if it is a form of non-transferable evidence that is incapable of being shared with another individual. The proponent of *the way of counterbalancing evidence* argues that both forms of evidence can converge to justify the premise that:

6. A perfectly loving God exists.

From the truth of 2 and 6, the proponent of *the way of counterbalancing evidence* concludes:

7. Therefore, reasonable non-belief does *not* occur.

Premise 7 entails the denial of premise 3 in so far as it claims that reasonable non-belief in the existence of God does not occur.

The force of this particular rebutting strategy turns on the plausibility of the claim that the communicable and incommunicable evidence for God's existence is conclusive in such a way that renders all non-belief in the existence of God *irrational*; any non-belief in the world is the result of irrationality in so far as it amounts to the failure to believe in the face of decisive and compelling evidence for theism.

What, then, of *the way of counterbalancing evidence* as a rebutting defeater for premise 3 of the argument from hiddenness? For one, the strategy requires the weight of the communicable evidence in the form of theistic arguments to decisively outweigh the empirical evidence in favor of what appear to be genuine cases of reasonable non-belief. For this reason, some theists and non-theists alike will find this too strong a route in response to the problem; perhaps we ought to take seriously the appearance of reasonable non-belief, cases where intellectually responsible atheists or agnostics are aware of the available evidence for God and yet maintain their non-belief in light of what they take to be cogent rejoinders to the theistic arguments.

In short, the defender of *the way of counterbalancing evidence* proposes that the communicable and incommunicable evidence in support of the premise:

6. A perfectly loving God exists.

is sufficiently weighty to counterbalance the evidence in favor of the premise:

3. Reasonable non-belief does occur.

Here one's assessment of *the way of counterbalancing evidence* will no doubt rest on one's views concerning the cumulative evidential force of the theistic arguments as well as the evidential value of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. For theists who are inclined to think that arguments for the existence of God can deliver *rationaly compelling* grounds in favor of premise 6, *the way of counterbalancing evidence* offers a concise rebutting defeater to premise 3 of the argument from divine hiddenness. But while many Christian philosophers would be quick to affirm that theistic arguments make it *rational* to be a theist in light of the evidence, few would (in my estimation) claim that such arguments *rationaly compel* belief in the existence of God so as to rule out rational non-belief as a responsible intellectual option.

Moreover, some might argue that *the way of counterbalancing evidence* carries little dialectical force as a response to the atheist in so far as it rests entirely on either the cogency of the arguments for God's existence (which are widely contested by both theist and atheist alike) as well as the evidential force of the incommunicable evidence of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. And perhaps no one who is not already convinced of the success of the theistic arguments or who lacks the inner witness of the Holy Spirit will grant that premise 6 is more plausible than premise 3. We have, then, a dialectical standoff in so far as the responsible atheist will find premise 3 more plausible than premise 6, namely as a result of his or her own rational non-belief in light of what they take to be inconclusive communicable and incommunicable evidence for theism. If the aim of the theist is to simply maintain the rationality of theism in the face of divine hiddenness, then the way of counterbalancing evidence provides a straightforward rebutting defeater of the argument from divine hiddenness against theism. If, however, the aim of the theist is to *persuade* the atheist that the argument from divine hiddenness is an unsuccessful argument for atheism, it may be wise for the theist to consider looking to an alternative strategy in responding to the argument above.

Rebutting Strategy #2: The Way of Malfunction

This leads nicely into our second rebutting strategy, what I will call *the way of malfunction*. This response maintains that while God has indeed provided his creatures with clear and sufficient evidence of his existence (Rom

1:19–20), it is only due to the pervasive influence of moral and spiritual corruption that creatures are, to a certain extent, blind to the evidence God has provided in nature and conscience (Rom 1:18–23). The claim here is to underscore what theologians have called *the noetic effects of sin*: that *cognitive* failure with respect to a certain domain of knowledge (particularly knowledge of God) is or can be directly linked to a certain degree of moral or spiritual failure, whether the failure in question is inherited from one's first human ancestors or is the result of one's own moral choices.

