

Divine Hiddenness is Costly for Atheists

Perry Hendricks

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Penultimate Draft

Abstract: I've argued that those who endorse the argument from divine hiddenness must give up all pure *de jure* objections to theism, and this means that endorsing the argument is *costly* for atheists. Benjamin Curtis claims that this isn't a significant cost for atheists. I show that—contrary to Curtis—there is a significant cost, and spell out why this is so. Furthermore, I show that my argument functions as a new argument for affirming reformed epistemology—the view that if theism is true, belief in God is probably rational.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; *de jure* objections, theism, God

1. The Argument from Divine Hiddenness

Say that theism is the view that God exists and that atheism is the view that God doesn't exist. And say that a *pure de jure* objection to theism is an objection that claims that *whether or not* God exists, belief in God is irrational. Finally, say that an *impure de jure* objection to theism *depends* on an objection to the truth of theism (i.e. a *de facto* objection). That is, an *impure de jure* objection to theism assumes (or assumes the success of an argument for thinking that) theism is (at least probably) false. The argument from divine hiddenness (a *de facto* objection to theism) claims that the probability of there being non-resistant non-believers—people who do not actively believe God exists and are not resistant to believing in God—given theism is *lower* than the probability of there being non-resistant non-believers given atheism, or $\text{Pr}(\text{non-resistant non-belief/theism}) > \text{Pr}(\text{non-resistant non-belief/atheism})$. And since there are non-resistant

non-believers, we have (at least) some evidence against theism and for atheism.¹ In a recent piece (Hendricks 2021), I argued that if one endorses the argument from divine hiddenness, she's committed to the view that *if* God exists, then belief in God is probably rational. This is because the argument from divine hiddenness relies on the following assumption:

(H) God probably would either (a) directly cause (among the non-resistant) belief in him or (b) provide the non-resistant with an ability to form beliefs about him.

And (H) entails the following proposition:

(P) If God exists, then theistic belief is probably formed by properly functioning, reliable faculties.²

However, to admit (P) is to admit that if theism is true, then belief in God is probably rational.³ And this, I claimed, is *costly* for atheists: it means that they must give up all pure *de jure* objections to theism. This is because if (P) is true, it *by definition* eliminates all pure *de jure* objections to theism, since pure *de jure* objections to theism claim that whether or not theism is true, belief in God is irrational. But this explicitly conflicts with (P), which entails that if theism is true, then belief in God is probably rational. (Indeed, in effect, this means that those who

¹ See e.g. Schellenberg (2015) for an influential statement of the argument. For evidential versions of the argument that are far more plausible, see e.g. Anderson (2021), Leon in Rasmussen and Leon (2019), Maitzen (2006), and Oppy (2013).

² Since Curtis (2021) doesn't contest the inference from (H) to (P), I won't rehash my argument here.

³ In my (2021) piece, I assume an externalist epistemological framework.

endorse the argument from divine hiddenness must also endorse *reformed epistemology*, which is (roughly) the view that if theism is true, then belief in God is probably rational. More on this below in Section 4.)⁴

2. The Hendricks-Curtis Dispute

Benjamin Curtis (2021) has responded to my argument, claiming that accepting the argument from divine hiddenness isn't as costly as I say it is.⁵ He says that my argument

allows that an atheist can accept that God does not exist on the basis of the divine hiddenness objection *and* that belief in God is irrational on the basis of an independent argument that purports to show that this is so... That is, nothing Hendricks says shows that an atheist who endorses the divine hiddenness objection must *reject the soundness* of any argument for the conclusion that belief in God is irrational. All that he in fact shows is that such an atheist must take any such argument to *also* establish that God does not exist, and so *cannot consider the argument to be a de jure* objection, given the definition he lays down. But this is a very weak sense indeed of what it is to 'do away with', 'eliminate' or 'reject' an argument. (2021: 403)

In effect, Curtis claims that one can endorse the argument from divine hiddenness and then go on to argue that, because of the success of this argument, belief in God is irrational. This is an example of an impure *de jure* objection. And we can do this with any other argument against

⁴ For a discussion of recent developments in reformed epistemology, see Moon (2016).

