

HIDDENNESS OF GOD

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Many people are perplexed that God (if such there be) does not make His existence more evident. For many of them, the hiddenness of God puts their faith in God to the test. Others, however, claim that God's hiddenness is the basis of an argument against God's existence. While this claim is no newcomer to religious reflection, it has been the focus of renewed debate since the 1990's.

Two preliminary observations are in order. First, the God in question is the God of traditional theism, a personal God who is unsurpassably good. Second, the "hiddenness of God" is an inapt term to use in an argument for the conclusion that there is no God since God is hidden only if there is a God; the term "inculpable nonbelief" is better. At a first approximation, the argument is that there are people who, through no fault of their own, lack belief that God exists; thus, since there is a God only if there is no inculpable nonbelief, there is no God.

1. RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

The argument from inculpable nonbelief is related in several ways to the more familiar argument from evil and suffering against the existence of God.

First, inculpable nonbelief is supposed to be evidence against the existence of God independent of evil and suffering. To see how this can be, imagine a society in a world much like our own but in which there is no evil or suffering. While no argument from evil could arise in such a society, some of its citizens might maintain that there is a God while others maintain that there is not since there are inculpable nonbelievers.

Second, evil and suffering are much more powerful evidence than inculpable nonbelief. It is difficult to view inculpable nonbelief as nearly as bad as the horrors of Auschwitz or the suffering caused by the tsunami of December 26, 2004. Perhaps this is due, in part, to the fact that, unlike evil and suffering, inculpable nonbelief is not bad in itself; indeed, it is bad only if there is a God.

Third, although inculpable nonbelief is weaker, independent evidence for atheism, it is arguably stronger precisely because of the suffering in the world. That is because suffering constitutes a context in which one's expectation increases that God would make Himself and His love sufficiently clear. For one is more in need of the assurance and comfort that God's manifest love would bring when one suffers. Thus, its absence in the suffering of many people, especially horrific and intense suffering, is more striking.

Fourth, formulations of the argument from inculpable nonbelief parallel those of the more familiar argument from evil. For example, one commonly distinguishes

“logical” (“deductive”) arguments from evil from “evidential” (“inductive,” or “probabilistic”) arguments from evil. A logical argument from evil affirms of some known fact about evil that it is incompatible with theism, while an evidential argument does not, either because it affirms that the fact in question is not known but only reasonably believed, or because it affirms that the fact in question is only improbable given theism, not incompatible with it. One can distinguish arguments from inculpable nonbelief along the same lines.

2. SCHELLENBERG’S VERSION OF THE ARGUMENT

More than anyone else, John L. Schellenberg is responsible for renewing the contemporary debate with his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993). The main argument is this:

- (1) There are people who are capable of relating personally to God but who, through no fault of their own, fail to believe.
- (2) If there is a personal God who is unsurpassably great, then there are no such people.
- (3) So, there is no such God. (from 1 and 2)

According to Schellenberg, (1) is a generalization from two facts. First, there are honest seekers of the truth who are atheists and agnostics. Second, there are individuals who belong to cultures that lack the idea of a personal God altogether, e.g. the Chinese race in the period from the beginning of their history until the Christian Middle Ages. In defense of (2), Schellenberg offers the following subargument:

- (2a) If there is a personal God who is unsurpassably great, then there is a personal God who is unsurpassably loving.
- (2b) If there is a personal God who is unsurpassably loving, then for any human person H and any time t, if H is at t capable of relating personally to God, H has it within H’s power at t do so (i.e., will do so, just by choosing), unless H is culpably in a contrary position at t.
- (2c) For any human person H and any time t, H has it within H’s power at t to relate personally to God only if H at t believes that God exists.
- (2d) So, if there is a personal God who is unsurpassably great, then for any human person H and any time t, if H is at t capable of relating personally to God, H at t believes that God exists, unless H is culpably in a contrary position at t.
(from 2a through 2c).

In effect, (2d) is (2) of the main argument.

Schellenberg regards (2) as a necessary truth, reflecting part of the meaning of “there is a personal God who is unsurpassably great.” (An evidential or probabilistic version of the argument would say that (2) is only likely to be true.) So Schellenberg regards each of (2a) through (2c) as necessary truths. He thinks (2a) is just obviously necessary. (2b), however, is not obvious. Indeed, what does it mean? In particular, what

does Schellenberg mean by “relating personally to God” and being “capable” of such a relationship? He means this. To relate personally to God is to interact with God in the various ways that theistic religious traditions describe: on the divine side, God’s guiding, supporting, and forgiving one, for example, and on the human side, one trusting Him, showing gratitude, and worshipping Him, among other things. Crucially, such a relationship would involve an explicit consciousness of God’s presence and interaction with one. This relationship is to be conceived of developmentally, not as something that comes complete and mature. To be capable of a personal relationship with God is to have the cognitive and affective equipment required to be conscious of God’s presence and interaction with one and to hold the attitudes and to perform the behavior involved in such a relationship; it also requires possession of the concept of God, or at least the materials from which it can be constructed.

