

THE HIDDENNESS PROBLEM AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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The problem of Divine hiddenness, or the hiddenness problem, is more and more commonly being treated as independent of the problem of evil, and as rivalling the latter in significance. Are we in error if we acquiesce in these tendencies? Only a careful investigation into relations between the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil can help us see. Such an investigation is undertaken here. What we will find is that when certain knots threatening to hamper intellectual movement are unravelled, the hiddenness problem emerges as a contender in its own right – one that may generate serious difficulties for theism regardless of conclusions drawn concerning the force of the problem of evil.

The past fifteen years have seen considerable discussion of a problem for theism called the problem of Divine hiddenness, or the hiddenness problem. This problem has been developed in a number of different ways, but a central idea is that overlooked facts about the nature of love and about the connection between loving relationship with God and *belief* in God reveal that the existence in many times and places of a certain sort of *nonbelief* – I call it *nonresistant* nonbelief – counts strongly in favor of there being no God. The problem in question is therefore one

involving argument in support of atheism.

In this paper I investigate relations between the hiddenness problem and the venerable old problem of evil. My reason for doing so is in part simple curiosity and in part a more specific wish to clarify the position one ought to take on the question of the former's distinctive status and relative importance. Is the movement that can be discerned in philosophy books and classrooms toward a view of the hiddenness problem as (a) distinct from the problem of evil and (b) at least as serious a threat to theism appropriate? Or is it rather based on conceptual confusion or oversight? Everyone knows that the hiddenness problem is in some non-trivial way(s) related to the problem of evil, and even I, in the Introduction to my book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (DHHR), went so far as to call the former a "special instance" of the latter. Is talk of hiddenness in fact *reducible* to talk about evil, or are hiddenness arguments somehow *dependent* on the success of arguments from evil? Alternatively, do hiddenness arguments (even if successful) represent much *weaker* support for atheism than arguments from evil may provide? If any such thought can be developed successfully, the significance of the hiddenness problem must be cast into question. And if *none* can, its potential for fruitfulness in future discussion must be sharply enhanced. Thus it is important that we consider with some care just how this problem *is* related to the problem of evil.

A number of possible relationships suggest themselves. Here are the candidates I will examine (in every case the preface 'it may be said that' should be regarded as tacitly present):

1. Each problem admits of both logical and evidential formulations.
2. There are *types* of hiddenness from which one might argue just as there are *types* of

evil.

3. Both problems focus on pain and suffering.
4. Both problems focus on things bad.
5. Both problems focus on things apparently contrary to the moral character of God.
6. The problem of evil *creates* the problem of hiddenness.
7. Both problems are answerable by reference to the same sorts of considerations.
8. Evil makes for a much stronger atheistic argument than does hiddenness.
9. A further argument for atheism results when considerations from each of the two problems are brought together.

My aim in each case will be to determine whether the candidate relation or connection is a *real* relation or connection obtaining between the two problems, and also to see whether any of the connections that do obtain (and there are some!) are such as to place in doubt the distinctive status and relative significance of the hiddenness problem. Proceeding in this way, so I suggest, we will be able to learn quite a lot about the proper place of the hiddenness problem in the broader context of atheistic reasoning.

Suggested relation # 1: each problem admits of both logical and evidential formulations.

It is widely accepted that the problem of (or argument from) evil comes in two main flavors, labeled ‘logical’ and ‘evidential’, with a logical argument from evil claiming that some fact about evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God and an evidential argument claiming that in some other way – perhaps only probabilistically – facts about evil provide support for atheism.

Just so, we can find in the literature versions of the hiddenness argument claiming that nonresistant nonbelief is incompatible with God's existence (i.e., regarding it a *necessary* truth that such nonbelief would be prevented by God), and also ones restricting themselves to a more modest evidential claim.

Is there anything about this obvious parallel that should make us doubt the distinctiveness of the hiddenness argument? Pretty clearly not. In fact, this sort of parallel could exist between plenty of arguments that are quite different from one another. Most radically, we might note that there could be arguments from *good* instead of from evil to which the very same logical/evidential distinction applies. Suppose we have, independently of any conclusion drawn about the problem of evil, information that, necessarily or probably, God would create a world with a certain good characteristic A and this rules out God's creating a world with a certain good characteristic B. Now suppose we discover that our world has goodness B. We would then have a basis from which to mount an argument, logical or evidential, depending on the nature of our information, from goodness B to the nonexistence of God. But if an argument so obviously distinct from an argument from evil as an argument from good could share the feature in question, then that the hiddenness argument shares it cannot suffice to show that the hiddenness argument lacks a distinctive status.

Suggested relation # 2: there are types of hiddenness from which one might argue just as there are types of evil.

Here too it seems that we have a real connection between the two problems. It is a familiar observation that someone developing an argument from evil, whether logical or evidential, can

argue not only from evil in general but also more narrowly from this or that *type* of evil. The most commonly mentioned types are natural and moral evil, and recently there has been much talk of horrendous or horrific evil. Similarly, what I am calling hiddenness falls into several interesting types.