⁵ For a different response to my argument, see Hill and Leon (forthcoming).

theism—any *de facto* objection to theism will furnish us with the tools for an impure *de jure* objection to theism. And—Curtis thinks—giving up only pure *de jure* objections to theism isn't costly—maybe it would be costly for atheists to give up both pure and impure *de jure* objections to theism, but that's not what I argued. So, economically conservative atheists need not balk at the cost of the argument from divine hiddenness.

3. Divine Hiddenness *is* Costly for Atheists

Say that a position is *epistemically privileged* if and only if its negation is irrational *whether or not* it's true. For example, if $\sim X$ is irrational whether or not it's true, then X is epistemically privileged—it's the only rational option with respect to the question of X , and this is the case whether or not X is actually true. Now, recall that my point is that if one accepts the argument from divine hiddenness, she cannot make a pure *de jure* objection to theism: she cannot claim that, whether or not theism is true, belief in God is probably irrational—(P) rules this out *by definition*. As Curtis points out, this leaves intact impure *de jure* objections to theism. And so, Curtis says, endorsing the divine hiddenness argument isn't costly for atheists. But given the notion of epistemic privilege, it should be clear that giving up pure *de jure* objections to theism *is* costly: to be able to dismiss belief in God as irrational *whether or not* God exists epistemically privileges atheism—it makes it the only rational game in town. And losing this epistemic privilege is doubtless a significant cost for atheism: it means that one needs to put boots on the ground and provide *evidence* for the falsity of theism in order to show that it (theism) is irrational—one cannot out of hand dismiss belief in God as irrational prior to examining evidence for its truth.⁶

⁶ For examples of pure *de jure* objections to theism, see e.g. Fried's (1989) argument that belief in God is due to wish-fulfillment, Marx's (1964) complaint that religious belief is the produce of malfunction (discussed in Plantinga

Of course, Curtis rightly points out that one can still mount impure *de jure* objections to theism. For example, one can use the argument from divine hiddenness and then claim that because there is non-resistant non-belief, God probably doesn't exist, and so belief in God is probably irrational. But note that this won't work if one takes an *evidential approach* with respect to the argument from divine hiddenness and with respect to the existence of God.⁷ For example, if one takes non-resistant non-belief to be compatible with God's existence but also to be (at least) some evidence against theism, she cannot use this evidence *alone* to conclude that belief in God is probably irrational. Instead, she would need to show that given our *total evidence*, the probability of God's existence is less than .5, and from there she may claim that belief in God is probably irrational. This is important because (i) it shows that much work need to be done to mount a successful impure *de jure* objection to theism—considering the total evidence with respect to theism and atheism requires substantial work on the part of the inquirer—and (ii) it illustrates the cost of atheism losing its epistemic privilege.

2000), Hume's (2009) claim that belief in God doesn't emerge from a truth-aimed process, arguably Schellenberg's (2013) argument from religious immaturity, and the Bloom's (2009) argument from the cognitive science of religion. (See Penner 2018 for an overview of some pure *de jure* arguments against theism that make use of cognitive science of religion.)

⁷ And note that evidential arguments from evil are *by far* the most popular: there are few defenders of logical versions. And, moreover, evidential arguments from divine hiddenness (e.g. those mentioned in footnote 1) are *by far* the most plausible and powerful. However, if one does defend a logical version, this issue mentioned is *possibly* avoidable.

4. An Argument for Reformed Epistemology

Roughly speaking, reformed epistemology is the view that belief in God can be rational even if one doesn't have an argument for the truth of theism. Many philosophers have defended this view (e.g. Alston 1993, Bergmann 2023, Moon 2016, and Plantinga 2000). However, my argument provides us with a novel way to provide positive support for reformed epistemology: if my is correct about about the argument from divine hiddenness entailing that, if theism is true, belief in God is probably produced by reliably functioning cognitive faculties—and Curtis doesn't contest this—then the argument from divine hiddenness provides us with reason to think reformed epistemology is true. This is because *if* belief in God is produced in a reliable manner, *then* belief in God is rational. And so if I'm right, then those who endorse the argument from divine hiddenness should be reformed epistemologists, and reformed epistemologists can cite the argument from divine hiddenness as reason to endorse their view.⁸

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⁸ For discussions about this issue, thanks to Adriane Hendricks, and thanks especially to G.L.G.—Colin Parick Mitchell—for particularly insightful comments.

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