

- CA:Wadsworth, 1988), pp. 126–8. The arguments are similar, so we will look at Swinburne’s version.
15. II Corinthians 11:14. See also George Mavrodes, “Real vs. Deceptive Mystical Experiences,” *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S.T. Katz (NY: Oxford U.P., 1978), pp. 235–58.
 16. A version of this objection can be found in Michael P. Levine’s “If there is a God, any Experience which seems to be of God, will be Genuine,” *Religious Studies* 26/2 (1990): 207–218.
 17. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* IV. 12, trans. J.H. Taylor (NY: Newman Press, 1982), p. 117.
 18. *Summa Theologica*, trans. A. Pegis (NY: Random House). IA IIae, q 104, al.
 19. The act of conservation is usually seen as being identical with the act of creation. As Descartes put it “conservation and creation differ merely in respect of our mode of thinking and not in reality.” (*Meditations*, trans. J. Veitch (La Salle, IL.: Open Court, 1950), pp. 58–9). This idea of “Continuous creation” is found also in Thomas (See *St Ia Iae*, q 104, al.).
 20. So Robert Oakes, “Perishability, the Actual World, and the Existence of God,” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), pp. 493–504.

III.A.6

Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence

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Several years ago, and a short while after her death, some of the private writings of Mother Teresa were published under the title *Come Be My Light*. The journal entries were shocking— not because they disclosed hidden sins or scandals, but because they revealed something far more troubling. They painted a picture of a woman celebrated for her faith and devotion to God but wracked by pain and doubt for lack of the felt presence of God in her life—a woman who sought God with tears and cried out for years for some small taste of the divine,

for some tiny assurance in her soul of God’s love and presence in her life, but, like so many of the rest of us, received nothing but silence in response. In one of the most poignant passages of the book, she writes:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love—and now become as the most hated one—the one You have thrown away as unwanted—unloved. I call, I cling, I want—and there

is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One.—Alone. The darkness is so dark... The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable.—Where is my faith?—even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness.—My God—how painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing... I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. ... The whole time smiling—Sisters & people pass such remarks.—They think my faith, trust & love are filling my very being & that the intimacy with God and union to His will must be absorbing my heart.—Could they but know—and how my cheerfulness is the cloak by which I cover the emptiness & misery.—What are You doing My God to one so small? (Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, edited with commentary by Brian Kolodiejchuk, New York: Doubleday, 2007, pp. 186–87)

What indeed? What are we to make of the silence of God?

Divine silence—or, as many think of it, divine hiddenness—is the source of one of the two most important and widely discussed objections to belief in God. It is also, I venture to say, one of the most important sources of doubt and spiritual distress for religious believers. Mother Teresa eventually reconciled herself to a certain extent with God’s hiddenness, but (moving all the way to the other edge of the continuum) Friedrich Nietzsche saw it as just one more reason to sneer at religious belief. He writes:

A god who is all-knowing and all-powerful and who does not even make sure his creatures understand his intention—could that be a god of goodness? Who allows countless doubts and uncertainties to persist, for thousands of years, as though the salvation of mankind were unaffected by them, or who, on the other hand, holds

out the prospect of frightful consequences if any mistake is made as to the nature of truth? Would he not be a cruel god if he possessed the truth and could behold mankind miserably tormenting itself over that truth?—But perhaps he is a god of goodness notwithstanding and merely *could* express himself more clearly! Did he perhaps lack the intelligence to do so? Or the eloquence? So much the worse! For then he was perhaps also in error as to that which he calls his “truth,” and is himself not so very far from being the “poor deluded devil”! (*Daybreak*, trans R. J. Holingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 89–90)

It’s pretty clear that Nietzsche thinks that the existence of an all good, all powerful God is outright incompatible with our experience of divine hiddenness. But why? In the next section of this article, I will try briefly to answer this question. That is, I will try briefly to get clear on exactly what the problem of divine hiddenness is supposed to be. (Only briefly, though, because I think we all have at least a basic grasp of what the worry is.) After that, I’ll spend the remainder of the article discussing three strategies for dealing with the problem.

THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS

The problem of divine hiddenness starts with the supposition that *God exists*. There is no problem (for adults) about the hiddenness of Santa Claus, or of unicorns, or leprechauns, or the like. We simply don’t believe in these sorts of things. The problem of divine hiddenness arises under the supposition—genuine, or “for the sake of argument”—that God exists. The problem gains traction because our concept of God is the concept of a being that we *ought* to encounter—*tangibly* and *vividly*, it would seem—at some point in our lives.

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Again, there is no real problem of the hiddenness of abstract objects. Nobody says, “Well, if there are such things, why don’t they show themselves once in a while?” They’re just not that sort of thing. God, however, is supposed to be the sort of being who would show up once in awhile. But almost none of us ever really see God, hear God, touch God, or encounter God in any other palpable way. Even those who say that God speaks to them in prayer don’t usually mean that they hear voices—or have any other experience apart from the felt conviction that some particular idea they’ve had is, in some sense, “from the Lord.” That, in a nutshell, is the problem.

Why do we think that we ought to encounter God? Simple: Our concept of God is the concept of a perfectly rational, perfectly wise being who loves us like a perfect parent. A being like that would want to have a relationship with us; and we all know that, in order to have a relationship with someone, you have to communicate with him or her. This is why the junior high approach to romance does not work. You know how this goes: Boy sees girl; boy likes girl; and.... .boy takes every possible measure to prevent this fact from becoming known to girl. If people never grew out of this sort of immaturity, the human race would die out. So it’s a safe bet that a perfectly *rational* God wouldn’t take this approach in trying to relate to us. So it stands to reason that God would show up in our lives once in a while.

More seriously: The theistic religions are in full agreement about the fact that it is *bad for us* to spend our lives without a relationship with God. We all know that, all else being equal, it is bad for a child to grow up without a father or a mother, or to believe—for *good* reasons or bad—that her father or mother doesn’t love her. We all know that good parents go out of their way to talk to their children, to reassure them of their love, to be present in vivid and tangible ways—ways that the child can understand and benefit from at whatever stage of life she’s at—and so on. Good parents don’t lock themselves in a room day after day, waiting for their children to acquire the wherewithal to seek them out. Good parents don’t expect that their children will discover

their love for them simply by way of inference from the orderliness of the living room and the presence of fun toys in the basement. Good parents go out of their way to say, “I love you,” and to hold their children and to comfort them when they’re sad. How much more, then, should we expect the same from a being who (we’re told) loves us *like a perfect parent*? If my daughter were crying out for my presence in the way that Mother Teresa cried out for God’s, I would move heaven and earth if I could to be there for her. If my son were in despair because he thought that he had irreparably disappointed me, I would hold his hand and tell him that that’s not true. How could I not? And yet I’m selfish, imperfect, lacking in resources, and short on wisdom, only human. How much more then should we expect God to respond to such cries?

Of course, I don’t mean to suggest that God would be bound to respond in some *very particular way* to us when we cry out for his presence. Nor, I should think, would God be bound to respond *every single time*. Good parents sometimes turn a deaf ear to their children’s cries, and often for the child’s good; they sometimes leave their children with babysitters (even when it’s not strictly necessary), ignoring vehement protests; and so on. So what kind of encounter with God am I saying that we ought to expect?

Well, it’s hard to say exactly. But you might think that, at a minimum we ought to expect at least one of the following to be the case:

- *Our evidence should be conclusive:* It shouldn’t be the case that one can be fully aware of the available evidence of God’s existence and at the same time rationally believe that God does not exist. OR
- *Experience of God’s love and presence should be widely available:* It shouldn’t be the case that, in general, people never (or only very rarely) have experiences that seem to be experiences of the love or presence of God.