Now it is important to realize that I am not just saying that we can see various types of hiddenness by relaxing the meaning of the term, by allowing that term ‘hiddenness’ to range over more than just nonresistant nonbelief.¹ What I am saying instead is that *nonresistant nonbelief* comes in various types. In a recent extension to the hiddenness argument, I distinguish four main types: the nonresistant nonbelief of former believers, lifelong seekers, converts to nontheistic religion, and isolated nontheists.² In the first case you have the nonresistant nonbelief of those who regret the loss of a connection to God and unsuccessfully seek to regain it; in the second, that of seekers whose continued search has yielded nothing in the way of evidence sufficient for belief; in the third, that of seekers whose search has uninterruptedly led to nontheistic religious belief; and in the last, you have the nonresistant nonbelief of those never in a *position* to ‘resist God’ because they are shaped by a meaning system in which the idea of a loving God inviting humans to loving relationship is absent or alien.³ No doubt there are other types too.⁴ Thus there arises the possibility of an argument against the existence of God from one or another or some conjunction of these *types* of nonresistant nonbelief in addition to the argument from nonresistant nonbelief in general. Maybe over and above the general point about how a loving God could never leave anyone without access to relationship with God we can locate, more specifically, reasons why a loving or just or generous or righteous or providential or non-deceiving God would never countenance: sincere onetime believers trying to make their way home without

being able to do so; or dedicated seekers failing to find; or seekers taking themselves to have found a truth that only enmeshes them in a meaning system distortive of (what must, if God exists, be) the truth; or individuals being entirely formed by, and unavoidably living their whole lives within, a fundamentally misleading meaning system. In my view such arguments can indeed be developed. Notice that, if so, we are in the hiddenness case able to advance both the general incompatibility argument *and* various more specific arguments, whereas in the case of the problem of evil, the more general argument has been discredited (no one these days is trying to show that there could not be *any evil at all* if there were a God) and philosophers wishing to develop the problem of evil have turned to making more specific arguments focused on this or that type of evil – for example, horrific suffering – instead. In the case of nonresistant nonbelief, I suggest, there need be no turning; it is rather a matter of *adding*.⁵

The point about types therefore identifies a real connection between the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil. Does this connection give us any reason to think that the hiddenness argument fails to be independently significant? Again, it seems not. Indeed, it is quite obvious that various phenomena not related in *any* interesting or important way may still share the rather common characteristic of being distinguishable into types.

Suggested relation # 3: both problems focus on pain and suffering.

This purported connection is more significant than either of the first two. If it could successfully be established – if indeed what the hiddenness argument is drawing to our attention comes down to some objectionable fact about pain and suffering – then it would be very hard to see how the hiddenness argument is really introducing anything new; then that argument would surely rise or

fall with the argument from evil and be undeserving of separate consideration in our texts and classrooms. For if anything is obvious, it is that the problem of evil includes the problem of pain and suffering! But I want to argue that the claim in question cannot be made out: the idea that what the hiddenness argument is emphasizing comes down to facts about pain or suffering is based on confusion.

This confusion stems from a conflating of genus and species (of nonresistant nonbelief and *inculpable doubt*, which is a *type* of nonresistant nonbelief), together with the misidentification of the hiddenness argument's reason for regarding the latter as something God would prevent. In DHHR I use the occurrence of inculpable doubt to make my case for the occurrence of nonresistant nonbelief (I could have appealed to other forms of nonresistant nonbelief and made my job easier). Some have been led by this to suppose mistakenly that, for me, nonresistant nonbelief *just is* inculpable doubt. Add to this the further error of replacing the reason actually to be found in DHHR for considering inculpable doubt problematic (which involves love's impulse toward relationship) with thoughts about the *suffering or trauma* it may involve, and you generate the confused idea in question: that what the hiddenness problem is *really* about is just another allegedly objectionable case of pain and suffering.

Both errors can be found in independent papers on my argument published in *Faith and Philosophy*, authored by Douglas V. Henry and Robert T. Lehe.⁶ It is important to see that and why they are errors. The problematic nature of Divine hiddenness does not consist in the suffering that uncertainty or the loss of theistic belief may sometimes involve. For one thing, nonresistant nonbelief often does not involve such doubt or loss of belief. It is also exemplified by the many individuals, so easily forgotten or ignored by someone shaped by theistic ideas, who

are shaped by *other* ideas and so have never found themselves in a position of regretted loss of belief or anguished doubt – here recall the ‘isolated nontheists’ mentioned above. But more fundamentally, it is not the anguish of doubt and the empathy of God that should lead us to wonder why there are inculpable doubters or other nonresistant nonbelievers. It is rather the natural inclination of any loving parent (and so of any loving Parent) to make loving relationship with herself possible for her children – for their sake, certainly, but also for its own sake, *and even where there would be no pain and suffering if it were not made available*. The Divine Parent’s motivation to make Divine-creature relationship possible therefore includes much more than is included in the motives to which we appeal when we argue, if we do, that God would be moved to prevent pain and suffering.

