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DIVINE HIDDENNESS AS DESERVED

Travis Dumsday

The problem of divine hiddenness has become one of the most prominent arguments for atheism in contemporary philosophy of religion. The basic idea: we have good reason to think that God, if He existed, would make Himself known to us such that His existence could not be rationally doubted (or at least He would make Himself known among those who are willing to believe). And since He hasn't done so, we can be confident that He does not actually exist. One line of response that has received relatively little attention is the argument that God justly refrains from granting us all a rationally indubitable belief in Him because we are unworthy of such belief, and in fact deserve exclusion from communion with God. John Schellenberg dubs this the "Just Deserts Argument." Here I consider several possible versions of the argument and subject one of them to further development and defense.

1. Introduction

If God exists, why doesn't He make His existence more obvious? Why not make it so obvious that it could not rationally be doubted? This is a question with a longstanding pedigree in Christian thought, going back to the patristic era.¹ More recently, it has been turned into an argument for atheism popularly known as the "problem of divine hiddenness." That argument can be summarized briefly as follows: on any well-formulated theism, God loves us and desires our ultimate well-being. Now, surely a genuine love would lead the lover to seek open relationship with the beloved, especially if the ultimate well-being of the beloved requires such relationship. And what is *our* ultimate well-being supposed to consist in,

¹See for instance St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. A. Robertson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), chaps. 11–15; St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 106–118; St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, trans. T. W. Chambers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1889), homilies 2 and 4–8; St. Gregory Nazianzus, *Orations*, trans. C. G. Browne and J. E. Swallow (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), oration 28, chapter 12; and Origen, *De Principiis*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), book 3, chapter 1.

or at least require, according to any well-formulated theism? It requires having a positive relationship with God. Consequently, God would ensure that each of us has what we need to enter into such a relationship. But as a matter of fact, lots of people fail to believe in God, often through no fault of their own. Nonresistant nonbelief (nonbelief on the part of those otherwise willing to believe) is widespread. The state of affairs we see in our world contradicts what theism would lead us to expect *a priori*, which provides good reason to think that God does not exist at all.

While a number of authors earlier in the twentieth century provided valuable discussions of the problem,² its most focused advocacy began in the early/mid 1990s.³ There are differences between precise formulations of the argument; for instance, Schellenberg's is the most robust, claiming that even a single instance of nonresistant nonbelief (nonbelief on the part of someone who is otherwise willing to believe in God) suffices to disprove theism.⁴ Drange⁵ and Keller⁶ by contrast adopt a weaker formulation, according to which it is rather the huge amount of such unbelief that disproves theism; later, Maitzen argues that it is seemingly inexplicable cross-cultural inequities in non-belief that is really problematic.⁷ (We see here an analogue with the problem of evil, where Schellenberg's formulation is akin to the logical problem of evil, and the others to the evidential problem.)

²See for instance John Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy," in *Encountering Evil*, ed. Stephen Davis (Westminster: John Knox, 1981), reprinted in Peterson et al., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 341–353; C. R. Melse, "Does God Hide From Us? John Hick and Process Theology on Faith, Freedom, and Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 24 (1988), 93–111; Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983); Anthony O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation, and Faith* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); and Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of it All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

³See J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Theodore Drange, "The Argument from Non-Belief," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), 417–432; James Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995), 13–24; Stephen Maitzen, "Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006), 177–191.

⁴Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.

⁵Drange, "The Argument from Non-Belief."

⁶Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil."

⁷Maitzen, "Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism."

The literature on the problem continues to expand, with many replies⁸ and counter-replies⁹ issued. I want to focus on a possible route of reply that has received little attention, namely the idea that God might properly refrain from revealing Himself so as to ensure universal rational belief because we do not deserve such revelation. It is just that God remain "hidden." Schellenberg¹⁰ and Keller¹¹ consider and dismiss something like this point, which Schellenberg labels the "Just Deserts Argument." Subsequent literature has not explored it much further. My aim here is to engage in that exploration.

The paper is divided as follows: in the next section I lay out several possible versions of the Just Deserts Argument and specify which one I will be defending. Then in section three I develop that version in some

⁸See for instance Imran Aijaz and Markus Weidler, "Some Critical Reflections on the Hiddenness Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61 (2007), 1–23; Ebrahim Azadegan, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Sin: the Noetic Effect of Sin," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013), 69–90, "Ibn 'Arabi on the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 53 (2013) 49–67, and "Divine Love and the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming); Hunter Brown, "Incarnation and the Divine Hiddenness Debate," *Heythrop Journal* 54 (2013), 252–260; Andrew Cullison, "Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (2010), 119–134; Terence Cuneo, "Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 49 (2013), 151–164; Travis Dumsday, "Divine Hiddenness, Free-Will, and the Victims of Wrongdoing," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010), 423–438, "Divine Hiddenness and the Responsibility Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010), 357–371, and "Divine Hiddenness as Divine Mercy," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012), 183–198; C. Stephen Evans, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006), 241–253; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), 433–453; Jason Marsh, "Do the Demographics of Theistic Belief Disconfirm Theism? A Reply to Maitzen," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), 465–471; Justin McBrayer and Philip Swenson, "Scepticism About the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012), 129–150; Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jake O'Connell, "Divine Hiddenness: Would More Miracles Solve the Problem?" *Heythrop Journal* 54 (2013), 261–267; Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, "Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), 183–198; Michael Rea, "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (London: Routledge), 76–96; and Chris Tucker, "Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine-Creature Relationships," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), 269–287.