And yet both of these things that seem like they *shouldn’t* be the case *are* the case. It is exactly this that I have in mind when I say that God is *hidden* or *silent*, and when I say that we don’t encounter God

often in palpable ways: Our evidence is inconclusive; religious experience—of the interesting and unambiguous sort—is rare. And it’s really hard to see any good reason why God might leave matters this way.

So it looks like we have only three options: (a) We identify some mistake in our reasoning thus far; (b) we find some believable, good reason why God might remain hidden; or (c) we concede that there is no God. There is really no other way forward.

If you’re interested in identifying a mistake in the reasoning, it helps to have the premises of the argument carefully laid out and numbered. Like so:

1. Suppose that God exists—that is, suppose that there is a perfectly powerful, perfectly wise being who loves us like a perfect parent.
2. God is mostly hidden from people: Our evidence is inconclusive; religious experience of the interesting and unambiguous sort is rare.
3. There is no good reason for God to remain hidden.
4. If God is mostly hidden and there is no good reason for God to remain hidden, then one of the following is true:
 - a. God exists but, like a **negligent father**, does not love us enough to make himself known.
 - b. God exists but, like an **inept lover**, lacks the wisdom to appreciate the importance or proper way of revealing himself to us.
 - c. God exists but is **too weak** to reveal himself in the ways that he should in order to secure his relational goals.
5. Premises (1)–(4) are inconsistent.
6. Therefore: God does not exist.

This will be our official statement of the problem of divine hiddenness.¹

DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM

The advantage to articulating a problem in the way that I just have—with numbered premises and inferences signaled with “therefore’s”—is that it gives

us a pretty systematic way of addressing the problem. If premises (1–4) *really are inconsistent* (and I think they are, since our concept of God rules out 4a–4c), then one of them is false. The trick then is to ask about each one, “Is this premise true or false? And if it is false, why is it false?” In the next few minutes, I’ll suggest some reasons for thinking that premises (2) and (3) might be false. My own sympathies lie with those who reject premise (3). But I’ll start with some thoughts about premise (2).

Conclusive Evidence?

In St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans, Paul writes:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom. 1:18–21; New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America)

Does it sound like St. Paul would agree with the claim that God is mostly hidden? No. On Paul’s view, as some people read it, there is no reasonable Non-belief: Non-belief is due to sin. Or, a bit more softly, what passes for non-belief is really a kind of self-deception. Being an atheist is sort of like being an alcoholic in denial: You want so badly not to see the truth that you suppress it and convince yourself that things are how you want them to be.

This is an offensive doctrine. But I think that it has to be taken seriously. Self-deception is a real

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phenomenon; and there is nothing at all implausible about the idea that people would prefer—indeed, would want very badly—for there to be no God. One of my colleagues once pointed out that most sensible people would recoil in horror upon hearing that a person of great power and influence had taken a special interest in them and had very definite, detailed, and not-easily-implemented views about how they ought to live their lives. Along the same lines, eminent philosopher Thomas Nagel, in a now famous chapter entitled “Naturalism and the Fear of Religion,” writes:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It is not just that I do not believe in God, and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I do not want there to be a God; I do not want the universe to be like that....

My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time. (*The Last Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009; pp. 130–131)

So is it really so crazy to think—*on the supposition that there is a God, remember*—that many people would be in the grip of this kind of self-deception? No. To be sure, the view implies that a great many people—including many whom we regard as otherwise very wise and intelligent—suffer from a kind of deep-seated irrationality. But I don't think we should shrink from this sort of claim on principle. After all, atheists say that sort of thing about theists all the time.

