

The Hiddenness of God, by Michael C. Rea. Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 198.

\$30.00 (Hardcover).

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The Hiddenness of God, an expanded version of Michael Rea's 2017 Gifford Lectures, is an intellectually rigorous and pastorally perceptive book. The methodology that Rea employs makes it an exemplary work of confessional philosophy of religion. First, his approach is interdisciplinary. He engages thoughtfully not only with contemporary and classical philosophy, but also with the work of theologians and biblical scholars without sacrificing any philosophical rigor or speaking condescendingly of work in other disciplines. Second, rather than setting aside "existential" questions to treat divine hiddenness primarily as a logical problem of reconciling faith in a loving God with the reality of human experience, Rea offers an insightful philosophical and theological defense of a practical and pastoral vision of the love of God for those whose ability to trust God has been deeply marred by God's apparent absence. Given that philosophers and other intellectually savvy people are among those who feel the weight of divine hiddenness and who seek answers that satisfy both the intellectual challenge and their emotional and spiritual struggle, Rea does a great service to the community of faith. Indeed, even at points where the argument does not fully persuade (which I shall identify below), one gets the sense that Rea has put his finger on the important issues. This is a book that I would recommend to my fellow philosophers and to an intellectually curious friend in the throes of anguish over their sense of God's absence, and there is not much higher praise that I could offer a work on this topic.

As Rea sees it, the problem of divine hiddenness, in all of its various forms, results from violated expectations (25). We suppose we know something about how a loving God would behave towards God's creation, and these expectations often go unfulfilled in experience. Our varying assumptions about a loving God's accessibility to us give rise to number of distinct forms of the problem of divine hiddenness. Rea focuses the present work on two: one *doxastic*

and one *experiential*. The doxastic problem includes the inconclusive evidence about God's existence and the (related) presence of reasonable and non-resistant non-belief in God (the existence of which Rea does not himself acknowledge but includes for the sake of argument). The experiential problem is the fact that many who long for a sense of God's loving presence never have this desire fulfilled, and some who seek God are so traumatized by their experience that they may lose the capacity to relate to God in ways that we usually think of as positive.

In light of such realities, we may conclude that there is no God, that God is not loving to all humans, or that our initial expectations about the behavior of a loving God were misguided. Although Rea himself does not put it in precisely this way, I take his solution to be a combination of the latter two. God is not loving, if the term 'loving' here refers univocally to our human concept of love, and our expectations about how a divine being would demonstrate love towards finite beings like us are inappropriate. In chapters 3, Rea argues that, despite being largely neglected by analytic philosophers of religion, divine transcendence is among the attributes that both perfect being theology and the Christian tradition ascribe to God, and that this attribute should be taken seriously in our reasoning about the problem of divine hiddenness. In chapter 4, Rea argues for a "mid-range" characterization of transcendence. On one hand, he argues that pan-symbolism (the thesis that "(i) all true theological discourse is metaphorical, and (ii) no theological claim is literally true" (43)) is false. On the other hand, neither is it true that "many of God's intrinsic attributes can, even apart from divine revelation, be deeply understood and characterized in literal, univocal terms and be made the literal semantic content of human words and concepts" (49). The appropriate understanding lies somewhere in between. Rea characterizes mid-range transcendence in the following way:

(DT) Divine transcendence is whatever intrinsic attribute of God explains the fact that *intrinsic substantive predications of God* or of the divine nature that express *non-revealed concepts* are, at best, analogical. (51)

If DT is true, then, apart from revelation, we have reason to believe that God is loving, at best, only in an analogical sense. But the descriptions of the love that proponents of the problem of divine hiddenness, like J. L. Schellenberg, offer assume that God's love is just like, or at least very similar to, ideal human love. Thus, the expectations of God's availability to us, which are necessary for the success of the argument from hiddenness, are inappropriate. As Rea puts it, "[I]n light of the fact that divine love is importantly *different from* human love...arguments like Schellenberg's require for their rational believability a certain kind of defense of their theological premises that Schellenberg has not yet produced" (57).

