

## **BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES**

### **VERONIKA WEIDNER**

*Ludwig Maximilians University Munich*

Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018, 224 pp.

Michael C. Rea's Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews in 2017 flowed into his comprehensive, thought-provoking monograph "The Hiddenness of God" published by OUP in 2018. In this review, I first wish to give an outline of the book's composition and main claims. Second, I very briefly highlight what I especially value about Rea's book, and third I enclose a selection of critical queries.

1. Among the multifaceted claims contained in this book is standing out Rea's view that he has solved the hiddenness problem, not only the one purported by John L. Schellenberg et al., and that he has shown that the latter's hiddenness argument is unsound due to the falseness of some of its premises. Within the framework of analytic theology, Rea is explicit about arguing from a Christian point of view which draws inspiration from the sources of this tradition's history and its theology as well as spirituality.

In ch. 1, Rea sketches the structure of his book and how he plans to unfold its central theme that the hiddenness argument, especially Schellenberg's version of it, rather than questioning the existence of God, instead raises questions about an appropriate concept of the nature of God. In particular, Rea argues that the argument relies upon some ill-founded implications of divine love and disputable conditions regarding what is necessary for a divine-human relationship.

Ch. 2 explicates, first, what the term divine hiddenness may denote. According to Rea, in theological discourse it mainly refers to the essence of God which is characterised by its transcendence or rather intrinsic incomprehensibility in epistemological terms, and, in (religiously) experiential terms, the term also refers to the presence of God which believers claim to be perceivable and available only in a limited way. In addition to that, recent defenders of the hiddenness argument are introduced as relating to a "doxastic (belief-oriented) aspect" (p. 15) of divine hiddenness consisting roughly in the fact that some lack belief that God exists. Second, Rea aims at solving two versions of the hiddenness problem according to which the existence of a perfectly loving God is coherent with the phenomenon of divine hiddenness neither in experiential terms nor in doxastic terms (as put forward by Schellenberg et al.). Concerning the other well-known problem challenging theism, third, Rea asserts that "the problem of divine hiddenness, like the problem of evil, is fundamentally a problem of violated expectations" (p. 25). In the case of the problem of divine hiddenness, a perfectly loving God is not expected to allow divine hiddenness in experiential or doxastic terms to obtain.

In ch. 3-5, the first part of Rea's solution to the hiddenness problem is presented which consists in arguing that the alleged expectations a perfectly loving God is held to be violating are not justified. Ch. 3 elucidates that according to scripture and tradition, God is portrayed not only as being a perfectly good and loving divine person, but also as being transcendent regarding God's alterity in e.g. ontological terms and God's epistemic unknowability. In ch. 4 Rea explains why divine transcendence is neither to be understood in its darkest sense involving, *inter alia*, the view that no theological claims are literally true nor in its lightest sense implying that at least many theological claims, e.g. those about God's

attributes which may be derived from philosophical reflection alone, are literally true. Instead, divine transcendence on Rea's account roughly implies that theological claims about e.g. the attribute of divine love need to be derived from divine revelation in order to be literally true, otherwise they are analogically true at best. In other words, given God's transcendence conceptual claims about divine love should not be defended only by way of reflecting on what is involved in ideal human love and then concluding that this, at a minimum, is literally true of divine love. Rea concludes that, since the aforementioned alleged expectations a perfectly loving God is held to be violating are claimed to be literally true but brought up through philosophical reflection which is not based on divine revelation, the expectations are not justified. In ch. 5, an additional reason why these expectations are not justified is presented, namely that even a perfectly loving God may not desire the good of human beings in an unlimited way or desire union with human beings in an unlimited way but might instead desire the good of God in an unlimited way and desire union within divine Trinity in an unlimited way. And so, Rea in fact argues in these chapters that premise S1 of the hiddenness argument (p. 21) according to which a perfectly loving God is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person is left unsubstantiated.

