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The Problems of Divine Hiddenness and Divine Inscrutability

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Theism is held captive between two problems, as Odysseus was between Scylla and Charybdis, without a plausible route through the middle. In this section I discuss two families of arguments: (i) the *problem of divine hiddenness* (PDH) and (ii) the *problem of divine inscrutability* (PDI). The PDH claims that empirical facts concerning nontheists provide evidence for God's nonexistence, whereas the PDI claims that our difficulty in knowing anything about God provides reason to withhold belief in God. To explicate the PDH, I begin by summarizing three versions of the argument (provided by J. L. Schellenberg (1993), Stephen Maitzen (2006), and Jason Marsh (2013) [DJL2]). I then distinguish the PDH from the problem of evil and consider some objections. Having done so, I catalogue the varieties of nonbelief. As I show, a tempting solution to the PDH leads to the PDI.

The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

Divine hiddenness traditionally referred to God's silence or absence from the lives of many. The theme is old in theological literature. The Psalmist complains that God has hid His face from us (Ps. 88:14). In Isaiah 45:15, we read, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." Others have felt that God's absence poses a threat to their faith or to their sense of existential purpose. A son of Holocaust survivors says of his mother, "she told me when she's called before God in final judgment, she will…demand to know why he stood by silently…as her large family was being destroyed" ("Holocaust Survivors" 2001). Upon visiting Auschwitz,

Pope Benedict XVI stated, "In a place like this, words fail. In the end, there can only be a dread silence—a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent?" (Whitlock 2006).

Beginning with J. L. Schellenberg's *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993) and continuing with his subsequent works (2010, 2015, 2017a, 2017b), the term divine hiddenness has taken on a different meaning in a family of arguments for atheism. According to the PDH, empirically observed features of (dis)belief in God's existence undermine the hypothesis that any such being exists (see Drange 1993, 1998; Maitzen 2006; Marsh 2013; Howard-Snyder 2006; Howard-Snyder and Green 2016; De Cruz 2015). Schellenberg's most recent version (2015, 2017a, 2017b) proceeds:

(1) If God exists, there are no nonresistant nonbelievers.

(2) There are nonresistant nonbelievers.

(3) So, God does not exist.

Why should we think (1) is true? God would be open to and desirous of personal, loving relationships with her creatures. Though some humans may resist relationship, God would never close herself off from relationship. The belief that God exists is prerequisite to loving relationship with God. So, if God exists, everyone who is open to relationship would believe that God exists. Premise (2) is an empirical observation.

Stephen Maitzen (2006) argues that the geographic distribution of nonbelief is surprising on theism but not surprising on naturalism. On naturalism, theistic belief is explained as a cultural product without supernatural intervention, predicting that theistic belief varies with the cultural forces postulated by the social sciences. Theism, however,

needs to explain away nonbelief; typical theistic explanatory strategies are implausible. Some argue that nonbelievers might not be ready for a relationship with God. Compare two groups of people, Danes and Texans: one study reported that 80 percent of Danes are nonbelievers (Zuckerman 2007), while a study of religiosity in Texas found that only 5 percent are nonbelievers (agnostics and atheists combined; Pew Research Center 2014). Danes do not seem less prepared than Texans for loving relationship with God. Other theists concede that nonbelievers would accept God's existence if God's existence were apparent, but would believe for reasons contrary to loving relationship. Again, the right reasons seem equally available to Texans and Danes. Still others propose that the judgment of nonbelievers is clouded by sin, disabling nonbelievers from seeing the clear truth of theism. But Danes are no more sinful than Texans.