⁹Significant contributions include Benjamin Cordry, "Divine Hiddenness and Belief De Re," *Religious Studies* 45 (2008), 1–19; Robert Lovering, "Divine Hiddenness and Inculpable Ignorance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004), 89–107; Stephen Maitzen, "Does Molinism Explain the Demographics of Theism?" *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), 473–477; J. L. Schellenberg, "Response to Howard-Snyder," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), 455–462, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 201–215, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 287–303, "On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love: Replies to Henry and Lehe," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), 330–342, "On Not Unnecessarily Darkening the Glass: A Reply to Poston and Dougherty," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), 199–204, "Reply to Aijaz and Weidler on Hiddenness," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008), 135–140, "Response to Tucker on Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), 289–293, "Replies to My Colleagues," *Religious Studies* 49 (2013), 257–285; and Nick Trakakis, "An Epistemically Distant God? A Critique of John Hick's Response to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), 214–226.

¹⁰ Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 133–136.

¹¹Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil," 17.

further detail. Section four sees a consideration of various objections, and in the fifth and final section I examine briefly how the argument might be integrated into a broader cumulative case reply to the problem of divine hiddenness.

2. *Just Deserts Arguments*

Consider the following possible replies to the problem of divine hiddenness, each of which appeals in some way to issues of human blameworthiness and divine justice:

- (A) For all we know, all of us (or at least the vast majority of us) are, to varying degrees, evil. Perhaps this is in part the result of something like the Judeo-Christian fall, perhaps not. Either way, for all we know our sinfulness has wide-ranging effects, corrupting us to a significant degree. This corruption impacts both our affective and cognitive capacities. These impacts are such that many of us miss the significance of readily available evidence for the existence of God, which, in and of itself, would be fully adequate to convince a genuinely nonresistant nonbeliever. Perhaps God allows this state of affairs to continue, not because He is unable to do anything about it (He could for instance miraculously override the corruption of our faculties such that we would apprehend the significance of the evidence all around us), but because we deserve to be excluded from personal relationship with Him on account of our evil, such that He can justly and properly refrain from granting such relationship to us, at least for the time being. (Note that one might make a stronger claim here and argue not only that God *can* justly and properly refrain, but that He *should*—in other words, that justice obligates our exclusion. The stronger claim is certainly defensible, but here and throughout I'll assume the weaker.)
- (B) For all we know, all of us (or at least the vast majority of us) are, to varying degrees, evil. Perhaps this is in part the result of something like the Judeo-Christian fall, perhaps not. However, this does *not* impact our cognitive faculties in a significant way. We can in fact discern and evaluate the evidence for the existence of God. In and of itself that evidence is sufficient to sway any genuinely nonresistant nonbeliever. However, as a matter of fact there are no nonresistant nonbelievers (or at least relatively few). Those who fail to believe fail because they have not taken adequate time with the evidence, or because they are deceiving themselves about the quality of that evidence, etc. All (or most) nonbelief is culpable, and culpable not indirectly (because of the person's *general* evil/culpability) but directly (because of the person's culpability *specifically* with respect to evaluating the evidence for God). Perhaps God allows this state of affairs to continue, not because He is unable to do anything about it (though perhaps some diehard nonbelievers

would persist in unbelief under any circumstances), but because we deserve to be excluded from personal relationship with Him on account of our evil, such that He can justly and properly refrain from granting such relationship to us, at least for the time being.¹²