In chapter 5, Rea temporarily sets aside DT to argue that even if God is at most "lightly transcendent" (63), we should not conceive of divine love as an idealization of (the best forms of) human love as it is often assumed to be. According to Rea, to have an attribute in an *ideal* way involves possessing it in a way such that all limitations on that attribute are removed. That is, "[a] person who loves an individual or group of individuals in an ideal way would be unlimited in her desire for union with her beloved, unlimited in her desire for the good of her beloved, or both" (69). This is, quite obviously, not the way that God *does* or *should* love human beings. We have no reason to think that humans are the right sorts of beings to tolerate unlimited union with God (the witness of scripture tells us that no one can see God and live). Furthermore, the God of the Christian tradition is *a person*. This means that God may well have personal interests and desires that have nothing to do with humans and their good. We have no reason to think that God's own personal interests might not sometimes come into conflict with the good of some or all humans. Further, it is possible that God sometimes sacrifices the good of humans for those other interests, just as our own partners, parents, and friends sometimes prioritize their own interests above ours. Both points suggest that the expectations about God's love that give rise to the problem of divine hiddenness are inappropriate. Rea's solution to the problem of divine hiddenness in chapters 3 and 4 bears a strong resemblance to the skeptical theist response to the problem of evil—our inability to think of a good reason for a loving God

to be, apparently, absent to some people doesn't not give us any reason to doubt that God in fact has one.

Rea devotes the final four chapters of the book to demonstrating that, despite our violated expectations, and despite the fact that transcendent divine love might not be as much like human love as we assume, it is still *apt* to describe God as loving towards all humans. In chapters 6 and 7, he develops a theory of religious experience according to which it results, not from direct causal contact with a supernatural stimulus (i.e., God or other supernatural reality), but from "cognitively impacted" experience of the natural world (where "cognitively impacted" means that our cognition either "affects the character or content of the experience itself" or "our spontaneous response to the experience" (105)). The upshot of the theory is that low-level religious experiences are much more widely accessible than often assumed and are not the result of either God's whim or God's response to human efforts.

The final two chapters attempt to sketch how we might understand a hidden God as showing love to those with deeply conflicted relationships with God—relationships marred by unfulfilled expectations, experiences of religious trauma, or the complete lack of the concept of God. According to Rea, God shows love to the first two categories of people by authorizing lament and protest against God and to the latter because "simply trying to participate in a relationship with God by itself suffices for participation in a relationship with God" (162). That is, literally everyone, from the saint who enjoys mystical experiences of the divine, to those who suffer from the effects of religious trauma, to those who lack a concept of God can participate in a positively meaningful relationship with God just by trying. Furthermore, Rea follows Marilyn McCord Adams in arguing that the crucifixion provides a means by which horrendous sufferings such as those associated with religious trauma can ultimately be defeated.

There is much to appreciate in this book, but insofar as I have anti-theodic leanings (and therefore, a tendency to reject the very attempt to offer a solution to the problem of divine hiddenness), I'm tempted to gesture broadly at the entire project, objecting to its very exis-

tence. Instead, I will proceed more constructively by raising a worry about the project of chapter 5 and then reflecting on its implications for the rest of the book.

While I think the discussion of divine personhood in chapter 5 contributes positively to the overall conversation, I'm skeptical about its success as an argument that even those who reject DT in favor of "light transcendence" lack justification for the expectations on divine love that motivate the hiddenness problem. Insofar as Rea's characterization of ideal love (as I described it above) is what intellectuals and lay people *mean* when they talk about God's supreme or ideal love for humanity, I think he is correct. God clearly does not and should not have an *unlimited* desire for our good or desire *unlimited* union with us. But I suspect that what many *actually* mean (or at least what they *should* mean) when they talk about God's "ideal" love is something more akin to the Aristotelian notion of virtue. On this way of construing the common view, if God loves humans perfectly or ideally, then God desires union with us and desires our good in the *appropriate* way, to the *appropriate* degree, and in the *appropriate* sense. "Ideal," then, is used (perhaps misguidedly) to indicate that God's love is not marred by the sins and vices that distort fallen human love. If we accept DT, then I think we have to follow Rea in acknowledging that we have little-to-no understanding (apart from revelation) of what it looks like for a transcendent divine being to love humans in an appropriate way, to an appropriate degree, in an appropriate sense. If DT is true, the problem of divine hiddenness does not defeat belief in God's existence or in God's love (where 'love' is used analogically). However, Rea states that this chapter operates on the assumption that God is at most "lightly transcendent." That is, discourse about God's nature and God's intrinsic properties can be literally and univocally true. On this assumption, while divine love might not be exactly the same as human love, the concept "loving" can be univocally applied to God and the truth conditions for the proposition "God loves all humans" should be roughly continuous with the truth conditions for propositions about human love. It seems to me exceedingly reasonable, if not rationally required, to think that God's pursuing God's own personal interests at the expense of meeting