Having said that, given my earlier point about how we could find *additional* hiddenness arguments by looking at reasons for thinking that a morally perfect God would prevent this or that *type* of nonresistant nonbelief, and given that the traumatized doubt of some individuals represents one such type, it is not hard to see how considerations concerning suffering might yet enter the picture at one point along the full spectrum of moves available to the hiddenness arguer. But it is only at one point, and the hiddenness argument can get by perfectly well without making that move. Thus the independence of the hiddenness argument is preserved. What that argument is emphasizing does not *come down to* facts about pain and suffering, nor can it justly be said that it *focuses* on pain and suffering. Far from it.

Suggested relation # 4: both problems focus on things bad.

Nonetheless, it may now be said, both arguments do focus on things *bad* and thus the hiddenness

argument really does just represent one form the argument from evil can take. Don't philosophers often tell their readers or students – I know I have done so on occasion – that the word 'evil' as used in connection with the problem of evil is really an *umbrella* term, covering a wide range of different negative or undesirable or bad phenomena and not just the extremely wicked choices and character to which the term is customarily restricted in everyday contexts? And if so, cannot hiddenness be lumped in with all the *rest* of the bad things we deplore, which many of us suppose a good God would prevent?

I suspect that the temptation for quite a few philosophers will be to answer this last question in the affirmative. But upon reflection it becomes evident that this temptation should be resisted. Let me begin my defense of this claim by showing how even if the hiddenness argument *were* an argument from things bad or undesirable, it would not follow that a 'lumping in' reaction is appropriate. (Later I will reject the idea that the hiddenness argument *is* properly construed as an argument from things bad.)

There are at least two ways of developing this initial defense. The first involves making a distinction between what we might call an abstract and a concrete sense of 'the problem of evil.' In the abstract sense the problem of evil is just the problem of things bad or undesirable, however detailed or filled out. In the concrete sense it is the problem of things bad *as discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion*: here I have in mind the arguments and modes of argument actually being used in philosophy to give a definite shape to the problem. Now, as it happens, these latter are all in one way or another bound up with the badness of *pain and/or suffering* (think of the current and recent popularity of claims about horrendous or horrific suffering, or concerning the *amount* of pain and suffering the world contains and has contained). Facts about

pain and/or suffering are indeed all that many contemporary philosophers appear to have in mind when they use the term ‘evil.’ But the hiddenness argument, as we have already seen, is not thus restricted. It is indeed to be distinguished from any focus on pain or suffering. Hence it must be distinguished from the concrete problem of evil even if it remains a species of the abstract. But for the hiddenness argument to be rightly regarded as representing a distinctive and independent problem that makes its own contribution to the case for atheism in contemporary philosophy, surely it is sufficient that it be distinguishable from the concrete problem of evil. Hence it is rightly thus regarded.⁷

Suppose, however, that my distinction here between abstract and concrete is rejected. (Someone might say, for example, that pain and suffering have become the focus of contemporary discussion not because they are all that philosophers have in mind when concretely using the term ‘evil’ but because they represent the *clearest cases* of evil.⁸) This only permits us to notice a second way in which no claim about the appropriate blurring of our two problems follows from the assumption (which I will ultimately reject) that the hiddenness argument is properly regarded as an argument from things bad or undesirable. This new defense points out that even if what the hiddenness arguer is arguing *from* turns out to be a claim about things bad in a commonly used sense of ‘bad’, nonetheless the *manner* of her argument may be distinctive. Suppose that hiddenness is bad in this sense. We must still consider *how* it is being argued that God would prevent it. In particular, is the manner of argument one that involves lumping hiddenness or nonresistant nonbelief in with all the other apparently gratuitous bad things that a benevolent creator might be expected to oppose? Not at all. Though brief summaries of the general hiddenness argument often obscure this point, the manner of that argument’s reasoning is

again one involving reference to explicit, reciprocal *relationship* with God, which a loving God would intend to facilitate for all relevantly capable and nonresistant creatures at all times at which this description applies to them, and which logically requires belief in God. This is not a form of argument that has heretofore been utilized by any who have proposed a problem of evil (indeed, theists will think of pain and suffering as ameliorated by relationship with God, and, in any case, as in no way inconsistent with it). Hence in hiddenness reasoning we find a distinct *form* of argument and, with it, a *new problem* even if part of the argument's *content*, concerned, as we are presently assuming it is, with badness, is properly regarded as overlapping with that of arguments from evil. Moreover, it may be that this form of argument is successful while many others, including the arguments from evil most commonly utilized in the contemporary literature, are not. (I, for one, would claim that this is so.) Hence, in an important sense, attempts to diminish the hiddenness argument's distinctive contribution that proceed by assimilating it to the problem of evil must fail even if the latter assimilation goes through.