- (C) For all we know, all of us (or at least the vast majority of us) are, to varying degrees, evil. Perhaps this is in part the result of something like the Judeo-Christian fall, perhaps not. However, this does *not* impact our cognitive faculties in a significant way. We are in fact capable of evaluating evidence for the existence of God. However, due to our manifest unworthiness, God justly conceals His existence/the quality of evidence. Perhaps He does this by externally interfering with our cognitive capacities, or perhaps He does this by fostering a situation of religious pluralism and ambiguity (granting conflicting and confusing “revelations” to different groups or allowing non-divine but still supernatural entities to pander such “revelations” etc.), or through various other means.¹³
- (D) For all we know, all of us (or at least the vast majority of us) are, to varying degrees, evil. Perhaps this is in part the result of something like the Judeo-Christian fall, perhaps not. However, this does *not* impact our cognitive faculties in a significant way. We can in fact discern and evaluate the evidence for the existence of God. However, in and of itself that evidence is not sufficient to sway every genuinely nonresistant nonbeliever. (Perhaps this is because none of the arguments for God’s existence are demonstrably sound, or because seemingly good arguments face apparent defeaters, or because there is good evidence on both sides which balances out to an even degree, or because there *are* demonstrably sound arguments but these are for many people too difficult to follow, etc.) Perhaps God allows this state of affairs to continue, not because He is unable to provide us with additional evidence (He could for instance grant us all an immediate and overpowering religious experience, or engage in worldwide miraculous displays), but because we deserve to be excluded from personal relationship with Him on account of our evil, such that He can justly and properly refrain from granting such relationship to us, at least for the time being.

No doubt these four versions do not exhaust the ways in which one could formulate a Just Deserts Argument, and I raise them simply to draw out

¹²This last version resembles an argument defended by Douglas Henry in his “Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?” *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), 75–92, and “Reasonable Doubts About Reasonable Nonbelief,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), 276–289. However, he does not focus on issues of desert and of divine justice, but on challenging the empirical claim that there is widespread nonresistant nonbelief.

¹³Schellenberg interprets Pascal’s Just Deserts Argument along these lines (see his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 1993). I am inclined to think that Pascal’s version is actually closer to (D), but I will not get into this exegetical issue here.

some areas of difference between possible versions. These four versions differ with respect to (1) whether our evil corrupts us in cognitive ways; (2) whether the objective evidence for theism is adequate to convince a non-corrupted and/or non-resistant individual; (3) what the causes of evidential inadequacy might be, if indeed the evidence is insufficient; (4) whether God actively inhibits our ability to become aware of His existence or merely allows our ignorance. What these versions agree on is that for all we know, we deserve exclusion from relationship with God and that this unworthiness helps explain the presence of unbelief in our world. (The “for all we know” indicates that the various formulations of the Just Deserts Argument, as formulated here, are intended as defenses rather than theodicies; they present *possible* reasons why God might justifiably refrain from making Himself universally known to nonresistant nonbelievers, but do not commit to their actual truth.)

One could formulate a Just Deserts Argument on the basis of (A)–(D), or indeed on other possible variants arising from different combinations of those four assumptions just listed. My attention will centre on (D). I do not claim that it is inherently more likely than the others, but I think it would be most profitable to pursue here, as it relies on fewer and weaker assumptions. Thus, it does *not* rely on the idea that our cognitive faculties are corrupted, nor on the idea that the evidence for theism suffices of itself to convince any genuinely nonresistant nonbeliever (something advocates of the problem of divine hiddenness will certainly resist), nor on the idea that all nonbelief is culpable specifically as nonbelief (i.e., that all nonbelievers have culpably mistaken the status of the evidence or deceived themselves about it). In other words, focusing on version (D) may allow for easier defense and, more importantly, will allow us to key in what unifies the various possible formulations of a Just Deserts Argument, namely the issues of human desert and divine justice.

Let’s turn then to consider version (D) of the Just Deserts Argument a bit more closely.

3. *Hiddenness as Deserved*

There are two further background assumptions I’ll be working with that ought to be specified at this point. These are assumptions that could be inserted for any of (A)–(D) above, so the present formulation will not be disadvantaged by their adoption vis-à-vis those other options. The assumptions are as follows:

- (1) It will be assumed that the target of the problem of divine hiddenness is any well-formulated theism, or what I will call “generic theism.” This accords with the explicit aims of most advocates of the hiddenness argument—Drange is an exception, specifically targeting Christian theism, though even he is inclined to the view that

hiddenness is a problem for any theistic system.¹⁴ At any rate, the reply I will attempt is a reply on behalf of generic theism. In consequence I will leave aside specifically Christian dogmas (such as belief in an afterlife, the possibility of forgiveness, the fall of man, etc.), not assuming their falsity, but not assuming their truth either.

- (2) It will be assumed that God, if there is a God, can properly allow human moral evil, and that He does so at least in part in order properly to preserve human freedom. In other words, some version of the free-will defense with respect to the problem of moral evil is workable.

I will not argue for these assumptions. I needn't argue for the first, since most proponents of the hiddenness argument are targeting generic theism rather than specifically Christian theism. The second is both substantive and subject to considerable controversy.¹⁵ However, I could not possibly hope to provide a theodicy for moral evil in the present paper, and so must beg the reader's indulgence in simply taking this second assumption for granted in what follows.