As a result, this rebutting strategy aims to provide reason to think that it's false that reasonable non-belief occurs; as with the previous strategy above, this route maintains that *all* non-belief is *unreasonable*, but explains this fact in terms of cognitive faculties that are malfunctioning due to the presence of moral and spiritual corruption. Alvin Plantinga states and defends this view nicely:

The most serious noetic effects of sin have to do with our knowledge of God. Were it not for sin and its effects, God's presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past. Like any cognitive process, however, the *sensus divinitatis* [the sense of the divine in humans] can malfunction; as a result of sin, it has indeed been damaged.⁴

Proponents of the way of malfunction are keen to cite Romans 1:18–21 in support of the idea that moral and spiritual corruption can have cognitive consequences on one's ability to appreciate the evidence for God from nature:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (NIV).

What are we to make of *the way of malfunction* as a rebutting strategy against premise 3 of the argument from divine hiddenness? First of all, note that the strategy aims to be comprehensive in the following twofold manner. First, *all* non-belief is unreasonable or irrational; there are *no* instances of reasonable non-belief. Second, the *single* source of all non-belief is cogni-

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 214.

tive malfunction due to pervasive moral and spiritual corruption. Here we might ask, as we did with *the way of counterbalancing evidence*, what are we to make of what appear to be intellectually responsible and properly informed non-believers who remain rationally unmoved by the evidence for God? Is their non-belief in the existence of God ultimately the product of moral and spiritual rebellion against God? Are all atheists and agnostics in the grip of self-deception regarding the existence of God due to their moral and spiritual corruption?

The plausibility of *the way of malfunction* as a *stand-alone* rebutting strategy hinges on the tenability of tracing *all* non-belief in the existence of God to cognitive malfunction due to the presence of moral or spiritual corruption. But some theists see this as too tall an order.⁵ Some, like Chad Meister, argue that saddling Romans 1:18–21 with the universal claim that *all* non-belief is unreasonable and ultimately motivated by moral and spiritual rebellion against God is exegetically unwarranted. At most, Meister argues, it seems that the passage warrants only the claim that *some* non-belief is ultimately the product of such corruption; there is, says Meister, little textual grounds for interpreting the above passage as saying that the class of spiritually corrupt non-believers must be coextensive with the class of those spiritually corrupt non-believers who, *in virtue of their corruption*, go on to suppress the evidence for God.

Be that as it may, the general insights undergirding *the way of malfunction* need to be taken seriously by the theist as a response to the argument from divine hiddenness. Scripture is unequivocally clear that certain cases of non-belief are the direct result of willful suppression or ignorance of the evidence for God that is clearly perceived in the created order.

Rebutting Strategy #3: The Way of Defence

Our third and final rebutting strategy takes aim at premise 2—*that if a perfectly loving God exists, then reasonable non-belief does not occur*—and sets out to identify *possible* reasons God might have for creating a world in which reasonable non-belief occurs. Call this rebutting strategy *the way of defence*. A “defence” is a philosophical term of art that stems from discussions of the various problems of evil and divine hiddenness in the philosophical literature. In the context of the argument from divine hiddenness, a philosophical defence offered on behalf of the theist aims to describe *a possible way the world could be* that includes both the existence of God and the existence of reasonable non-belief, a way the world could be *that is true for all we know*, one that we are in no position to rule out.

Note first that the theist who adopts *the way of defence* will take issue with Schellenberg’s initial formulation of the argument from divine hiddenness above. Premise 2 of the original formulation of the argument—*that if*

⁵ See Chad Meister, “Evil and the Hiddenness of God,” In *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 143–44.

a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur—assumes that God could not possibly have morally sufficient reasons to allow reasonable non-belief, an assumption that is rejected by the theist who adopts *the way of defence*. Thus, premise 2 ought to be replaced with the more cautious 2*:

2* If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur, *unless God has a morally sufficient reason to permit its occurrence.*

Altering premise 2 to 2* requires us to revise premise 3 of the argument to the following:

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

Premise 3* is the crux of the revised argument from divine hiddenness, and it is 3*b in particular that the proponent of the way of defence finds objectionable. In arguing for the truth of premise 3*, the atheist is saddled with the burden of showing not only that reasonable non-belief occurs, but also that God has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting reasonable non-belief; a tall order indeed!

There are two general versions of *the way of defence* in response to premise 3*b in the literature on divine hiddenness. The first claims that God's morally sufficient reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief center on goods that aim to benefit *his creatures* in some way or other. The second claims that God's morally sufficient reasons may perhaps center on goods internal *to God Himself*; that God's reasons for His hiddenness and silence might be a function of His personality and perhaps His preferred mode of interaction with human creatures.