So much for how the claim of independent significance might be defended if our suggested relation # 4 – the idea that both the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil focus on things bad – were sustainable. Let me now turn to what I regard as the truth of the matter: that this idea is *not* sustainable. The most straightforward defense of this claim might reason that nonresistant nonbelief is not bad at all. Proponents of an atheistic argument from hiddenness may indeed think that nonresistant nonbelief is very good and greatly to be admired, both for its nonresisting and for its nonbelieving qualities! Compare this with what we have to say about pain and suffering and the other bad things with which the problem of evil has been associated: these phenomena are bad whether God exists or not, and also whether morally justified or not; and they

will be viewed as such by everyone, whether theist or not.

But such an approach may appear disingenuous. Doesn't the atheist say that being barred from relationship with God would be a bad state, and isn't she committed to saying that the persistence of nonresistant nonbelief, a sufficient condition of being in that state, inherits a certain badness therefrom? In other words, isn't her view that nonresistant nonbelief is instrumentally bad even if it is not intrinsically so? And doesn't the atheist want the theist to *feel* this badness and to be moved by it to accept the hiddenness argument as sound?

The answers to these questions – at any rate from a correct-thinking atheist – must be no, no, no, and no. Here indeed we have come to what I regard as the central point to be made about the hiddenness argument and badness. Although a *theist* may indeed keenly feel the value of (what she takes to be) an existing relationship with God and may be inclined to view anything contributing to its absence, even for a time, as a bad thing, and although in debate an atheist may be tempted to take advantage of this, such moves only mislead in the present context. The *atheist* would properly be quite content were we all to recognize simply that, given certain definitional facts about 'love', the situation of hiddenness is in conflict with the idea that a God of *fullest love* exists, as opposed to feeling that hiddenness represents something bad that a benevolent or morally perfect God would resist. (A similar distinction is well made by Theodore M. Drange in developing his own argument from nonbelief.⁹) If love is an essential property of God, then such a recognition is all we need to ground a hiddenness argument against the existence of God. Even where the notion of benevolence, of a concern for well-being, *is* introduced into the hiddenness argument by the arguer, it is not as indicating that God would ward off this bad thing hiddenness, but rather as one more way of showing how given the fullness of Divine love, which entails an

overflowing benevolence that does not need a threat of *badness* to be led to act, a perfectly loving God would prevent nonresistant nonbelief. What is distinctive about the argument from evil is that it *instead* appeals to the existence of things we would not expect from benevolence or moral impeccability *because they are bad*.¹⁰ Hence it is not appropriate to regard these two problems as *sharing* a focus on things bad.

The point I am making here can be crystallized and clearly linked to the question of this section by noticing an ambiguity in the notion of an argument ‘from things bad.’ Do we mean ‘from things that happen to be bad but whose badness is not central to the argument’ or ‘from things bad, *because* they are bad’? If we are hoping to characterize an argument from evil, surely it is the latter. And this latter description, so we must admit, does not fit the hiddenness argument, even if we waive the point that hiddenness may not properly be thought bad at all, and raise no objection if theists go on to endorse the *other, irrelevant* sense of ‘argument from things bad.’

With that possible propensity of theists in mind, I offer, as a way of concluding this ‘bad’ discussion, the following analogy. Given what we have seen, to say that because the hiddenness argument, like the argument from evil, is concerned with something bad, the hiddenness argument is reducible to the argument from evil would be like saying that because the design argument, like the cosmological argument, is concerned with things contingent, the design argument is reducible to the cosmological argument. The latter claim is manifestly unconvincing, since the proponent of a design argument, though arguing from things contingent, is not *focused* on their contingency (that they are contingent is not a central premise of her argument; rather she focuses on order of one kind or another). For a similar reason (namely, that the hiddenness

argument, even if arguing from things that happen to be bad, is not focused on their badness), no claim about the reducibility of the hiddenness argument to the argument from evil on account of a joint concern with things bad can be convincing. The hiddenness argument is misleadingly regarded as an argument *from* evil – and this even if it can be shown to be arguing from things that a theist may reasonably regard as *being* evil.

Suggested relation # 5: both problems focus on things apparently contrary to the moral character of God.

It may now be suggested that in talking about hiddenness as contrary to Divine love, the general hiddenness argument *is* talking about something being in opposition to what might broadly be termed the unsurpassable moral character of God, even if not about a contravention of moral perfection involving a blameworthy neglect of the bad. Surely a reference to love would be unavoidable in a description of the Divine moral character: love must be one of the Divine moral virtues if – as is obviously true – God is to be understood as a morally unsurpassable personal being. And surely any state of affairs that comes into *conflict* with Divine *moral virtue* is not inappropriately regarded as presenting us with a problem of evil. But then the problem of *hiddenness* may be regarded as such a problem. Here I may be reminded that it was in light of such reasoning that, in DHHR, I myself said that the hiddenness problem could be viewed as representing a “special instance” of the problem of evil.