Turning now to the specific content of (D), I should first say something about the claim that for all we know we are all, to varying degrees, evil. This may seem a rather harsh assessment. Likewise, one might wonder about the precise extension of "all" — do I include infants and the mentally disabled, for instance? So to clarify, what is meant is that for all we know, all (or at least the vast majority of) mentally competent adults have knowingly and freely committed seriously immoral actions (and made omissions) and are flawed in character. "Seriously immoral" is not to be restricted to criminal acts. I leave it to the reader to look back on his or her life and to consider just which bad acts have counted as seriously immoral vs. merely immoral. (If none are found, look harder.)

I employ the proviso "or at least the vast majority of us" in order to leave open the possibility of the presence among us of true moral saints, people free of the corruption under discussion. What of these people? Is God hidden to them? For purposes of the present argument, I would suggest that, for all we know, He is not. It could be argued that indeed there are such people and that the best historical examples are in fact to be found among the great saints of the major theistic traditions. That is, arguably the most righteous people in history happen to be co-extensive with the people who have claimed open communion with the divine. For all we know, that could be the case, given that it seems such moral virtue is a rare commodity.

¹⁴Drange, "The Argument from Non-Belief."

¹⁵It is worth noting that the problem of evil is properly seen as distinct from the problem of divine hiddenness; J. L. Schellenberg makes a convincing case for this in "The Hiddenness Problem and the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010), 45–60.

Leaving aside the saints then, and given our status as morally corrupt, we can ask ourselves: in our current state of moral corruption, are we worthy to have a personal relationship with God? Are we worthy, that is, to enter into intimate communion with a Being who is perfectly righteous, "that than which nothing greater can be conceived"? Or is it instead the case that we deserve to be excluded from such communion, at least for the time being? Based on the record of our past actions and omissions and the state of our characters, what do we deserve before God? I would submit that we deserve exclusion.¹⁶ And if we deserve exclusion, and God is just, then it seems God (who is perfectly just) can properly exclude us.¹⁷ That being the case, why would He provide us with a knowledge of Himself, such that we are universally freed from the state of nonresistant nonbelief? After all, the main thrust of the problem of divine hiddenness is that we need rationally secure belief in God precisely in order to pursue relationship with God. So if the point of rationally secure belief is relationship, and we are justly excluded from relationship, then we have no reason to be surprised that we lack rationally secure belief. Why would God provide it to us, since we can't benefit from it anyway (or at least, not benefit from it in the way laid out by the problem of divine hiddenness)? In our own faults, then, we have a good explanation for why God refrains from providing us with the sort of extra, overriding and universally accessible evidence cited in (D) above.

Still, even if our unworthiness properly blocks us from entering into a relationship with God, shouldn't God prompt such a relationship anyway, since God is supposed to love us and love entails the seeking of relationship? This too was an opening assumption of the problem of divine hiddenness as formulated above.

That opening assumption is controversial. Does love always entail a seeking of open, explicit relationship? It may entail a *desire* for such, but need it always entail the *active pursuit*? We certainly don't think this holds in the realm of human relationships. We don't insist that the wife of a seemingly incurable cocaine addict must maintain continual contact with her husband despite the resultant physical and emotional abuse. We might consider it morally problematic for the wife to cease *desiring* her husband's cure and the possibility of a subsequent relationship (or at least think that if she still *really* loved him that desire would ipso facto persist). However, we would certainly not insist that she actively stay in contact with him. Why? I expect there are multiple reasons for this, but three immediately present themselves. First, she would be putting herself at risk of harm. Second, we can easily imagine scenarios in which such continual contact would also be bad for the self-destructive husband. Perhaps that continual contact would act as a continual reminder of what he's lost or

¹⁶For Christian readers: bear in mind that we are still bracketing distinctive Christian dogmas such as justification, the forgiveness of past sins, sanctifying grace etc.

¹⁷And again, it would be defensible also to maintain that He *should* thus exclude us.

willfully relinquished and would simply result in needless additional suffering on his part. Perhaps the continual contact with his loving wife, with her health and good spirits and even her love, would even prompt resentment or jealousy or hatred, leading him to even greater depths of moral degradation. Third, we might think that at a certain point, the husband might become so reprobate that his wife could properly, as a matter of justice, disassociate herself from him. There might come a time when, while it remains appropriate for her to continue to desire his reform (if such reform is possible—no one is bound to desire what is known to be impossible), it becomes appropriate for her to discontinue the pursuit of a relationship with him. (If for instance, he sold their children to slave traffickers in order to obtain money for drugs, she might properly make that judgement. More robustly, one might even think it would be *wrong* for her to persist in actively pursuing relationship with him at that point, that the exclusion would be *obligatory*, though again that is not a line of thought taken up here.)

To bring the analogy back home, if our moral corruption is truly serious, and especially if it is incurable, God might properly refrain from engaging us in open relationship both for His reasonable self-preservation,¹⁸ for our own benefit, and for the sake of justice.