So what possible reasons might God have for creating a world in which reasonable non-belief occurs, reasons that might be God's actual reasons, *for all we know*? I will begin by laying out the various theistic defences that aim to identify some creaturely good that God's hiddenness might aim to achieve.

Improper-Response Defence

To begin, some philosophers have argued that, for all we know, continual overt manifestations of God's presence in the world—manifestations that constituted conclusive evidence in favor of the existence of God—might actually *frustrate* or *undermine* God's relational aims for his creatures. If so, then God has a morally sufficient reason to refrain from revealing Himself in such a manner to such individuals. Call this the *improper-response defence*.

The idea behind the *improper-response defence* is that for all we know, for some individuals, if God were to provide conclusive evidence of his existence to such individuals, they might come to *resent* God and His overt self-advertisements. For such individuals, Peter van Inwagen asks:

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?⁶

Along similar lines, Paul Moser has argued that perhaps God remains hidden to certain individuals on the grounds that a failure to do so might prevent them from coming to know God *in the proper way*.⁷ Moser distinguishes between *propositional* and *filial* knowledge of God. Propositional knowledge of God is merely knowledge that the proposition *that God exists* is true; filial knowledge, on the other hand, takes as its object another *person*, in this case God Himself, and consists in “humbly, faithfully, and lovingly standing in a child-parent, or *filial*, relationship to God as one’s righteously gracious Father.”⁸ Propositional and filial knowledge *per se* are clearly distinct concepts. Analogously, few would deny that my knowledge of the truth of the proposition *that Suzanne Inman exists* (my wife) is clearly different from my knowledge of *Suzanne Inman* herself (the person).

And just as it would be absurd to say that the proper aim of a marital relationship is mere propositional knowledge *that* one’s spouse exists, so too it would be absurd to claim that God’s aim in creating humans is for them to acquire mere propositional knowledge *that* God exists. After all, even Scripture itself emphasizes the fact that mere belief in God’s existence is a far cry from what God intends for his creatures: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (Jas 2:19, cf. Heb 11:6, ESV). Consequently, given God’s specific creative aim of a loving, filial relationship with humanity, it is misplaced to expect that God provide only the sort of evidence of His existence that results in mere propositional knowledge *that* God exists. Thus, for all we know, God might have good reason to withhold overt evidence of his existence from some creatures in so far as his failing to do so would elicit a negative response and thus *impede* the prospects of entering into a loving relationship with such creatures.

One standard objection of the *improper-response defence* is to argue that there simply *are* no such individuals who would respond negatively to God in the face of overt evidence of his existence. But this is very strong claim indeed! The objection is committed to the following rather implausible claim: that *all actual reasonable non-believers* would respond positively to God, were

⁶ Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 151.

⁷ Paul Moser, “Reorienting Religious Epistemology: Cognitive Grace, Filial Knowledge, and Gethsemane Struggle” in *For Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Christian Theology*, ed. James Beilby (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

⁸ Moser, “Reorienting Religious Epistemology,” 75.

they to encounter overt and decisive evidence for God's existence. Yet for non-believers who are more than explicit that they don't *want* there to be a God, such a sweeping, universal claim seems patently false. Take, for example, the following words of Thomas Nagel, one of the most influential philosophers writing today:

In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper—namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. . . . My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time.⁹

If Nagel is correct in his assessment that his “cosmic authority problem” is likely shared by a great many of his contemporaries, then the claim that all current reasonable non-believers would in fact positively respond to God if presented with decisive evidence for God looks rather dim.

Second, some theists have argued that the *improper-response defence* is incomplete as a rebutting strategy against 3*b. While it may be plausible to think that not *every* reasonable non-believer would respond *positively* to overt evidence for God, the *improper-response defence*, as a *stand-alone* strategy against premise 3*b, commits the theist to a similar, equally implausible claim: that *all actual reasonable non-believers* would respond *negatively* to overt evidence for God's existence.