Jason Marsh (2013) argues that the evolutionary and historical development of theistic belief seems incompatible with theism. The cognitive and social sciences have significant success in providing a naturalistic explanation for the development of theistic belief. Though religion has been commonplace throughout human history, theistic belief was not. Ancestor worship, animism, polytheism, and henotheism preceded theism. The cognitive capacities that gave rise to supernatural beliefs are not particularly conducive to theism, as evidenced by the late arrival of theistic belief in our evolutionary history. Again, if God exists, God is open to and desires loving relationship; the unavailability of the concept of God would undermine God's desires and purposes. The earliest populations of humans were probably not more resistant to or less in need of relationship with God. But if they were, why would God bring about a state of affairs in which her creatures were resistant,

unprepared for relationship, or sinful? God could have created humans in a state similar to that of medieval Europe, when, apparently, most humans fulfilled the prerequisites for belief in God.

The PDH and the Problem of Evil

To complete my discussion of the PDH, I turn to distinguishing the PDH from the problem of evil (POE). To be sure, a version of the POE could be constructed based on some facts appealed to by friends of the PDH. Various goods accrue from relationship with God. Individuals in loving relationship come to share their moral evaluations; relating to God would allow one to grow in virtue, come into one's greatest fulfillment, and understand one's purpose. One would understand God as a moral exemplar and follow God's example in living one's life. Nonresistant nonbelievers are (apparently) deprived of great goods for no compelling reason, perhaps undermining God's perfect justness and goodness.

Nonetheless, whether divine hiddenness is an evil is tangential to the PDH. The PDH concerns divine love and not God's opposition to badness or desire for goodness (Schellenberg 2017a). Those who enter into loving relationships do so because they value relationship for its own sake and not because the beloved's well-being improves in virtue of the relationship (though that may be the case) (Schellenberg 2015, 43). God would seek loving relationship regardless of whether loving relationship promoted well-being. Peter van Inwagen (2002) provides a useful thought experiment. Consider a possible world where all existent evils can be plausibly explained. Some people, though not resistant to relationship with God, find themselves unable to believe God exists. One day, they realize their

nonbelief is itself evidence for God's nonexistence—that is, they have formulated Schellenberg's argument without reflecting on evil.

While the PDH is distinct from the POE, the POE bolsters the case for the PDH. Loving parents sometimes inflict justified suffering on their children that the children do not understand, as when a child requires a painful life-saving medical procedure. Even though God's reasons may not be epistemically available to us, God might possess sufficient reason for all observed suffering. Still, loving parents are present with and reassure their children. Parents who neglect suffering children are not loving parents. Many people who suffer are unable to believe God exists, even though they desperately desire to believe. Others suffer but live in contexts in which theism is conceptually unavailable.

Some Possible Objections

Schellenberg's, Maitzen's, and Marsh's versions of the PDH assumed God would desire and be open to loving relationships. But perhaps God would desire and be open to loving relationships only with some select group of people and unconcerned for others. Schellenberg replies that God is defined as a perfect person—a person such that none more perfect can be conceived (2015, 96–97). A perfectly loving person is more perfect than a person who either loves imperfectly or fails to love at all. Therefore, God is perfectly loving. Human beings are sometimes blocked from relationship because they have finite resources. For example, time spent with one person might conflict with time spent with another. But God has unlimited resources. Nothing blocks God from relationship with nonresistant persons. Moreover, being perfectly loving involves seeking, and openness to, relationship for

its own sake. Thus, if God exists, God seeks and is open to loving relationship with all her children.

Others might object that most people have had a general belief in divine beings, so that most people have had relationships with God. To the contrary, theism was not the inevitable consequence of our cognitive architecture. The cognitive machinery historically responsible for the development of supernatural beliefs involved our agent detection capacities, our tendencies toward anthropomorphism, and so on—none of these fine-tuned for theism. As Marsh argues, our ancestors came to theism late in human evolution and largely by happenstance. Also see the argument presented in Linford and Megill (forthcoming).