It should also be added that, for the present version of the Just Deserts Argument to go through, I need not claim that our exclusion from divine relationship is a *punishment* for our sins (though one could plausibly claim this). Rather, I need only claim that our moral status is such that God can justly and properly exclude us. Being justly excluded from the reception of a good can be seen as the fulfilment of justice without necessarily being thought of as a punishment (though it could be).

This observation should forestall a potential objection, namely that while exclusion is a just punishment, there are other equally appropriate punishments God could have instituted. If exclusion is seen not as a punishment for sins, but instead simply as a just response to the fact that we deserve exclusion, such a worry is defused. Also, it forestalls a second reply that Keller provides to the Just Deserts Argument, namely that exclusion from the presence of God would be a punishment with no remedial/reforming effect on those punished.¹⁹ If exclusion is not punishment, this point too is neutralized. It is perhaps worth noting that Keller is clearly opposed to a retributivist theory of punishment, according to which punishment is proper even if it has no deterrent or remedial effects; on retributivism, punishment is a matter chiefly of justice. By contrast,

¹⁸One might assume that God, being God, is incapable of harm or pain of any sort. Divine impassibility has historically been the majority position amongst theists (even amongst Christian theologians, abstracting from the incarnation). However, it has been disputed, and if proponents of the problem of divine hiddenness are driven to take a position on this dispute, a substantial burden (in the form of a substantial background assumption not shared by all the relevant interlocutors) is thereby imposed on their argument.

¹⁹Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil."

if one accepts a retributivist theory of punishment, then Keller's second reply will carry little weight. (It is also worth noting something that will come up again shortly: the exclusion spoken of may or may not be permanent. If it is conceived as temporary, some of the force of the concern raised in this first objection is liable to be further mitigated.)

Why shouldn't God nevertheless reveal Himself to innocent children? In fact, this is Schellenberg's preferred model of revelation, whereby God reveals Himself through a powerful and rationally indubitable religious experience as soon as the person reaches the age of reason.²⁰ His concern in proposing this model of early revelation isn't justice (i.e., ensuring that we all obtain some knowledge prior to our becoming corrupt) but rather ensuring that each individual has a rationally grounded belief in God before any doubts even have a chance to settle in. Still, the justice issue might be another reason for favouring such a model.

This is reminiscent of a move in the problem of evil debate: if one replies that much or all of what we suffer is inflicted justly because we deserve it, a natural response is to reference the suffering of infants and children. In the case of hiddenness, though, such a concern quickly faces a complication: if God were to reveal Himself in the manner recommended by Schellenberg, such that all children had a powerful experience of the divine, this would surely trickle up to adults; we would notice the peculiarly consistent (indeed universal) story coming from the children, the evidential force of which would surely compel a recognition by adults of the truth of theism. And as we have seen, such knowledge might actually be bad for us. Moreover, it might be just and proper for us to be excluded from such knowledge. Perhaps for the sake of fulfilling the broader aims of justice, children are properly denied an explicit revelation of the divine. If one considers this in turn to be unjust, or not worth the cost, consider that as a society we make a comparable judgement every time we send a father or mother to prison for some criminal offense, knowing full well that in doing so the long-term well-being of his or her children may be placed at great risk.

As a second possible response, one might employ a variant argument akin to the Just Deserts Argument. That is, one might argue that just as it is proper for God to exclude those who on account of their evil *deserve exclusion*, it is also proper for God to refrain from revealing Himself to those who *have not yet merited* revelation. Young children do not obviously deserve exclusion; still, one might claim that they also have not done anything to deserve that relationship. They have, as of yet, done nothing to make themselves worthy of knowing God, and so, until they become worthy, they are rightly not granted it. Perhaps they will one day become worthy, but they are not there yet.²¹ And if through later moral

²⁰Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 49.

²¹What exactly would be needed to deserve communion with God? Is it even possible to merit this? I need not take a definite stance on those questions here. To make this second

corruption they become actively unworthy, they are then excluded on the same ground as adults.

An anonymous referee suggests a third possible way to deal with the ignorance of children on a Just Deserts model: perhaps God foresees the evil they will do and excludes them on that basis. On certain models of divine foreknowledge and/or middle knowledge, this too might work.

To sum up the present formulation, (D), of the Just Deserts Argument: for all we know God properly refrains from revealing Himself to us mentally competent adults (or at least the vast majority of us mentally competent adults, the non-saints), in consequence of the fact that we deserve exclusion from relationship with Him. This exclusion can be conceived as a just punishment for serious wrongdoing, or simply as a matter of desert: there is no punishment involved, but we deserve exclusion and thus are excluded. As to ignorance among saints, for all we know, it doesn't exist. As to the ignorance of children, this might be justified in several ways, including, as noted, their own lack of merit, or concerns about the way their knowledge would inevitably spread to adults (who as a matter of desert are meant to be excluded from this knowledge).

That is the basic line of reasoning behind the present version of the Just Deserts Argument. Naturally it faces further objections, to a consideration of which we may now turn.