Still, this is a hard doctrine, and it has some real problems as a general explanation of the phenomenon of divine hiddenness. Remember, even believers struggle with God's hiddenness. Many people seem to be utterly broken by divine silence in the midst of their own suffering or the suffering of others, or simply by the ongoing and unsatisfied longing for the presence of God. I've seen more

than one friend break down in tears over this sort of thing. And remember Mother Teresa. Moreover, many people are atheists or agnostics despite years of what at least *seems* to them to be honest seeking after God. Is it possible that all of these people are radically self-deceived? Sure. But then we must ask why a compassionate God would allow such pervasive and destructive self-deception to go unchecked. Every day drug, alcohol, and sex addicts, people with eating disorders and abusive personalities, and many others as well are made to face up to their own self-deception and admit to themselves and others what they very badly want to hide. Often—maybe mostly—they're made to do this by someone who simply confronts them vividly one way or another with the truth. Why wouldn't God do that for us? This question calls out for an answer as much as the original question of why God would remain hidden calls out for an answer. So denying that second premise seems to me to be just a way of relocating the problem—sort of like pushing around a bulge under the carpet instead of stomping it out entirely. And it seems that the only sensible answer is: God must have some very good reason.

Good Reason?

So now we come to the third premise: Maybe God does have a good reason for remaining hidden. But what could such a reason be? Here I want to consider two different *kinds* of response. One response says that he does it for *our* sake. Many philosophers think that, in general, God could be justified in permitting suffering of innocents only if the innocents themselves benefit.² The idea is that a perfectly loving being wouldn't make *me* suffer for the benefit of someone else. And even folks who think that God could allow some people to suffer for the benefit of others typically think that, at the very least, there would have to be some benefit to *human beings generally* in order for God to be justified in permitting the evils that come from his remaining hidden. The other sort of response denies this: God has reasons, but his reasons are his own and have nothing directly to do with benefiting us

(which is why we often can't *see* any benefit to us in God's hiddenness). I'll take each in turn.

So first, what might be some of the ways in which *we* (humans generally) could benefit from divine hiddenness? Here I'll consider two suggestions.

First, one might think that hiddenness is necessary for preserving the *freedom and integrity* of our own responses to God.

Some folks suggest that if God were to show himself openly, we would effectively be coerced into submission. I have kids, and they each in their own ways sometimes try to manipulate and bully the other one. I want them to *freely* choose not to do this—which means I often don't appear in the doorway when I hear that the conditions for manipulation and bullying are growing ripe. If I appear in the doorway, they'll be on their guard; their freedom to grow will be, in a certain way, undermined.

That's one way of pitching the idea that divine hiddenness might help to preserve our freedom. But here's another: Suppose Bill Gates were to go back on the dating scene. Wouldn't it be natural for him to want to be with someone who would love him for himself rather than for his resources? Yet wouldn't it also be natural for him to worry that even the most virtuous of prospective dating partners would find it difficult to avoid having her judgment clouded by the prospect of living in unimaginable wealth? The worry wouldn't be that there would be anything coercive about his impressive circumstances; rather, it's that a certain kind of genuineness in a person's response to him is made vastly more difficult by those circumstances. But, of course, Bill Gates's impressiveness pales in comparison with God's; and, unlike Gates, God's resources and intrinsic nature are so incredibly impressive as to be not only overwhelmingly and unimaginably beautiful but also overwhelmingly and unimaginably *terrifying*. Viewed in this light, it is easy to suppose that God *must* hide from us if he wants to allow us to develop the right sort of non-self-interested love for him.

Note too that if this is God's motivation, divine hiddenness is as much for our benefit as God's.

Which brings me to the second, but related, "benefit to us" strategy for understanding divine hiddenness. Perhaps God's hiddenness is good for our souls. Perhaps it helps to produce virtues in us that we wouldn't otherwise acquire. Maybe it teaches us to seek God, to hunger and thirst after him, to not take him for granted. Much in the scriptures suggests that this is what God wants for us. The psalmist writes, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God," (Ps. 42:1, *New Revised Standard Bible*) and the idea seems clearly to be that we *all* should long after God in this way. Likewise, at one point in the Gospels Jesus gives thanks to God for hiding certain things from those who are not seeking him; and he admonishes us to ask, *seek*, and *knock* (Mt. 11:25; Mt. 7:7). God wants us to be seekers after him, and what better way to cultivate that disposition than to hide?