But at this point it would have to be noted that it is only if we broaden our conception of evil far beyond its ordinary compass that we get this result, which is to say that even if we let this result stand, the distinct significance of hiddenness argumentation within the context of atheistic

argumentation as *ordinarily* prosecuted might remain. However, I am now inclined to think that we should not let that result stand: to say that just any state of affairs conflicting with virtue must – though perhaps in a stretched sense – be bound up with evil goes too far.

To see that it does, consider the following example. It is perhaps not implausible to suppose that in every possible world in which God's moral nature is exercised in relation to finite beings it is an expression of Divine virtue for God to provide for finite beings some moments of (what is relative to their capability) supreme well being or happiness, which is a good. Then it must in any relevant sense be 'contrary' to the moral nature of God not to do so. But notice that this implies that it is contrary to the moral nature of God for God to provide for humans a *perpetual* state of *extreme* happiness (where 'extreme' names a level of happiness less than supreme) – which surely is also a good. Should we then, those of us convinced by the 'supreme happiness principle,' if we were moderately or very or extremely happy but somehow had it on reliable authority that supreme happiness would never be ours, foment a new version of the problem of evil – with the evil in question being the dreadful fact that something less than supreme happiness was our lot in life? Would it not be bizarre to speak of any problem here as a problem of *evil*? And yet that is what we are committed to do if we accept the idea that anything contrary to the moral character of God introduces a problem of evil.

Notice that God is surely not *obligated* to offer or provide for finite beings the moments of supreme happiness God does in our example provide. It could not even in a *stretched* sense be regarded as *wrong* for God to offer or give finite beings perpetual extreme happiness instead. (If it were, perhaps we could bring the notion of evil in by a side door.) For what God does by providing moments of supreme happiness evidently amounts to an overflowing of

supererogatory goodness. I suggest, therefore, that our example refutes any attempt to link the hiddenness problem to the problem of evil by means of the relation discovered in this section – that both the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil focus on things contrary to the moral character of God.

This conclusion may be resisted, perhaps because the problem of evil is so often framed in terms of the virtue of Divine love that got us started here. I would reply by pointing out that when philosophers speak of love, they usually mean just what falls under the narrower virtue notion of ‘benevolence.’ Few of them seem to know what to do with the idea that love might involve *more* than benevolence, which can operate safely from a distance. And yet it is precisely this ‘more’ – those softer, *relationship*-centred properties which hardnosed analytical philosophers can find uncomfortable and which jar with the picture of a distant Father nurtured by our culture – that I have emphasized in DHHR, and used to frame the hiddenness argument. Again, the Divine Parent’s motivation to make Divine-creature relationship possible includes much more than do the motives to which we appeal when we argue, if we do, that God would be moved to prevent bad things from happening to us. A loving parent does not make relationship with herself possible simply because that would *avoid harm* for them. As Robert Adams has put it: “It is an abuse of the word ‘love’ to say that one *loves* a person, or any other object, if one does not care, except instrumentally, about one’s relation to that object.”¹¹ Thus the hiddenness argument is importantly distinguishable from what is usually discussed under the character trait or virtue of ‘Divine love,’ including what has deliberately been associated with the problem of evil.¹²

Suggested relation # 6: the problem of evil creates the problem of hiddenness.

This tempting suggestion is revealed as false by a little examination. What it means, I suppose, is that the problem of evil makes for the truth of a critical premise of the hiddenness argument, the one saying that there is nonresistant nonbelief. Nonresistant nonbelief is possible *because of* the problem of evil: enough legitimate doubts about the existence of God are created by all the terrible things that happen in the world to make it possible for someone to be in a state of nonbelief without resistance.

But here one wants to raise a question: is it *only* because of the problem of evil that nonresistant nonbelief is made possible? And the answer, clearly, is no. For one thing, if we say otherwise we are conflating nonresistant nonbelief with *conscious, reflective* nonresistant *doubt or disbelief*. We are overintellectualizing, forgetting those important types of nonresistant nonbelief, alluded to earlier, that do not involve reflection and so do not involve reflection on the problem of evil. For another thing, if there were no evil, or no unjustified evil, the possibility of even reflective nonresistant nonbelief might remain because of *other* arguments against the existence of God or because of the apparent failure of arguments *for* the existence of God, as well as the absence in many cases of an experiential confirmation of the existence of God. So any connection here between the problem of evil and the occurrence of nonresistant nonbelief is contingent and limited: certainly it does not warrant saying that the problem of evil creates the problem of hiddenness and hence that the latter is in this way dependent on the former. The continued viability of the argument from evil contributes but modestly to the success of the hiddenness argument, and even should that viability fail, in the absence of some other more positive evidential input, the hiddenness argument would remain forceful.