4. Objections

In this section I examine six distinct objections to the Just Deserts Argument, beginning with:

Objection 1: God may be perfectly just, but he is also supposed to be perfectly loving. So God would forgive our past sins and overlook our present objective unworthiness and admit us into personal communion with Himself.

This is basically Schellenberg's response, and part of Keller's reply as well.²² But it is too quick. For is it immediately obvious that love trumps justice? Is it immediately clear that a person who deserves exclusion from a great good should be granted that good anyway, on account of the demands of love? Certainly there are lots of situations in ordinary life where we would claim this is not the case. A loving parent might exclude a dissolute son from his will, denying him a great good (in the form of great wealth) because the son's actions have rendered such exclusion entirely proper; perhaps it is even conducive to the son's long-term well-being to be thus excluded. Think for instance of a parent who excludes a child from his will

suggested reply work, all that is needed is (1) the idea that for all we know it might be the case that only those who merit communion with God are properly granted it, and (2) that for all we know some degree of free and self-aware moral action and developed moral virtue are required, which young children (below the age of reason) do not yet possess.

²²See Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 135, and Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil," 17.

because he does not want to enable an expensive drug habit. Or consider a judicial context. A judge might love the convicted murderer (in the sense of having a sincere desire for the prisoner's ultimate well-being), but that love does not mean that he or she, as a just judge, is thereby blocked from properly sentencing the prisoner to jail or death. And that is the case even if the prisoner is repentant, and even if the court is wholly confident that he will commit no further crimes. The judge can properly lay down the sentence, such that love bows to justice. (And again, one might argue more strongly that not only *can* the judge properly lay down the sentence, but that the judge is *obligated* to sentence the prisoner, that justice demands he/she not let his/her love interfere with the enforcement of the law.)

Seemingly then, love and justice can come into apparent conflict, and sometimes it is appropriate for justice to win out. What about in the present case? Should justice or love win out? Should God overlook our faults and enter into relationship with us, even though justice seems to warrant (arguably even demand) our exclusion? I would submit that it is at least not obvious that justice is to be forfeited here. And if it is not obvious, the burden of proof is on the proponent of the problem of divine hiddenness to show why it is justice that is to be forfeited. That is, those advocating the problem of divine hiddenness as a positive argument for atheism must apparently rest their argument on a controversial assumption about the relationship between love and justice. It is incumbent on them to convince their interlocutors of the truth of that assumption, yet this is a task to which advocates of the problem have devoted little attention.

Of course, a central claim of Christianity is that God, as both perfectly just and perfectly loving, finds a way to satisfy the demands of both justice and love, and that this involves a heavy cost to Himself. But we are still bracketing Christian dogma, including the dogma of Christ's substitutionary atonement and the redemption that provides us.

Objection 2: So maybe we don't deserve to enter into a positive relationship with God. Maybe God can (or even should) justly exclude us. But why can't He give us rationally indubitable evidence of His existence anyway? Why leave us in this state of doubt? If we can't enter into communion with Him, can't we at least know that He's there? God could exclude us from relationship with Himself and still provide us with adequate evidence to remove all nonresistant nonbelief.

True, but why should He? Should He do so to satisfy our curiosity? That's hardly obligatory on His part. Should He do so to inform us of an important truth that is inherently worth knowing? Lots of truths are important and inherently worth knowing. God is under no obvious obligation to tell us about them. Why would He be under an obligation to tell us about this one, given that it is now (in consequence of our wrongdoing) divorced from its axiological significance for us?

Recall how the problem of divine hiddenness is formulated: since our ultimate well-being supposedly consists in or at least requires a positive

relationship with God, and since love is relationship-seeking, God would give everyone the epistemic resources to enter into such relationship (or rather, would give them to anyone who isn't actively resistant to such relationship). But He hasn't given us these resources, so He doesn't exist. Now, if it be granted that the epistemic status of theism is divorced from its axiological significance, the problem of divine hiddenness, as standardly formulated, is substantially weakened, having to rest purely on the thesis about the essentially relationship-seeking nature of love (which, as we have seen above, is a questionable thesis).

As a counter-reply to this reply, one might argue that theism retains its axiological significance even in the face of our corruption, since our corruption is remediable. We all have the ability to repent and atone adequately for our past wrongdoing. So even if we are currently unworthy of communion with God, the possibility of future worthiness implies that God should supply us with what we need to pursue relationship with him. And one of the necessary pre-requisites is a rationally secure belief in His existence.

But why think that repentance will do any good? Why think there's any hope of redemption? The objector seems to be smuggling in distinctively Christian assumptions (namely, the possibility of our obtaining forgiveness in a manner consistent with justice) to what is supposed to be a critique/reply addressing generic theism. Of course, the generic theist might opt to believe in the possibility of redemption, but it is difficult to see how one could develop a convincing proof of that possibility using only the resources of natural theology. From the perspective of generic theism, it seems that, for all we know, God can and does properly exclude us. And since the Just Deserts Argument is a defense rather than a theodicy, that suffices. (One might worry, though, that the present objection, even if ineffective from the standpoint of generic theism, will prove effective against specifically Christian theism. I'll address this concern shortly.)