Or maybe divine hiddenness teaches us that God cannot be manipulated by us—that God is not at our beck and call. We cannot summon God by performing the right sorts of incantations; God is maximally free, maximally authoritative, and will be manipulated by no one. This too might be a lesson that is good for us to learn, and so it, too, might be among the purposes of divine hiddenness.

The Personality of God?

Or maybe ... just maybe ... although divine hiddenness often *does* have these salutary effects, and others, that still is not their point at all.

The last suggestion I'd like to consider is one that sees divine hiddenness not as something that God does to produce some great good for us, but rather as something that God engages in for his own reasons, independently of (though not in violation of) our good. Throughout this talk I have sometimes used the term divine *silence* to refer to the phenomenon of hiddenness. I think that that's a more fruitful way of thinking of God's mode of interaction with us. And what I want to suggest is that perhaps divine silence is nothing more or less than an expression of God's personality.

Remember our problem: We experience divine silence and, under the assumption that God

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exists, we ask, “*What’s his problem? Doesn’t he love me? Doesn’t he care? Doesn’t he understand that you have to talk to people to relate to them? What kind of father is he?*” The objections implied by these rhetorical questions are altogether natural, but they are flawed. They are flawed in just the same way in which complaints about the behavior of human persons are often flawed: They depend on a particular interpretation of behavior that can in fact be interpreted in a number of different ways, depending upon what assumptions we make about the person’s beliefs, desires, motives, dispositions, and overall personality.

Someone from your school doesn’t greet you in the hallway. Have you hurt her feelings? Does she think you’re a fool and not want to be seen talking to you? Does she think so poorly of herself that she thinks *you* wouldn’t want to be seen talking to her? Is she depressed and having a bad day? As a matter of fact, she’s the class genius—beautiful mind sort of genius—and she’s always off in her own world, introverted and totally preoccupied. Does that affect your interpretation of her behavior?

You’re on a first date. After a while you notice that you’ve been doing almost all the talking. You start asking questions to draw her out, but her answers are brief, and the silences in between grow longer and longer. You spend the entire ride home without saying a word. Does she hate you? Does she find you boring? Have you offended her? Or is she just rude? As it happens, she just arrived in the United States and was raised with the view that if you *really* want to win a man over, you should be quiet and let him do all the talking. Does that information affect your interpretation?

My point? Interpreting silence requires a lot of information about what sort of person you’re dealing with—about the person’s cultural background, about what sorts of social norms he or she is likely to recognize and respect, about his or her views about what various kinds of behavior (both verbal and not) communicate to others, about his or her general “style” of interacting with other people, about what’s going on in his or her life, and so on. But if this is what it takes to interpret the

behavior of an ordinary human person, imagine how difficult it must be to interpret the behavior of an invisible and transcendent *divine* person.

Seen in this light, the suggestion that divine silence *in and of itself* somehow indicates disinterest or lack of love and concern on God’s part is absurd. God is as alien and “wholly other” from us as it is possible for another person to be. So isn’t it almost ridiculous to think that we would have any idea what divine silence would indicate? To assume that divine silence indicates a lack of concern for us involves quite a lot of unwarranted assumptions about the degree to which divine modes of interaction would likely resemble 21st-century human modes of interaction.

Granted, divine silence *would* indicate a lack of concern for rational creatures if we had good reason to think that God had provided no way for us to find him or to experience his presence in the midst of his silence. This would indicate a lack of concern because it would indicate that God is *trying* to prevent us from finding him, or at least doing nothing to help, and thus bringing about something that is both intrinsically very bad for us and totally beyond our control. But as far as I can tell, we don’t have good reason for thinking that God has left us without *any* way of finding him or experiencing his presence.