the most basic spiritual needs of the human beings God has created would be very strong evidence that the propositions “God loves all human beings” is not literally true.

One might respond in the following way: although it sometimes hurts our feelings when our partners, parents, or friends prioritize their own interests over our own (as Rea himself points out), in moments of cool reflection most of us acknowledge that it is appropriate, even good, for them to do so. Could we think something similar is true with respect to God? Obviously we could. The question is to what degree a lover can neglect the interests of the beloved in favor of other interests and still count as a lover in a literal, univocal sense. Consider the following example. If, upon reflection, a potential parent recognizes that the pursuit of their own goods or some other greater goods would render it impossible for them to meet the most basic and important relational and emotional needs of a potential child (and that there is no one else who might satisfy those needs in the parent’s absence), then it seems that the only way to avoid the charge of being an *unloving* parent is for the potential parent to either sacrifice (some of) their own interests or other goods for the sake of the child or to refrain from bearing a child to begin with. Indeed, it is not uncommon for children whose parents have neglected their most basic emotional needs and physical wellbeing in order to pursue some some other great good (e.g., serving and living among the homeless in an impoverished area, seeking peace in a war zone, etc) to criticize these parents for their failure with respect to parental love. Their criticism, of course, is not that their parent’s love should have been unlimited, or even that the parent shouldn’t have sacrificed *some* of child’s good to pursue other goods. The criticism is that the parent failed to meet some minimum threshold of loving concern for the wellbeing of their child. Allowing the child to express their anger, to love their parent as far as they understand them, or even defeating the suffering of childhood by somehow incorporating that suffering into a positively meaningful relationship with them in adulthood does not change this fundamental failure *as a parent*. Similarly, if God is not transcendent in a sufficiently strong sense, and if we lack reason to think that human goods are somehow served by divine hiddenness (as Rea suggests they need not be), then I think it stretches the human concept of love beyond recognition

to ascribe it to a God who knowingly brings humans into existence whose most basic spiritual goods, needs, and desires God intends to sacrifice for some other, possibly greater, goods. The problem is not the existence of limits on divine love, but a failure to meet some minimum requirement. “God is loving towards victims of religious trauma” appears to be literally false, regardless of what protest God authorizes and even if God ultimately defeats the suffering inflicted by God’s apparent absence to them.

Obviously, Rea himself *does* endorse DT; DT is *in fact* central to the argument of the book; and the rest of the book is devoted to defusing the force of just such negatively-valenced analogies as I offer here. They do so sensitively and poignantly. Whether the work of those chapters is sufficient to assuage the worries I raise here will depend on the degree to which the reader is willing to stretch the human conception of love in analogous and metaphorical usage. It is open for a reader to acknowledge that if DT is true, then divine hiddenness does not defeat belief in God’s existence or belief in God’s *transcendent* goodness, but to nonetheless maintain that to say that such a God is *loving*, even analogically or metaphorically, dangerously distorts our important human conception of love (especially since religious individuals are so prone to take God’s love as an example on which to model their own love). Perhaps it is better to say that God is *shloving* toward us, where *shloving* refers to whatever transcendent attribute is analogous to human love. Perhaps, as Rea shows through the last four chapters, God’s *shlove* is not nothing. Perhaps it is more than finite, fallen humans deserve. Perhaps we can raise no legitimate complaints against God for not loving us. Still, *shlove* isn’t what many hoped for (especially those who have been deeply harmed as a result of seeking God), and to our human eyes it may pale in the light of the *love* we sometimes receive from the finite, fallen humans.