Also, what if merely knowing that God exists is neutral with respect to helping towards genuine repentance, or even a hindrance? The New Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens et al.) inform us *ad nauseum* that belief in God is useless in impacting someone's moral conduct for the better—they insist in fact that theistic belief tends to inculcate brutal intolerance and closed-mindedness. Taking a page from these authors, one might argue that we are so morally corrupt that knowing certain truths, like the truth of theism, is actually liable to make us worse people. Just as an inherently nourishing meal is liable to kill a half-starved individual (one needs to start off with weak fluid protein etc.), perhaps in our corrupt state important religious truths are liable to just make us worse than we were before. We can't handle the truth.

Further, what if such knowledge just prompted fear and hopeless dejection? What if, as a matter of fact, justice sanctioned or even demanded our permanent exclusion from the divine presence? Would it be a good thing to know that God existed, to know that our ultimate well-being required a

positive relationship with Him, and to know that there is little or no hope of realizing such a relationship? Perhaps in such a scenario—a scenario that seems to me entirely possible on the assumption of merely generic theism—ignorance of the truth would be better for us.²³ (Note that I’m saying nothing here about an afterlife—the present point could be made with or without an affirmation of personal immortality.)

Finally, if we are excluded from relationship with God as a matter of justice (again, not necessarily as a matter of punishment, but at least as a matter of desert), why shouldn’t we also be rendered ignorant (or allowed to remain ignorant, in accordance with the (B) model) of His existence as a matter of justice? Perhaps we simply deserve to be denied certain goods, including certain goods of knowledge, and this is one of them.

Objection 3: If our moral corruption excludes us from achieving our ultimate well-being, then God should not have allowed us to become so corrupt. God might properly permit certain evils, but He should not permit any evils that would block us from achieving our ultimate end.

I earlier stipulated as an unargued assumption that God properly allows moral evil. But the objector might be seen not as attacking that assumption, exactly, but as trying to circumscribe it. Yes, God properly allows some moral evil, but a loving God would pull the plug once the moral evil gets bad enough to block us from achieving our ultimate good.

However, would “pulling the plug” entail overriding our freedom? If so, for many it will not be immediately obvious that God is bound to do so (particularly if one holds to the view that we have a right to autonomy). One of the assumptions being taken for granted here is that some version of a free-will defense to the problem of moral evil actually works. With that assumption in place, the present objection is liable to carry little weight.

Objection 4: Perhaps the problem of divine hiddenness won’t work against a generic theism. But surely it can still be applied against a specifically Christian theism, which affirms that God has actually made forgiveness available to us and seeks relationship with us. On that view, surely God would not now permit nonresistant nonbelief.

Christianity does provide a story of how God has reconciled the demands of love and justice such that we, who deserve exclusion from His presence, can be redeemed and forgiven and admitted to it. So it might seem as if Christianity is actually more vulnerable to the problem of divine

²³Note that this reply to the present objection could also be used as part of a stand-alone defense against the problem of divine hiddenness (i.e., we’re so corrupt/hopeless we’re actually better off not knowing the truth of theism). I develop something like this in my “Anti-Theism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness” (manuscript). Or one might ask more generally whether, due to corruption or some other factor, some people (perhaps a great many) might be unable properly to handle a divine communication, such that a loving God would delay it accordingly; in “The Argument from Divine Hiddenness,” Howard-Snyder develops an idea along those lines.

hiddenness than is generic theism. But Christianity also supplies further, distinctive reasons why God might allow nonresistant nonbelief. In fact, Christian theology supplies rather an abundance of dogmas potentially applicable to the present context, dogmas not available to merely generic theism. For instance, there is the idea that, while forgiveness is available, the means by which that forgiveness is subjectively appropriated is faith, where faith (at least on the understanding of much traditional theology) entails the possibility of rational doubt. (And there are important reasons *why* faith is the means by which forgiveness is subjectively appropriated.) In short, should one turn the problem of divine hiddenness around from an attack on any well-formulated theism to an attack on Christianity specifically, the effort might backfire, insofar as Christianity provides additional resources for addressing the problem.²⁴

Objection 5: This argument seems to suppose a pretty bleak view of humanity. Are we really so corrupt as to deserve exclusion from communion with God? And even if most of us are that corrupt, wouldn't there be at least some who escaped it? Shouldn't there be some people out there with a real, direct knowledge of God's existence? And if so, where are they?