To suffice as a *stand-alone* rebutting defeater to 3*b, the proponent of the *improper-response defence* must say that (for all we know), God's reason for remaining hidden from reasonable non-believers is that *all* of them would respond *negatively* to overt and conclusive evidence for God's existence. Again, we need not deny that *some* reasonable non-believers—say the Nagel-type who repeatedly affirm that they don't *want* God to exist—would respond negatively to overt evidence for God. But must the theist take this line with respect to *all* reasonable non-believers, and thereby rule out a class of reasonable non-believers (however small) who would respond positively to such evidence? Unless one is ready to endorse such a sweeping claim, the

⁹Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130–31.

theist will need to supplement the *improper-response defence* with another strategy against the argument from divine hiddenness.

Another objection to the *improper-response defence*, at least the version advanced by Paul Moser, is that it pushes the problem of hiddenness up a notch without solving it: why does God remain elusive and hidden from non-believers who, by all appearances, *earnestly* and *genuinely* seek for filial knowledge of God and yet fail to attain neither it nor propositional knowledge of God? Even granting that we ought not expect God to promote mere propositional knowledge of God *on its own*, the question arises as to why God hasn't yet bestowed filial knowledge on non-believers who, by all appearances, seem to be genuinely open and receptive to a filial relationship with God? Here the theist might dig in her heels and argue that in this case in particular, appearances are deceptive; no non-believer actively and earnestly seeks for God on their own (Rom 3:11). What grounds does the atheist have for believing that there actually *are* non-believers who earnestly seek for filial knowledge and friendship with God and fail to attain it? In fact, certain passages of Scripture seem to preclude the existence of such individuals (e.g., Matt 7:7).

But Moser has argued that even *if* the theist grants that there are reasonable non-believers who diligently seek for a filial knowledge of God to no avail, we have absolutely no way of knowing that such knowledge is not *forthcoming* at some time in the future. And even if we grant the force of this particular objection to the *improper-response defence*, it fails to provide evidence for atheism; only a "temporary agnosticism"—agnosticism for the time being—seems warranted.

Freedom-Defence

Yet another common variant of *the way of defence* against premise 3*b claims that overt manifestations of the divine presence may, for all we know, pose a significant threat to free creature's ability to exercise morally significant freedom. Call this the *freedom-defence* against 3*b. More specifically, the *freedom-defence* argues that divine hiddenness may be a necessary condition for a world containing human creatures that possess the kind of freedom and integrity that is pertinent to the moral life, one that involves the freedom to choose between both good and bad courses of action.

Michael Murray and David Taylor advocate the *freedom-defence* and argue that if God were not hidden to a certain extent, then his existence would pose an immanent threat to our ability to exercise morally significant freedom.¹⁰ In particular, our being powerfully aware of God's existence would *coerce* us into submitting to His moral imperatives for our lives. Hence our ability to choose either *in accordance with* or *against* God's moral impera-

¹⁰ Michael Murray and David Taylor, "Hiddenness," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan (New York: Routledge: 2013), 368–77.

tives would be obliterated along with our ability to freely choose to develop a moral character of a particular kind. In the words of Murray and Taylor:

If God were to make his existence clearly and powerfully known to us, the impact would be no less than the moral patrolman. 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.¹¹

Consider a non-theological example of this idea at work. Those of us whose childhoods were marked by a seemingly endless string of sibling rivalries are all too aware of the disagreement, expressions of self-will, and coercion that define these early childhood relationships. Of course, any good parent would want their children to *freely* choose to not engage in such behavior with their siblings. But suppose that an overbearing parent, upon the slightest sign of sibling rivalry, made their presence overwhelmingly evident to their children on such occasions. Surely the presence of the parent would constitute a significant threat to the children's ability to *freely* refrain from engaging in ill behavior toward their siblings; it is not unreasonable, then, to suppose that in order for the children to have the ability to exercise morally significant freedom regarding whether to engage or not engage in such behavior, the parent must keep a certain "epistemic distance" in such situations.

What are we to make of the *freedom-defence* against premise 3*b? Note first that the defence presupposes the following exclusive disjunction: *either God would be hidden, or morally significant freedom in responding to God would be lost*. But why think this is true? We can certainly admit that *some* striking manifestations of the divine presence would be so overwhelming as to preclude any free or meaningful response to God. But must *all* cases of divine disclosure be freedom-precluding in this sense? Could not God be less elusive than He is at present, yet in such a way that keeps the morally significant freedom of creatures intact? As it stands, the proponent of the *freedom-defence* needs to give further justification in support of the above exclusive disjunction.