So why should one suppose that (2b) is true? Schellenberg argues that it follows from the nature of unsurpassable love, and can be supported by analogy with the best sorts of human love as well. An unsurpassable lover would seek a kind of close, explicit participation in the life of his or her beloved for its own sake, as well as for the beloved’s sake, so that the beloved could draw from it what he or she needed to flourish. This would be especially true in the divine-human case. A close, explicit interaction with God would bestow moral benefits. For example, it would enable one to more easily overcome character flaws and it would provide one with a model for other relationships. Moreover, it would bestow experiential benefits, such as peace and joy, security and support in suffering, and the pleasure of companionship. Of course, God would not force Himself on one, as that would make the relationship a sham. He would leave it up to one to enter into and maintain it. Thus, one’s own resistance, as well as the consequences of one’s prior free choices, would be the only thing God would allow to prevent one from relating personally with Him. Otherwise, He would always be available just for the asking.

As for (2c), Schellenberg argues that it is absolutely impossible for one to have a personal relationship with another unless one believes that the other exists. Thus, as a matter of logical necessity, one has it within one’s power to relate personally to another only if one believes that the other exists. The same goes for us and God. Schellenberg’s argument has enjoyed much critical scrutiny. To this scrutiny we now direct our attention.

3. NON-THEODICAL CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT

Some critics say that the argument does not show that there is no God since it leaves open the possibility of an impersonal God, or a personal God that is not unsurpassably great. Others say that since God is so absolutely different, even incomprehensible, nothing could count as evidence against God’s existence, including inculpable nonbelief. These responses are irrelevant, however, since Schellenberg’s target is a God that is at least somewhat comprehensible insofar as He is said to be personal and unsurpassably great.

Another criticism holds that the argument is an occasion for observing that unsurpassable greatness does not imply unsurpassable love. In this connection, think of the Stoic view of eudaemonia (happiness), according to which the sage, the person who has achieved moral and intellectual perfection, would possess benevolence but lack upsetting emotions like empathy, ecstasy, fear, and grief since these passions would upset the life of bliss characteristic of the sage. On such a view, (2a) is false. A personal God who was unsurpassably great would be a divine sage and, as such, would not possess the sort of attachment and passion characteristic of the love exhibited by parents for their children.

Some critics deny (2b). They note that one's view of the implications of unsurpassable love depends on what human analogies one takes to be most salient. They suggest that an emphasis on maternal love of children supports (2b), whereas an emphasis on familiar adult love or the love of a benevolent reconstructive surgeon is more apt and supports the denial of (2b). One might worry about this since, first, benevolence is not love, second, maternal love is offered as an apt analogy in lived theistic religions, and, third, a perfectly loving God would empathize with the plight of those who seek Him but who through no fault of their own come up empty-handed.

Many critics say that there are no inculpable nonbelievers who are capable of relating personally to God; as such, (1) is false. Chief among them are those who argue, first, that there is sufficient evidence to believe, in creation and history, or through the witness of one's conscience or *sensus divinitatis*. Next, they argue that nonbelief is best explained by the willful sinfulness of nonbelievers, in which case it is not inculpable. For example, Jonathan Edwards (1970) argues that God has endowed human beings with the faculties to discern, appreciate, and weigh the evidence for God's existence, but those faculties work properly only if they function in accordance with "true benevolence," which consists mainly in an intense desire for truth about God and for true holiness. So while there is plenty of evidence, some lack it because they lack true benevolence. In *Original Sin*, Edwards denies that there are nonbelievers who possess true benevolence; after all, he says, the scriptures say (cp. *Romans* 1:19—22) that there is "sufficient light for the knowledge of God," hence, nonbelievers must fail to believe "divine things" owing to "a dreadful stupidity of mind, occasioning a sottish insensibility of their truth and importance" (1970, 149, 157). This insensibility consists in a "proneness to idolatry" and a "disregard of eternal things"—dispositions to ignore familiar and obvious considerations, to be swayed by ridicule and deference to people in authority, to prejudice against religion, and so on—which impair the God-given ability to reason properly about God. People bring such impairments on themselves. One worry about this criticism is that, even though some nonbelievers lack true benevolence, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that others possess it since they really do earnestly seek the truth about God, love the Good, assess evidence judiciously, and, if anything, display a prejudice for God, not against Him.