I think that we have a tendency to assume that we can experience God’s presence only if we tangibly *perceive* something—a voice, a vision, an ache in our stomachs or our heads, a tingly feeling of some sort. But experiencing the presence of a person sometimes involves none of this. Sometimes it is just a matter of the person *being* present, together with our believing that she is present and taking a certain attitude toward her presence. Consider: You’re studying in the library. You look up and you see a reflection in the window: The girl you’ve been in love with all year but never had the courage to ask out has entered the library behind you. Without seeing you, she turns down the aisle of books adjacent to yours—just a single stack of shelves separates you—and takes up a seat. She’s out of your view, but is there any doubt that you’ll experience her presence? And you would, even

apart from the initial glimpse that alerted you to her presence—all you’d need to experience it—to *genuinely experience it*—is the true conviction that she’s right there on the other side of those books, together with a certain kind of attention and attitude toward that conviction.

In her book *A Wind in the Door*, Madeline L’Engle makes this point very nicely by way of the distinction between communication and communion:

“Hey, Meg! [says Calvin] Communication implies sound. Communion doesn’t.” He sent her a brief image of walking silently through the woods, the two of them alone together, their feet almost noiseless on the rusty carpet of pine needles. They walked without speaking, without touching, and yet they were as close as it is possible for two human beings to be. . . . Mr. Jenkins had never had that kind of communion with another human being, a communion so rich and full that silence speaks more powerfully than words.” (*A Wind in the Door*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973, p. 171)

And, of course, silent communion is not the only way to experience a person unseen. Think of times when you relay a story about an encounter with another person and, after a bit of effort, you falter and say, “Well, you just had to be there.” What you communicate, I think, is that your words have failed at their goal—the goal of *putting us there, of mediating to us an experience of a person we don’t see and maybe have never met*. Sometimes we do fail in that way, but often we succeed. When you say “You just had to be there,” nobody ever says, “Well, of course! You *always* have to be there; you simply can’t convey an experience like that in words!” *Stories about other persons can mediate their presence to us—they can give us a taste of what it is like to be in the presence of the person, sort of like memories give us a taste of what it is like to be in the presence of the remembered event, even when we’re not*. Again, though, it matters that we *believe* that the person reporting the events in question is reporting events

involving *real persons*. When we do, we can be transported and get at least a bit of what it’s like to be around the person we’re being told about. And this, it seems, is what biblical narrative—and, to a certain extent, the liturgies of the church—can do for us when we approach them with eyes of faith.³

My claim, then, is that divine silence might just be an expression of God’s preferred mode of interaction, and that we need not experience his silence as *absence*—especially if we see Biblical narratives and liturgies as things that in some sense mediate the presence of God to us, if we live out our lives in the conviction that God is ever present with us, and if we seek something more like *communion* with God rather than just communication.

The pressing question, however, is what to do with the fact that God’s silence is *painful* for us. Many believers experience crippling doubt, overwhelming sadness, and ultimate loss of faith as a result of ongoing silence from their heavenly Father. On the assumption that God exists and that a loving relationship with God is a great good, it would appear that many people have been positively damaged by divine silence. Isn’t it just this that leads us to take divine silence as evidence of God’s lack of concern? Perhaps silence is just an expression of God’s personality, but then, the objector might say, God’s personality is just that of an unloving and inattentive parent.

The problem with this objection is that it completely ignores the fact that sometimes our being pained by another person’s behavior is *our* problem rather than theirs—due to our own dysfunctional attitudes and ways of relating to others, our own epistemic or moral vices, our own immaturity, and the like. In such cases, it is our responsibility to find a way out of our suffering rather than the other person’s responsibility to stop behaving in the ways that cause us pain. And maybe this is how it is with divine silence, too. Maybe our suffering in the face of divine silence is unreasonable, due more to our own immaturity or dysfunction than to any lack of kindness on God’s part. Maybe it is a result of our own untrusting, uncharitable interpretations of divine silence, or an

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inappropriate refusal to accept God for who God is and to accept God's preferences about when and in what ways to communicate with us. And maybe there are ways of experiencing the world that are fully available to us, if only we would strive for maturity in the ways that we ought to, that would allow us to be content with or even to appreciate the silence of God in the midst of our joys and sufferings. Coping with divine silence, then, would just be a matter of finding these more positive ways of experiencing it.