Perhaps we were wrong to have supposed that loving relationship requires one to consciously acknowledge the beloved. If loving relationship does not require conscious acknowledgment of the beloved, then, contrary to appearances, nonresistant nonbelievers might be in loving relationship with God. For example, if God is numerically identical with the Good, and nonresistant nonbelievers love the Good, perhaps we should understand them to love God. This is implausible. Consider the following state of affairs. Pam tells us Roy loves her. Prima facie, we have reason to believe Pam. Nonetheless, we have reason to revise our belief if we learn that Pam is radically mistaken about Roy's identity. Roy does not exist; the man with whom Pam has a relationship is Jim. When asked to describe the man Pam takes to be Roy, Pam does not accurately describe Jim's attributes and cannot describe what Jim looks like. Suppose we learn Jim has somehow orchestrated Pam's confusion. We would rightfully say this state of affairs is conceptually incompatible with loving relationship.

Nonresistant nonbelievers include ancient polytheists. According to the objection under consideration, ancient polytheists loved God under another name. But, if ancient polytheists did love God under another name, ancient polytheists were wrong about whom they claimed to love, wrong about the attributes of whom they loved, and wrongly depicted God in their artwork.

Consider the plausible principle that someone who loves me would not bring about a state of affairs in which I predictably relate to them inappropriately, especially when the inappropriate ways of relating are costly. Ancient ways of relating to the divine typically involved practices now understood as costly or theologically inappropriate, such as the offering of human or animal sacrifices or the conception of the divine as male or monarchical. The latter is theologically inappropriate because the latter assumes a political ideology no longer considered just (monarchism) together with gender essentialist assumptions (God as male), while simultaneously costly because conceiving of God as a male monarch potentially legitimates unjust patriarchal political systems (see, for example, Marcus Borg's discussion of patriarchal images of God in his 1997: 64–71, 73). Further examples are offered in (Linford and Megill Forthcoming). If God exists, God providentially ensured the conditions antecedent to the historical development of religion, and therefore ensured that most people would relate inappropriately, and in costly ways, to God. None of this is compatible with God's love.

Cataloging Varieties of Nonbelief

Having explained some initial objections to the PDH, I proceed to catalogue varieties of nonbelief. To enter relationship with God, there must exist some finite sequence of steps an agent A could perform that, if God were open to and desired relationship, would culminate with A's loving relationship with God. Call the state of affairs in which there exists such a sequence *unblocked* and in which there is no such sequence *blocked.*

Blocking factors can be organized into cognitive and sociological categories. A's relationship with God may be cognitively blocked in the first sense (CB1) if (i) relationship with God is possible but (ii) A's cognitive capacities hinder relationship with God. A's relationship with God may be cognitively blocked in the second sense (CB2) if no possible finite cognitive capacity would have enabled relationship with God. In contrast, *sociological blocking factors* originate with one's sociological context (encompassing the cultural, geographic, and/or temporal context). There are sociological blocking factors in the first sense (SB1): (i) relationship with God is possible but (ii) A's sociological context hinders relationship with God. There are also sociological blocking factors in the second sense (SB2): no possible sociological context would enable relationship with God. The relationship between cognitive and sociological blocking factors is complex, depending on, for example, the intertheoretic relationships between the cognitive and social sciences.

Examples of cognitive blocking factors.

CB2, the category of cognitive blocking factors in which no possible finite sequence of steps would enable relationship with God, include instances in which God's characteristics disable humans from forming relationship with God. For example, no finite person could literally

love God if God is too incomprehensible. By contrast, instances of CB1, the category of cognitive blocking factors in which one is merely hindered from forming relationship with God, have to do with contingent characteristics of human psychology. On contemporary psychological theory, the capacity for theory of mind should co-vary with theistic belief; indeed, autistic individuals are observed to endorse theistic beliefs at a reduced frequency as compared with nonautistic individuals (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2009; Gervais 2013, 18; Norenzayan et al. 2012; De Cruz 2015, 57–58). Or consider that some Christian theologies have supposed moral conscience to play an important role in religious conversion. Many Christians suppose that instances of nonbelief are explained by immorality. In light of the global/temporal distributions of belief, immorality is a bad explanation for all instances of disbelief (should we really believe that Danes are more immoral than Texans?). But perhaps immorality can explain some instances of nonbelief. Moral behavior plausibly requires particular cognitive mechanisms. As a result of their neuroanatomy, psychopaths have a reduced capacity for moral conscience and for recognizing their moral failings. Therefore, some individuals may be cognitively disadvantaged in their ability to come into relationship with God. Additionally, many theists argue that moral facts provide evidence for theism. Insofar as psychopaths do not recognize moral facts, they may be unable to recognize an important argument for theism (Wielenberg 2008, 80–82). So, some persons may be disadvantaged from coming into relationship with God because they are cognitively unable to recognize evidence for God (Megill and Linford 2017, 8–9).