Some critics appeal to implicit belief. The idea is that since God is the Good (or, God's moral goodness is His most salient feature), pursuit of the Good is, in fact, pursuit of God, even if one does not recognize it as such. This thought can be taken in different directions. On the one hand, one might infer that, since belief in the Good just is (or is one way to have) belief that God exists, one is a nonbeliever only if one fails to pursue the Good, a failure for which one would be culpable; so, there are no inculpable nonbelievers, and (1) is false. On the other hand, one might deny that belief in the Good is belief that God exists but still infer that one can relate personally with God (just by choosing) even if one does not believe that God exists since, after all, belief in the Good (moral goodness) is sufficient for the early stages of a developing personal relationship with God; as such, (2c) is false.

Another possibility is that one can begin to develop a personal relationship with God without belief that God exists. One option here is a kind of faith that God exists that has as its cognitive component acceptance rather than belief. Belief differs from acceptance in that, first, acceptance is a mental act, rather than a dispositional mental state (which is not to say that acceptance does not engender a complex behavioral disposition), and second, acceptance is under voluntary control while belief is not. Regarding the first point, although accepting a proposition is like believing it in that accepting it involves a positive stance toward it, accepting a proposition is unlike believing it in that accepting it involves one adopting it or taking it on for the purposes of theoretical and practical reasoning as well as behavior, even though one is not disposed to think "yes, that's how things are" on considering it, which is essential to belief. As for the second point, belief is a state one finds in oneself, the causal consequence of one's reasons, evidence, or grounds. However, when one's grounds for a proposition seem ambiguous, one can choose to accept it or choose to withhold acceptance. Now, if one's faith that God exists involves acceptance but not belief, one will nevertheless be disposed to act and feel in ways appropriate to God's existence (e.g., worshipping and feeling gratitude), and one will accept various experiences and sacraments as God's interacting with one (e.g., forgiving, guiding, and supporting one). In that case, one might argue that (2c) is false: one can have it within one's power to begin to relate personally to God even if one does not believe that God exists; faith is enough.

4. A SOUL-MAKING THEODICY

Many critics concur with (2c) but argue that (2b) is false. Toward that end, they offer theodicies, reasons why God might lovingly permit inculpable nonbelief. Several general themes have emerged in the literature. First, God may well prefer temporary nonbelief to belief accompanied by a negative response. Second, God might have different reasons for different individuals depending on what attitudes and dispositions they possess; likewise, He might have different reasons for the same individual at different times. Third, God might have a combination of reasons, no one of which is enough but which, taken

together, explain His permission of inculpable nonbelief. Fourth, on some versions of theism, everyone will eventually have evidence sufficient for belief, if not in this life then in the next; so theodicies involve reasons for God to permit inculpable nonbelief for a time, not forever. Finally, evidence sufficient for belief that God exists need not involve arguments or spectacular “signs and wonders”; experiential awareness of God is enough. What follows are some representative theodicies.

According to one version of the soul-making theodicy, many people, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally to God, are already ill-disposed toward Him. Through no fault of their own, they have become inculpably ill-disposed nonbelievers. These include many of those who were raised to be hostile or indifferent toward religion, who were abused by excessively strict religious parents, or who had instilled in them an extreme self-centeredness or disrespect for proper authority. Perhaps God refrains from giving such people evidence sufficient for belief because they would not respond appropriately if they had it. Moreover, there’s a grave risk in bringing inculpable ill-disposed nonbelievers to belief since there is a good chance they will confirm their defective disposition by an unfitting response; indeed, it might even be useless to give them evidence since they might be so ill-disposed that they are more inclined to think they are institutionalizable (“hearing voices”) than that God is communicating with them. Consequently, God waits, giving them the opportunity to become more receptive and apt to reciprocate His love, and influences them in subtle but respectful and loving ways toward this end.

As for inculpable nonbelievers who are well-disposed toward God, this version of the soul-making theodicy considers separately those who were responsible for becoming well-disposed and those who were not. Examples of the first group include those who have been virtually determined—say, by parental training—to become well-disposed but who do not yet believe. In that case, as they become capable of relating personally to God, they are disposed to love God but they had little if any say in becoming so disposed. This is unfortunate because, all else being equal, a state of affairs in which one reciprocates God’s love but had little if any say in being so disposed is not nearly as good as a state of affairs in which one reciprocates God’s love and had a significant say about being so disposed. God prefers the better state of affairs, and so He does not bring to belief the well-disposed inculpable nonbeliever who is not responsible for being so disposed because He prefers them to confirm their disposition, on their own, in the face of contrary desires and competing allegiances, before them to belief. In that way, God allows them to make their involuntarily acquired good disposition toward Him genuinely theirs.