It helps, in this vein, to be reminded of a fact about God and a fact about ordinary human relationships. The fact about God is that the most enigmatic, eccentric, and complicated people we might ever encounter in literature or in real life are, by comparison with God, utterly familiar and mundane. The fact about human relationships is that experiencing the silence of another person can, in the right context and seen in the right way, be an incredibly rich way of experiencing the *person*—all the more so with a person who is sufficiently beyond you in intellect, wisdom, and virtue. A wise and virtuous person who is utterly beyond you intellectually and silently leads you on a journey that might teach you a lot more about herself and about other things on your journey than she would if she tried to tell you all of the things that she wants to teach you. In such a case, objecting to the silence, interpreting it as an offence, or wishing that the person would just talk to you rather than make you figure things out for yourself might just be childish—an immature refusal to tolerate legitimate differences among persons and to be charitable in the way that you interpret another's behavior. And there is no reason to think that the person would owe it to you to cater to these objections—even if her decision to be silent was arrived at not for the sake of your greater good, but simply because *that's who she is, and that's how she prefers to communicate with people like you*.

You might be tempted to object that, on this view, God is like a father who neglects his children, leaving them bereft and unloved while he sits in

stony silence thinking “I just gotta be me.” But to object like this is to fail to take seriously the idea that God might have a genuine, robust personality and that it might be *deeply good* for God to live out his own personality. One odd feature of much contemporary philosophy of religion is that it seems to portray God as having a “personality” that is almost entirely empty, allowing his behavior to be almost exhaustively determined by facts about how it would be best *for others* for an omnipotent being to behave. But why should we think of God like this? God is supposed to be a person not only of unsurpassable love and goodness but of unsurpassable beauty. Could God really be *that* sort of person if he's nothing more than a cosmic, others-oriented, utility-maximizing machine? On that way of thinking, God—the being who is supposed to be a person *par excellence*—ends up having no real *self*. So, as I see it, silence of the sort we experience from God might just flow out of who God is, *and it might be deeply good for God to live out his personality*. If that's right, and if our suffering in the face of divine silence is indeed unreasonable, the result of immaturity or other dysfunctions that we can and should overcome anyway, then I see no reason why even perfect love would require God to desist from his preferred mode of interaction in order to alleviate our suffering.

On the view that I am developing, then, it is not true that divine silence serves no *greater good*. Rather, it serves the good that comes of the most perfect and beautiful person in the universe expressing himself in the way that he sees fit. This is good on its own terms, and it is justified if—as theists generally believe—God has provided ways (not our preferred ways, but ways nonetheless) of finding and experiencing his presence despite his silence. And if, as I have suggested, there are ways of experiencing divine silence that we would find non-burdensome or even beautiful, and if God's persisting in his silence provides opportunities for us to grow in maturity or in our ability to relate to others, then divine silence might even be good for us.⁴

NOTES

1. The most widely discussed articulation of the problem of divine hiddenness is J.L. Schellenberg's *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cambridge University Press). *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) is another important volume which includes both further articulations of the problem as well as a variety of responses. All but the last of the responses that I present in the section entitled "Dealing with the Problem" are represented and defended in some detail in that volume. Finally, see also Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, "Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 183–98, and my "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God," pp. 76–96, in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, edited by Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009).
2. See, e.g., Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 393–423, and "Providence and the Problem of Evil," pp. 51–91 in *Christian Philosophy*, edited by Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). For critical discussion of this principle, along with references to other philosophers who endorse it, see Jeff Jordan, "Divine Love and Human Suffering," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 169–78.
3. I develop this idea in more detail in "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God." The idea takes inspiration from recent work by Eleonore Stump—especially her *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
4. This essay has been given as a talk aimed at undergraduate and non-academic audiences on several occasions, most recently at Wake Forest University and Bethel College, South Bend. It is published here for the first time.