More importantly, the *freedom-defence* is problematic in so far as it implies that believers in God—in so far as they have a clear knowledge of God's existence—are incapable of exercising morally significant freedom, that is, the ability to choose between morally relevant alternatives. Recall that according to Murray and Taylor, "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

¹¹ Murray and Taylor, "Hiddenness," 375.

would have been eliminated.”¹² But certainly believers in God *do* know that God is there, watching over them continuously. And yet few would want to claim that knowledge of this fact eliminates the morally significant freedom of the faithful, understood as their ability to choose between morally relevant alternatives as noted by Murray. In so far as the *freedom-defence* is inconsistent with other beliefs held by many theists, namely that believers in God have the ability to choose between good and bad courses of action, we have reason to think that the *freedom-defence* fails as a rebutting strategy against premise 3*b.

Divine Personality Defence

The above variants of *the way of defence* aim to identify some *creaturely good* (or the prevention of a certain creaturely evil) that divine hiddenness aims to secure, whether the creature’s having a proper or filial knowledge of God or the good of morally significant freedom. Here I want to briefly consider the second general *way of defence* that claims that God’s morally sufficient reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief might be internal *to God Himself*, that is, while God does indeed have morally sufficient reasons for remaining hidden or elusive (thereby allowing for reasonable non-belief), such reasons are independent of (though not in violation of) the good of His creatures.

Michael Rea has defended the intriguing claim that divine hiddenness and divine silence may, for all we know, be an expression of God’s personality and thus a great good in its own right.¹³ Divine silence may be the triune God’s preferred mode of interaction with His creatures. In fact, the Scriptures teach that God not only intentionally withholds revelatory light from individuals who are unrepentant and prideful (Matt 11:25), but He actively opposes or resists those who are steeped in pride and conceit (Prov 3:34; 1 Cor 1:19-27; Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). In so far as it is a great good in its own right for God to live out his personality in a way that He sees fit, God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting reasonable non-belief in the world. Call this *the divine personality defence*.

Recall that the argument from divine hiddenness above gets its traction from the idea that if a perfectly loving God exists and desires a relationship with us, He would ensure that no one would fail to believe that He exists on the basis of insufficient evidence. We can hear the complaints of the atheist undergirding the argument: *What kind of loving Father remains intentionally silent and hidden in the face of the son or daughter who is actively seeking him out, especially when the ultimate well-being of the child depends on their finding Him? If God truly cares about the eternal destiny of humanity, why doesn't he come out of hiding and conclusively reveal his existence once and for all?*

¹² Murray and Taylor, “Hiddenness,” 375.

¹³ Michael Rea, “Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence,” in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 6th ed., ed. L. Pojman and M. Rea (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage, 2012), 266–75.

According to Rea, this line of reasoning embodies a particular *interpretation* of the hiddenness or silence of God: that such behavior stems from *divine indifference* to humanity's plight. But as Rea emphasizes, silence between persons must always be interpreted in light of the background assumptions concerning the beliefs, desires, motives, cultural norms, and overall personality of the persons in question. Rea offers the following example:

You're on a first date. After a while you notice that you've been doing almost all the talking. You start asking questions to draw her out, but her answers are brief, and the silences in between grow longer and longer. You spend the entire ride home without saying a word. Does she hate you? Does she find you boring? Have you offended her? Or is she just rude? As it happens, she just arrived in the United States and was raised with the view that if you really want to win a man over, you should be quiet and let him do all the talking. Does that information affect your interpretation?¹⁴

The proper interpretation of *human* silence, then, requires a host of information about the beliefs, character, and personality of the person in question. And if we often misinterpret *human* silence in the above manner, how much more is it hasty to interpret divine silence as indicating a lack of love or care for His creatures given His utter transcendence?

According to *the divine personality defence*, general divine silence may, for all we know, be simply an expression of God's preferred mode of interaction with human creatures and need not be interpreted as divine *indifference*, *absence*, or *lack of love*. And in so far as God's acting out his own personality "serves the good that comes of the most perfect and beautiful person in the universe expressing himself in the way he sees fit," it constitutes a morally sufficient reason for God's continuing to allow the existence of reasonable non-belief.