Suggested relation # 7: both problems are answerable by reference to the same sorts of considerations.

This new relation, if it held, might seem to allow someone to argue that even if the hiddenness problem is logically distinct from the problem of evil in the ways I have said it is, the former problem still lacks any substantial *significance* as a threat to theism by virtue of the fact that relevant counterarguments are clearly of the same sort as are sufficient to deal with evil. If the latter arguments work for evil, should they not be expected to succeed with hiddenness too? As Jonathan Kvanvig puts it: “If we consider the plausible candidates for such delimiting defeaters – the value of freedom, necessity for a greater good, the importance of soul-making, cognitive limitations, and the like – there is no particular reason to think that such responses succeed only for the general problem of evil but not for the specific problem of divine hiddenness.”¹³ And in the same context he suggests that no one has argued that such candidates might be successful in the case of evil but not in the case of hiddenness.

Now, as I have observed in other writing, the last point betrays a most surprising oversight, for the second half of DHHR is really one long string of counterexamples to it.¹⁴ But the central point here must surely be an admonition to look more closely at what we concede if we concede that the hiddenness problem *is* logically distinct from the problem of evil in the ways I have said it is. We need a reminder of the results of previous sections of this paper, where we saw how importantly different is hiddenness or nonresistant nonbelief from the phenomena theists seek to explain when dealing with the problem of evil, and how various are the argument forms by which it can be made to lead to the conclusion of atheism. Anyone who *straightforwardly infers* that the defeaters in question must be successful in the one case if they

are in the other, is still assuming that we are, in talking about hiddenness, basically talking about pain or suffering or about familiar argument forms like that of William Rowe's evidential argument from evil (to which the structure of hiddenness reasoning is sometimes mistakenly assimilated),¹⁵ and thus succeeds in revealing only that she lacks awareness of the true contours of hiddenness argumentation. And anyone who does *not* make this inference, who succeeds in avoiding this error, will be required to plow deeply into the *new* areas of discussion opened up by the hiddenness argument concerning relationship with God and alternative forms of reasoning, which activity brings with it the need for another concession: that we are dealing here with a problem that may well be a threat to theism even if the problem of evil is not.

Suggested relation # 8: evil makes for a much stronger atheistic argument than does hiddenness.

Here is another relation that, if it stands up to scrutiny, might lead us deny the significance of the hiddenness problem – or to judge its relative significance within the overall case for atheism as slight – on the grounds that it is *dwarfed* by the problem of evil. Even those who judge the hiddenness problem to be important can be found making suggestions of this sort. Daniel Howard-Snyder, for example, in his recent article on the hiddenness argument for Macmillan's revised *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, says this: "Evil and suffering are much more powerful evidence than inculpable nonbelief. It is difficult to view inculpable nonbelief as nearly as bad as the horrors of Auschwitz or the suffering caused by the tsunami of December 26, 2004."¹⁶

Unfortunately, the assumption here seems to be that, at least in this context, strength of evidence can be measured along but one dimension: degree of badness. This assumption is false. Horrific suffering is indeed worse than hiddenness (Howard-Snyder appears to acknowledge that

it is difficult to speak of hiddenness as bad at all). But something not at all bad or even good might prove the nonexistence of God if God's existence were incompatible with it, thus representing atheistic evidence as strong as there could be. Recall here the possible atheistic argument from good described near the beginning of this paper. If indeed we had clear information that God necessarily would create a world with a certain good characteristic A, that this rules out God's creating a world with a certain good characteristic B, and that our world has goodness B, we would have a basis from which to mount a 'logical' argument from goodness B to the nonexistence of God and to conclude with the fullest of confidence that God does not exist. Thus the lack of any opportunity of appealing to things horrifying when developing the hiddenness argument does not in any way reveal that argument to be weaker than the argument from evil.

Some might deny the relative significance of the hiddenness problem by maintaining that the factual claims on which it relies – claims about the existence of nonresistant nonbelief – are much less well substantiated than the corresponding claims about evil. Douglas V. Henry airs his worries on this score in a recent contribution to this journal, arguing that even the sort of isolated nontheism mentioned earlier is less than “commonplace.”¹⁷ (Henry thinks – though on tenuous grounds of mostly nineteenth century ethnography – that there is and has been very little such nontheism.) Unfortunately, this is a red herring within the context of hiddenness argumentation. Though it can, I believe, successfully be argued that nonresistant nonbelief *is* commonly encountered in the history of the world,¹⁸ an invitation into this discussion from the critic is only a distraction, since the hiddenness argument needs no premise *saying* that it is. Indeed, even the various types of nonresistant nonbelief may be sparsely represented without depriving the

arguments based on them, which say that God would be opposed to *all* such nonbelief, of the needed factual premises, which assert that there is *some*.