In ch. 6-9, Rea presents the second part of his solution to the hiddenness problem. He explains why, from a Christian stance, it is apt to maintain that God is perfectly loving towards human beings, so that the traditional, mainly positively connoted analogies describing God as e.g. caring parent or devoted spouse are better characterisations of divine love than the negatively connoted analogies entertained by proponents of the hiddenness argument depicting God as e.g. a ghosting spouse or negligent parent. Ch. 6 and 7 entail an account of religious experience according to which God's loving presence, in a wide variety of ways, is available to all those evincing a concept of God and not being in a conflicted relationship with God, thus allowing them to enter a personal relationship with God. Briefly, taking oneself to experience a divine encounter involves experiencing stimuli in the form of natural phenomena, is impacted by one's own cognition, and is a kind of learnable skill. In ch. 8, Rea argues that also those evincing a concept of God but having a conflicted relationship with God (as e.g. Job or the nation of Israel as described in the book of Lamentations) are in a position to personally relate to God. Ch. 9 entails the view that even those who lack a concept of God and have a conflicted relationship with God are nevertheless able to participate in a personal relationship with God just by trying to do so. And so, Rea in fact argues in these chapters that premise S2 of the hiddenness argument (p. 22) is false according to which no finite person will nonresistantly lack belief that God exists due to a lack of e.g. experiential evidence in form of a religious experience, thus not allowing that finite person to personally relate to God, even if a perfectly loving God as described by the hiddenness argument exists.

2. As I see it, Rea's core achievement is that he explicitly addresses the problem of divine hiddenness as a set of many subsets, reframes several parameters of the analytic hiddenness debate so far by vigorously challenging certain background theses in an extensive way, and thereby apparently lifts the debate to a new level of argumentation. So, for example, Rea broaches the issue of what might count as an adequate theistic concept of God, offers a sophisticated, precise account of religious experience including a broad class of candidates of also rather low-key "*garden-variety divine encounters*" (p. 115), and includes inspiring meta-considerations about what might characterise philosophical theology (or rather theological philosophy) and how it might work. In a way, one gets the impression that Rea seeks to re-own the topic of divine hiddenness and deal with it also on theological rather than only on philosophical grounds-given that talk about the hiddenness of God grew out of theological literature and that certain expectations on God as depicted by Christian theism are at stake, it would, indeed, sound sensible to at least consult the sources of theology in this debate.

3. Nonetheless, I am wondering whether it would not have been beneficial to hint at the non-literal use of the term divine hiddenness entertained by Schellenberg which unavoidably caused some misunderstanding in the debate. Moreover, Rea's choice of terms in his distinction between divine hiddenness in an experiential and doxastic sense might make the impression that the difference between these two phenomena is bigger than it actually is. At least on Schellenberg's preferred defense of the latter phenomenon, both may entail a lack of experiential evidence in form of a religious experience, whereas the per-

sons concerned by the former phenomenon already believe that God exists, and the persons concerned by the latter phenomenon lack belief that God exists.

Apart from this linguistic query, I am not quite sure if what Rea depicts as divine hiddenness in a doxastic sense fully captures Schellenberg's intent. Rea states that both nonresistant nonbelief and reasonable (inculpably held) nonbelief do not obtain, whereas mere lack of belief due to someone's inconclusive evidence for God's existence, even if this evidence is seen by her to at least weakly support belief that God exists, occurs. Regarding Rea's definition of the latter kind of nonbelief and its even-if clause, at least Schellenberg would say that, roughly, if one's evidence already weakly supports belief in God, whether or not one is aware of it, then one believes in God (even though weakly), so that what is described here is actually not nonbelief in Schellenberg's eyes. But then, given this definition, I cannot see how Rea's affirmation that divine hiddenness in doxastic terms as defended by Schellenberg occurs is warranted, and why there would be a hiddenness problem of the Schellenberg sort which needs to be addressed. Setting this even-if clause aside, what seems to be crucial at least about Schellenberg's notion of a nonbeliever is that she does not reject a personal relationship with God by any means, but I cannot see how this point is captured in the respective definition. If I am right on this, then, again, the kind of hiddenness claimed to obtain here is not the one Schellenberg refers to as obtaining. But that could also possibly mean that, in Rea's view, the kind of nonbelief which is claimed to occur or have been occurring in the hiddenness argument's premise S4 (p. 22) is a nonstarter or rather that the premise is simply false, thus rendering the argument to be unsound, too.

Finally, I may add that it remains unclear to me which positive doxastic attitude towards the truth of the proposition that God exists save belief is required on Rea's account of religious experience. And I would be very curious to learn whether Rea thinks that lack of belief in God's existence is, loosely speaking, a good or bad thing, and thus whether this problem of divine hiddenness is an instance of the problem of evil or not.

It is beyond doubt that Rea needs to be thanked for this compelling and controversial book which I dare say is a genuine enrichment of the hiddenness debate. It seems as if Rea wishes to turn things upside down in this debate. That is, Rea may be said to claim that the hiddenness argument is anti-theistic insofar as it helps seeing an, in his view, inadequately conceived theism which is its target, or rather that the hiddenness argument is even pro-theistic insofar as it helps rediscovering an, in his view, adequately conceived theism.