Others may be exposed to such tremendous pain, suffering, and misery that their lives no longer seem worth living; they may be psychologically unable to believe God exists,

because they have an incorrigible conviction that their lives are purposeless and that God would not produce purposeless lives. (For an argument that God would not bring about purposeless lives, see Megill and Linford 2016.) Or they may be psychologically unable to form a relationship with God, because, though they believe God exists, they cannot come to see God as having more than an instrumental purpose for their lives. Others may have been horrifically abused by religious officials, or aware of the history of religious violence, and this may psychologically disable theistic belief. For some abuse victims, participation in spiritual activities diminishes their well-being, which might foreclose relationship with God. For example, an individual who was victimized by a Catholic priest explained that they cannot hear the word 'God' without thinking of the abuse that they suffered (Yan 2018). Traditional theologies have asserted the importance of participation in religious community for relationship with God. Again, participation in religious communities might be a nonoption for some abuse victims.

Examples of sociological blocking factors.

Having offered examples of cognitive blocking factors, I move to offering examples of sociological blocking factors. Instances of SB1, in which one's sociological context hinders relationship with God, include the cultural unavailability of theistic belief. Agents may be born before the advent of theistic belief. Agents may, through no fault of their own, live in societies where theistic belief is forbidden; alternatively, if relationship with God requires the enactment of particular rituals (e.g., prayer), such relationships would not be possible if the particular rituals are culturally impermissible. For others, though theistic belief is culturally

available, relationship with God might not be culturally available. Some cultures have understood the gods to be morally undesirable or some gods as malevolent. If the gods are morally undesirable, or if anger toward the gods is permissible, some may be unable to enter loving relationship with God.

Alan Kors (1990) argues that early modern European atheism originated with orthodox theology's endeavor to determine the best argument(s) for God's existence. Finding that no argument could withstand scrutiny, orthodox theology's endeavor to come to know God led into (perhaps culminated with) atheism. The history of science offers a similar lesson. There is no a priori reason for science's present secularism. First, according to broad consensus in philosophy of science and religious studies, the terms *science* and *religion* do not carve nature at the joints (Laudan 1983; Fitzgerald 2000; Cavanaugh 2009), undermining any a priori argument for their categorical distinctiveness. Second, according to historiographical consensus, the historical science/religion relationship is complex (Brooke 1991), not mutually supportive or combative. Past science invoked supernatural hypotheses to explain natural phenomena and sometimes succeeded— for example, Maupertuis developed the principle of least action on theological grounds. Research focused on the religious or supernatural was pursued in physics (in early modernity), biology (Kitcher 1993, 13–18), geology (Kitcher 2007, 25–42), archaeology (Davis 2004), and psychology (Alcock 1987), but such programs degenerated. Science secularized because religious or supernatural hypotheses bore less empirical fruit than their naturalistic rivals (Papineau 2000, 2016; Boudry 2009). Those standing on the shoulders of their informed,

cultural forebears may be rationally led to doubt. And those doubts may block relationship with God.

Synthesis.

Schellenberg's focus on nonresistant nonbelievers sells the evidence short. Many blocking factors produce individuals who are resistant to theistic belief but whose disbelief intuitively undermines theism (also see Linford and Megill Forthcoming). The examples for CB1/SB1 describe the way people have been contingently organized/situated; God could have done things differently. Consider the individuals who incorrigibly disbelieve because they were abused by religious officials. Abuse victims do not choose to be abused, so their resistance is not the result of their free choice. Nor is the victim's disbelief the consequence of the victim's wrongdoing. The victim suffers the consequence, while the abuser may continue in the abuser's relationship with God.