Now consider well-disposed inculpable nonbelievers who were responsible for becoming so disposed. Given the influences that shape childhood character, these will most likely be adults who have either reshaped their bad dispositions toward God for the good or confirmed their good dispositions over time. They constitute the most difficult case for the soul-making theodicy; nevertheless, it has some resources. For, as is well

known, one can be disposed to love another for the wrong reasons. For example, sometimes one's love springs from a desire to extend one's power or influence, increase one's pleasure, or satisfy one's curiosity. Other times its source is insecurity or fear, for example, fear of being alone or unprotected. And there are other sources. Likewise with God. One may well be disposed to love God on coming to belief, but one might be so disposed for reasons that are not as fitting as they might be. For example, it is most fitting to love God mainly for His moral beauty, His holiness; relatedly, perhaps no disposition to love God is suitably motivated unless it is grounded in a strong desire to surrender wholly to His will. In that case, the possibility arises that if God were to bring such people to belief, they would love Him, but their love would not be appropriately motivated. So He woos them, before bringing them to belief, influencing them behind the scenes in respectful and loving ways to change the source of their disposition to love Him and to confirm that change over time.

5. OTHER THEODICIES

A variety of other theodicies have been articulated. The *presumption theodicy* states that God does not bring some individuals to belief because if He did, they would relate to God in presumptuous and arrogant ways, not with due contrition and humility, which are essential to a proper relationship with God. According to the *stimulus theodicy*, God does not produce belief in some individuals because if He did, they would be less apt to recognize the wretchedness of living life on their own, without God. Divine hiddenness stimulates such people to recognize this fact about the human condition, which is essential for entering into a proper relationship with God. A variation on the stimulus theodicy states that God does not provide evidence sufficient for belief in some individuals because if He did, the perceived risk required for an intense and passionate faith would be objectionably reduced, and without such a faith one cannot wholly enter into a proper relationship with God. The *deception theodicy* asserts that some people are disposed in such a way that, if God brought them to belief, they would be deceived into thinking that they had arrived at a proper understanding of religious matters, and would become complacent or relate to God at a superficial level. Proponents of the *intellectual virtue theodicy* say that God does not provide evidence sufficient for belief in some individuals because if He did, certain intellectual temptations would not be available to them, and they would not have the opportunity to respond to those temptations virtuously. For example, if the evidence were too clear, sustained investigation and reflection, and wrestling with doubt, would be inhibited. According to the *diversity theodicy*, God does not produce belief in some people because if He did, diverse expression of religious imagination, creativity, and devotion would be greatly reduced, and religious variety of this sort is a great good. Finally, advocates of the *investigation theodicy* hold that it is a great good to pursue knowledge with others, all the more so when the knowledge is as important as knowledge of God. But people can pursue

knowledge together only if some of them are ignorant. So God permits inculpable nonbelief so that human beings might help each other to learn about Him and to assist nonbelievers in starting personal relationships with Him.

Naturally enough, these theodicies have been criticized. Some critics claim that they provide no good reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief at all, or at least not for every sort of inculpable nonbeliever. Others insist that if they are good reasons, then the problem of too much belief arises. Most importantly, it is claimed that the benefits of temporary inculpable nonbelief articulated in the theodicies can be accommodated within a developing, explicit personal relationship with God that involves evidence sufficient for belief that He exists.

One final critique of Schellenberg's argument should be mentioned. His argument invites one to affirm, at least tacitly, that there is no reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief. Two themes have emerged on this score. First, one should accept the invitation only if the theodicies fail, individually but especially collectively, to account for why God might lovingly permit inculpable nonbelief. The worry here is that human beings are enormously complicated, and it is no easy task to tell whether any particular candidate for inculpable nonbelief possesses or fails to possess those motivations, attitudes, and dispositions that figure in the theodicies above. Second, even if there are inculpable nonbelievers whose nonbelief cannot be fully explained by any theodicy one knows of, the live possibility remains that there is some theodicy one does not know of. Indeed, would it really be all that surprising if God had some purpose for permitting inculpable nonbelief, as well as other bad things that happen, that one cannot understand?

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