It's true that there will inevitably be controversy surrounding just how corrupt the typical competent adult is, and just what that corruption warrants. Intuitions here are bound to differ; consider to what extent comparable intuitions concerning punishment differ in applied ethics debates. All morally sane individuals believe that murder is a serious moral wrong. And yet there is widespread disagreement concerning the appropriate punishment for murder—witness the ongoing debates among knowledgeable professional ethicists concerning capital punishment. So disagreement in the present context is to be expected.

I am inclined to think that we are deeply corrupt, though of course there are degrees of corruption and some of us are worse than others. I am also inclined to think that given the immense moral distance between *any* corruption on our part and the absolute moral perfection of God, we might justly be barred from relationship with Him (and possibly also knowledge of His existence) even if we were much less corrupt than we currently are. But it must be granted that both of these assumptions are disputable.²⁵

²⁴For discussion of some further potentially applicable Christian doctrines, see for instance Travis Dumsday, "A Thomistic Response to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2013), 365–377.

²⁵In response to this point about our possible unworthiness even in a state of lessened corruption, an anonymous referee writes: "The author seems to have nothing at all to logically shield them from the consequence that any finite creature, even one who lived a morally perfect life for a finite creature (or maybe just once wasn't as grateful as they ought to have been) deserves exclusion from God. Does the author wish us to take that seriously? (Maybe so, I have Protestant friends who think that, but it should be made explicit if so.)" I would not wish to affirm that—lack of moral perfection is not the same as moral corruption. On some traditional interpretations of the Adam and Eve story, they were not created in a state of

However, the more important point for present purposes is not who exactly is right concerning the nature and extent of our corruption, but rather what this disagreement entails for the dialectic surrounding divine hiddenness. If I am correct, the advocate of the problem must show that we are not really very corrupt and/or that our degree of corruption is properly compatible with divine communion. To the extent that there can be reasonable disagreement on these points, the problem of divine hiddenness fails as a positive argument for atheism. In other words, if the relevant moral intuitions are at all hazy, insofar as the Just Deserts Argument is intended to function as a defense and not as a theodicy, the Argument carries the day.

Objection 6: But what about people who are not obvious moral exemplars, who in fact admit to not being moral exemplars, and yet claim direct contact with God? Religious experiences are in fact quite common across the population.

True, they are common. In fact, studies in the sociology and psychology of religion consistently show that more than 30 percent of the population will have a powerful religious experience during the course of a lifetime, and a substantial number have two or more such experiences.²⁶ Of course, such statistics may give advocates of the hiddenness problem pause—it may show, in fact, that God is not so hidden as was assumed. But leaving that point aside, if advocates of the problem want to claim that such experiences create problems for the Just Deserts Argument, it can be replied that in fact they set up a dilemma: if these experiences are taken to be veridical, then in fact good evidence for theism exists and the hiddenness problem is badly undermined. If they are taken to be demonstrably non-veridical, then they also create no problem for the Just Deserts Argument. The same might be said for those who do not claim powerful religious experiences, but merely claim to be in a real relationship with God. If their claim is veridical, the hiddenness argument is badly undermined. If their claim is dismissed, there is no problem for the Just Deserts Argument.

5. Conclusion

To sum up once again: for all we know, God properly refrains from revealing Himself to us mentally competent adults (or at least the vast majority of us mentally competent adults, the non-saints), in consequence of the fact that we do not deserve to enter into communion with Him. This

perfect righteousness—rather, they were open to further moral development (and, of course, moral corruption). Still, while not perfect, they had access to communion with God. My point here is not that perfection is required for such communion, but absence of serious corruption is; and for all we know we might be subject to a higher standard of what counts as serious corruption than we realize.

²⁶See for instance Spilka et al., *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford, 2003), 299–312, for a concise review of data collected internationally over the past forty-five years.

exclusion can be conceived as a just punishment for serious wrongdoing, or as simply a matter of desert: there is no punishment involved, but we do not deserve this great privilege and so it is not granted. For all we know, if there are saints, they know God, while children's ignorance is proper either because they have not yet deserved divine communion or because, if granted knowledge, that knowledge would inevitably trickle up to morally unworthy adults.

Is the present formulation of the Just Deserts Argument sufficient by itself to address the problem of divine hiddenness? I am not sure. My inclination is to think that divine hiddenness, much like the problem of evil, is best addressed via a large-scale, cumulative case argument, one making use of multiple independent but compatible lines of response. And the Just Deserts Argument does seem compatible with many of the more popular responses (for instance, Swinburne's responsibility argument,²⁷ the free will replies advocated by him as well as Hick²⁸ and Murray,²⁹ etc.). But the precise contours of that broader cumulative case will have to be left for future discussion.³⁰

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²⁷Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd Revised ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), and *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

²⁸Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy."

²⁹Michael Murray, "Deus Absconditus," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 62–82.

³⁰My sincere thanks to two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy* and to the editor, Thomas Flint, for many helpful suggestions and corrections.