Why would God produce states of affairs of that kind in the first place? Theology offers traditional answers but was constructed to reconcile theism with the world. As philosophers, we should instead ask what we would expect if theism were true. God could have created us so that, even if we were abused, we would not lose our capacity for theistic belief. Similar stories can be told for each instance of CB1/SB1: for example, God could have ensured that individuals with diminished theory of mind would not be diminished in their capacity to form relationships with God. Or, by organizing the world in other ways, God could have ensured that the trajectory of scientific inquiry did not lead away from her.

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The Problem of Divine Inscrutability

We've been supposing that we understand enough about God to understand consequences of God's love. Theists may invoke God's inscrutability to reject this supposition. God's love is distinct from creaturely love and may find expression in unpredictable ways. Perhaps we cannot see how, for example, the nonbelief of those who are abused or have diminished theory of mind is compatible with God's love. That's to be expected if we cannot generally understand the consequences of God's love. Perhaps God's inscrutability doomed the early modern quest for arguments establishing theism and similarly doomed theistic research programs. Some cultures may have radically misapprehended God, but radical misapprehensions of God are to be expected if God is inscrutable. Nonetheless, in alleviating the PDH, the theist has turned from Scylla to Charybdis. God's inscrutability generates a new family of arguments.

According to the *problem of divine inscrutability* (PDI), God's transcendent nature undermines theistic belief. Many traditional theologies understand God to transcend the cognitive capacities, conceptions, and vocabularies humans ordinarily employ. Three problems follow. First, if God sufficiently exceeds our cognitive abilities, the theist's God-beliefs were acquired through unreliable belief-forming mechanisms. We have reason to suspend beliefs we discover we acquired via unreliable mechanisms. Hence, if God does sufficiently exceed our cognitive abilities, we have reason to suspend our God-beliefs. Second, if God sufficiently exceeds our conceptions/vocabulary, we cannot grasp what we mean when we talk about God. If so, we have no reason to think God exists and we ought to suspend judgment. Third, we turned to inscrutability in part because of the (apparent)

failure of the historical search for arguments establishing theism or of theistic research programs. If God is inscrutable, both are doomed. No amount of future inquiry would establish theism. But if so, there can be no rational grounds on which to believe theism.

The theist may seek a moderate position requiring only that facts pertaining to God's love are inscrutable. Skeptical theists assert that there are many facts pertinent to loving relationship that are known only to God. We are not epistemically positioned to judge that what we observe is incompatible with God's love. Consequently, we are not epistemically positioned to know whether the PDH succeeds (McBrayer and Swenson 2012).

Here are three responses. First, as the skeptical theist agrees, in order for God's love to comport with observation, we would have to be sufficiently ignorant of the facts pertaining to God's love. But then why do we say God is loving? We couldn't say that God is loving based on any empirical observation because that would require knowing what sort of empirical observations are consistent with God's love. To be sure, Schellenberg argues that God is loving because God is defined as a perfect being. Nonetheless, we can hypothesize a less-than-perfect ultimate person who doesn't love. No empirical evidence could decide between the two hypotheses. The only philosophical argument that could distinguish them—the ontological argument—is largely regarded as unsuccessful.

Second, if God's love is compatible with most cultures remaining radically mistaken about God—as the skeptical theist maintains—why should theists think their own religious tradition accurately describes God? On skeptical theism (discussed further below), we couldn't be epistemically positioned to judge.

Third, to justify a substantive religious life, theists require a conception of the facts pertinent to divine love sufficiently robust to explain our God-given purpose and obligations. But such conceptions undermine skeptical theism.

On one end of a spectrum, we find anthropomorphic conceptions of God susceptible to the PDH. In the other direction, God is increasingly incomprehensible. The more incomprehensible God is, the more incomprehensible God's love, and so the less susceptible to the PDH. But the greater the divine's inscrutability, the more theism faces the PDI.

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