The objector, no doubt, will retort that God's interacting with His creatures in this manner is morally unjustified (i.e., does not constitute a morally sufficient reason for remaining hidden) given the fact that the eternal destiny of his creatures hangs in the balance. A God who stands by in cold silence while his creatures perish for their lack of knowledge of His existence is less like a perfectly loving being and more like the inattentive father who neglects his children on the grounds that his personality is such that he's "just not good with kids." While Rea has responded to this charge, plausibly so in my opinion, an exhaustive treatment of *the divine personality defence* and its accompanying objections is beyond our scope here. At the very least, this response to divine hiddenness merits a closer look from both theist and non-theist alike.

¹⁴ Rea, "Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence," 272.

4. Undercutting Strategy

Let me turn now to the second broad theistic strategy that aims to undermine the argument from divine hiddenness in favor of atheism. Recall that we've been considering various *rebutting strategies* against the argument from divine hiddenness, strategies that aim to provide positive reason to think that at least one premise of the argument is false. I'd now like to turn to consider an *undercutting strategy* that sets its sights on premise 3*b of the revised argument from hiddenness, *that at least some reasonable non-belief occurs for no good reason*.

We can start by asking: How does the atheist go about justifying the claim that for at least some reasonable non-belief, God has no morally sufficient reason for allowing it to occur? Presumably, the atheist moves from considering actual cases of reasonable non-belief (perhaps her own), fails to conceive of any morally sufficient reasons for such cases, and thus concludes that there are no such reasons. Hence, the atheist justifies the fact that there are no good reasons for at least some cases of reasonable non-belief from the fact that *she cannot conceive of any such reasons*; she has inquired long and hard concerning some possible compensating good to which reasonable non-belief might contribute, but has come up empty-handed. The inference from one's failing to conceive of any morally sufficient reasons for phenomenon x (whether horrendous evil or divine hiddenness) to, therefore, there are no morally sufficient reasons for phenomenon x , has come to be called a "noseeum inference" in the philosophical literature: *because we can't see or conceive of the reasons for permitting x , they must not be there*.¹⁵

The undercutting strategy in response to the argument from divine hiddenness I want to consider mirrors a well-known strategy in responding to the evidential argument from evil known as "skeptical theism."¹⁶ While there are more or less skeptical forms of skeptical theism, I'll focus on a common core shared by all varieties of skeptical theism: what I will call *the way of inscrutability*. *The way of inscrutability* provides an undercutting defeater for the atheist's noseeum inference in support of 3*b.

As an undercutting strategy, *the way of inscrutability* argues that the noseeum inference used to justify premise 3*b is illegitimate. The reason: it *assumes* that we have good reason to think that we are in an epistemic position to discern God's reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief if they *were* there. Yet on the standard theistic assumption of the utter immensity of God's knowledge and goodness, as well as the finitude of human cognitive and moral faculties, such an assumption is misplaced.

¹⁵ The genealogy of the term "noseeum" traces back to Stephen Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 12650.

¹⁶ As we will see, skeptical theists are not skeptical of theism but rather of the following inference: *because we can't see or conceive of God's reasons for permitting x , they must not be there*.

In general, the theist who opts for *the way of inscrutability* argues that since God's morally sufficient reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief would be *inscrutable* if they existed, it is unreasonable to rely on our finite cognitive faculties to justify the claim that *there are no such reasons*. In the same way that I acquire an undercutting defeater for my reasons for believing *that all of the apples in the basket are red* once I learn that the basket is illumined by a red light, so too the atheist acquires an undercutting defeater for their reason for affirming that there are no good reasons for reasonable non-belief, once they take seriously the immensity of the divine nature and the finitude of human cognition. Consequently, premise 3*b remains unjustified, and the argument from hiddenness is unsound.

The way of inscrutability differs from *the way of defence* in that the latter attempts to argue against the truth of 3*b by considering possible goods that might, for all we know, result from God's allowing reasonable non-belief to occur. *The way of inscrutability*, on the other hand, argues that *we have no good reason to think* that we are in an epistemic position to judge whether or not 3*b is true.