Now Henry apparently thinks such arguments are obviously weak, holding up the example of an experience of nonresistant nonbelief lasting for the rather short period of five minutes as a way of suggesting that “something has gone awry.”¹⁹ But I suspect that here again we are mixing up the hiddenness problem with the problem of evil – we are wondering how *bad* can five minutes of nonbelief be? Perhaps we are also again ignoring how, in making its case ‘from above’, that is, on the basis of general conceptual considerations concerning the connection between Divine love and the availability of a certain kind of relationship (a connection magnified instead of weakened in the case of a *Divine* being with resources to accommodate all the complexities of finite existence),²⁰ the hiddenness argument is drawing attention to neglected *necessary* truths. Perhaps it would also initially seem odd that the occurrence of what would, if it obtained, amount to a *single and tiny* Divine lie with unhappy consequences lasting only five minutes should prove the nonexistence of God. But if it were to be argued that Divine moral perfection precluded it, we would only evince a lack of comprehension were we to stress this point in reply.

It seems, therefore, that no good grounds have been presented for regarding the hiddenness problem as less severe than the problem of evil. Some would indeed regard the hiddenness problem as even *more* severe than the problem of evil, and as capable of generating the *stronger* arguments. Stephen Maitzen, for example, has claimed that at any rate the problem of the *distribution* of nonresistant nonbelief is more severe than any problem of evil, because seemingly intractable even in the face of responses that may defuse the problem of evil

(responses such as the soul-making defense, which apply uniformly or not at all).²¹ Drange has made similar points about his own argument.²² Depending on whether one agrees with suggestions of the sort made by Maitzen as to the reasonable degree of success enjoyed by responses to the problem of evil, one might make a similar point about relative severity on the basis of the investigations of DHHR, which show that responses on offer analogous to the various answers to evil fare rather poorly against the version of the hiddenness problem there developed.

I myself hold that even an *incompatibility* version of the hiddenness argument survives scrutiny, but because I am inclined to say the same about a version of the argument from evil,²³ it is not immediately obvious to me that a stronger claim than one of parity is warranted here. Having said that, as suggested earlier, the incompatibility version of the hiddenness argument, which argues in a perfectly general way, from just any nonresistant nonbelief, is complemented by various quite strong (in one or two cases, apparently equally strong²⁴) independent arguments from *types* of nonresistant nonbelief. Hence, there seems no good reason to suppose that a *weaker* claim than one of parity is warranted either.

The upshot, I suggest, is that although the argument from evil has got used to having the field of engaged atheism – atheism accepting the meaningfulness and coherence of both theistic and atheistic language – pretty much all to itself, it needs to make further room for company! Indeed, I think there are arguments other than just the argument from evil and the hiddenness argument that will grow from this field once it is more diligently cultivated.²⁵ The sooner we open up to this possibility and explore it, the better for religious inquiry.

Suggested relation # 9: a further argument for atheism results when considerations from each of the two problems are brought together.

Finally, I want to mention a possible connection between the two problems that pretty clearly does not seek to defuse either one in any way, but rather asks us to consider a child of their union: an argument *additional* to the argument from evil and the hiddenness argument that results from combining considerations from each in a certain way. I will only mention this possibility here, as I have developed it elsewhere.²⁶ The basic idea is that hiddenness and horrors are often combined in a human life, and that where this is so, the life in question not only illustrates a premise from both existing arguments, but suggests a *new* argument, which has a premise stating that even were God to permit one or other of these phenomena, their conjunction in any individual case would be avoided.

Is this new argument an argument from *evil*? It does appear to be, since it can be seen as focusing on a *type* of horrific suffering – horrific suffering that is experienced by individuals lacking access to any personal God there may be. But even if so, it does not in any way suggest that the hiddenness argument is inadequate on its own. It is put forward not to supplant but to supplement. Thus what we see here, I suggest, is evidence of the *fecundity* of hiddenness considerations rather than evidence of their barrenness or insignificance.

Conclusion

I conclude that although there are various interesting relations between the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil, none suggests that the former lacks relative significance or is subsumable under the latter. Candidate relations seeming to suggest otherwise turn out not to be

genuine relations at all. The hiddenness problem stands on its own two feet, and there is no good reason to suppose that, when stretched to its full height, it will be a threat to theism any less significant than its more gloomy cousin. All things considered, then, the hiddenness problem does indeed deserve the distinctive and careful treatment it is coming to find in philosophy books and classrooms.²⁷

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NOTES

1. I *have* suggested elsewhere that in the broadest sense ‘God is hidden’ is equivalent to a fairly large *disjunction* of claims, each of whose disjuncts is available to hiddenness arguers: see “What the Hiddenness of God Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion,” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 34-35. But here I focus on how the hiddenness argument has in fact been developed, which is with an emphasis on nonbelief of theism.
2. See my *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), Chapter 10.
3. Notice – because it is sometimes ignored – that one finds this last sort of nonresistant nonbelief not only in the early days of evolution or in relatively non-sophisticated forms of religion today. Take, for example, a child in Thailand who grows up to be a Buddhist monk, the content of whose formative teaching and experience and and reflective thought is all such as to emphasize the notions of impermanence and change and the immaturity of grasping at personality-belief. For such an individual the idea of a loving personal God is prevented from

ever really coming into view, much as for many Christians shaped by an evangelical worldview – isolated theists? – the ideas of Buddhism remain alien.