The cogency of *the way of inscrutability* rests on its challenge to the noseem inference used to justify premise 3*b. It is widely assumed in the philosophical literature that not *all* noseem inferences are objectionable. For instance, borrowing an example from Michael Murray, it seems reasonable to infer, after a thorough and careful inspection of my refrigerator, that since I can't see any milk in the refrigerator, that *therefore*, there *is* no milk in the refrigerator.¹⁷

However, there are other noseem inferences that strike us as objectionable. Consider the following example that is, once again, borrowed from Murray. You take a seat in the doctor's office and roll up your sleeve in preparation for your annual flu shot. The doctor removes the protective sleeve of the needle and, just as she is about to inject you with it, drops it on the floor and the needle rolls underneath the hospital bed; the doctor thumbs around for a few seconds looking for the needle, finds it, and attempts to inject you once more. Just before the needle reaches your arm, you protest, "Wait, isn't the needle contaminated after being on the floor?" The doctor takes the needle to better lighting, takes a long hard look at the surface of the needle, and says, "As I've examined the needle closely to the best of my ability and don't see any germs on it, it's likely that there aren't any germs on it." The doctor has made a noseem inference, and a *bad* one at that.

The above two cases—the case of the milk in the fridge and the germs on the needle—bring to light two important conditions that need to be satisfied in order to have an *unobjectionable* or *proper* noseem inference:

Right Location: one must have good reason to think that one is looking for *x* in the right location.

¹⁷Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Expectation: one must have good reason to think that one would see (discern, grasp, conceive, etc.) x if it really were there.

The case of the milk in the fridge meets both the *Right Location* and the *Expectation* condition; we have good reason to think that if there were a leftover carton of milk, it would be likely in the fridge and nowhere else, and we would expect to detect the milk if it were really there; a carton of milk is the sort of thing you would expect to see by inspection. The case of the germs on the needle, on the other hand, fails the *Expectation* condition: as micro-organisms, germs are not the sorts of things you would reasonably expect to detect by inspection with the naked eye.

Analogously, *the way of inscrutability* argues that the noseem inference used to justify premise 3*b—that at least some reasonable non-belief occurs for no good reason—arguably fails both the *Right Location* and the *Expectation* condition. Is it reasonable for the atheist to expect that she would discern God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting reasonable non-belief if they were really there? It depends. It depends whether or not one thinks that the atheist's noseem inference is more like the one in the case of the milk in the fridge or more like the one in the case of the germs on the needle.

Proponents of *the way of inscrutability* argue that, given the kind of being God would be if He existed, the atheist's inference is more like the noseem inference made by the doctor concerning germs on the needle. That is, the reasoning used to justify the premise that there are no good reasons for God's allowing reasonable non-belief is objectionable in so far as it fails the *Expectation* condition; just as there is no reason to think that the doctor would find what she was looking for—germs on the needle—by way of unaided human perception, so too there is no reason to think that the atheist would find what she is looking for—God's reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief—by way of her finite cognitive faculties. If this line of reasoning is correct, then the atheist's justification for premise 3*b is undercut and the argument from divine hiddenness is unsound.

Conclusion

In summary, we have explored two broad theistic strategies in responding to the argument from divine hiddenness against the existence of a perfectly loving God: what I referred to as *rebutting* and *undercutting* strategies. We looked at three rebutting strategies aimed at either premise 2 or 3 of the argument—*the way of counterbalancing evidence*, *the way of malfunction*, and *the way of defence*—as well as the relevant strengths and weakness of each. Under *the way of defence* we highlighted two general types of defences: those that claim that God's morally sufficient reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief center on goods that aim to benefit his creatures in particular (*improper response defense* and the *freedom-defence*), and those that claim such reasons are internal to God Himself (the *divine personality defence*). Finally, we looked at an undercutting strategy I called *the way of inscrutability*, which aims to

undercut the atheist's reasons for affirming premise 3*b: that at least some reasonable non-belief occurs for no good reason.

Note that the theist need not rest entirely on a *single* strategy when objecting to the argument from divine hiddenness. For instance, the theist might consider combining several of the above rebutting strategies, such as the *way of counterbalancing evidence* with the *way of malfunction*; or perhaps the *improper response defence* with the *divine personality defence*, as a way of mutually reinforcing one another where each is weak.

Whether the theist combines multiple rebutting strategies or rests her case entirely on *the way of inscrutability* as a way of undercutting the argument from divine hiddenness, she has ample resources to resist the claim that divine hiddenness is positive evidence for atheism.