4. And no doubt there are other facts about nonresistant nonbelief from which one might argue not reducible to facts about types, such as the fact about the *distribution* of nonresistant nonbelief to which Steve Maitzen appeals in his interesting version of the hiddenness argument. See Stephen Maitzen, “Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism,” *Religious Studies* 42 (2006), 177-191.

5. I will return to this point when we come to the matter of relative significance.

6. See Douglas V. Henry, “Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?,” *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), 75-92 and Robert T. Lehe, “A Response to the Argument from the Reasonableness of Nonbelief,” *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004), 159-174. See also J. L. Schellenberg, “On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love: Replies to Henry and Lehe,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), 330-342. In a recent rejoinder, “Reasonable Doubts about Reasonable Nonbelief,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), 276-289, Henry no longer speaks of suffering doubt, but continues to refer to nonresistant nonbelief as “evil.” And he characterizes the emphasis of my reply on nonresistant nonbelief in general as a “retreat” (278) and as a “widening” (283) for dialectical purposes, instead of recognizing that the prevention of *all* nonresistant nonbelief by a loving God is, and has been from the beginning, an integral part of the general hiddenness argument.

7. This assessment is supported by the arguments of those who recently have felt it easy to allow that *even were all evil to be removed*, finite creatures might still wonder why they are left in a state of nonresistant nonbelief (or some relevantly similar state). Nonresistant nonbelief can only be thought of as *remaining* in such a scenario if it is not thought of as evil. See Daniel Howard-

Snyder, “The Hiddenness of God,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. Donald Borchert (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 352 and Peter van Inwagen, “What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?”, in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 25-26.

8. Not only might someone say this, a referee for this paper *did* say it. I thank him for thus provoking some additional thinking.

9. See Theodore M. Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 49.

10. There is the possibility of an important confusion here, exemplified by those who wonder why I would put forward my argument from nonresistant nonbelief when it is obvious that God can be revealed to all of us in a happy afterlife and can be good to us even now in ways not involving self-revelation. The wonderment here depends on supposing that I am saying there is something deeply *bad* about a life even temporarily bereft of conscious acquaintance with God. And this is not what I am saying. Rather, I am appealing, again, to facts about love, which by its very nature opens itself to relationship with those loved.

11. Robert Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 188.

12. The material of this and the previous section is relevant to the arguments of Jonathan L. Kvanvig (“Divine Hiddenness: What is the Problem?”, in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 160), who suggests in related ways that the hiddenness problem can be assimilated to the problem of evil. His arguments on this score are more directly examined and found wanting in my paper “The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I),” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 209-211.

13. “Divine Hiddenness: What is the Problem?”, 162

14. Another writer making the relevant distinction but overlooked by Kvanvig is Drange: see his *Nonbelief and Evil*, 286-291. More recently, Maitzen has defended the distinction. See his “Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism,” 187-189.
15. See, for example, Daniel Howard-Snyder’s assimilation of my argument form to Rowe’s in his “The Argument from Divine Hiddenness,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), 433-453 and also my answer to him in the same issue of that journal.
16. See Howard-Snyder, “The Hiddenness of God,” 352.
17. See Henry, “Reasonable Doubts,” 279.
18. For some interesting arguments, examples, and references bearing on this point, see Maitzen, “Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism.” Remember also the example of the Thai monk from n. 3, which should bring to mind parallels in various times and places.
19. Henry, “Reasonable Doubts,” 282.
20. Though of course the finite beings who exist if God exists need not be *we ourselves*, the human beings who actually exist. Henry seems mistakenly to suppose otherwise – see “Reasonable Doubts,” 282. He also takes my reference to an approach ‘from above’ to be laying claim to a capacity to see things as God would see them, “from the divine perspective” (281). This he rightly regards as somewhat less than humble! But what we have here is only a straw person. What I really mean is indicated in the text – and also in the text to which he is seeking to formulate a rejoinder.
21. See Maitzen, “Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism.”
22. See his *Nonbelief and Evil*, 286-292.
23. See my *The Wisdom to Doubt*, Chapter 11.
24. On this see *The Wisdom to Doubt*, Chapter 10.

25. For examples of such additional arguments, see *The Wisdom to Doubt*, Chapters 12 and 13.

26. See *The Wisdom to Doubt*, Chapter 13, section 3. Howard-Snyder, in his encyclopedia article, mentions a closely related possibility.

27. This paper has benefitted from the comments of participants in a conference on Divine hiddenness at the University of Colorado (Boulder) and also the Editor of this journal and two anonymous referees. My thanks to all.