

**2011 St. Thomas Summer Seminar**  
**HIDDENNESS ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM**

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SESSION 1

**Today's sessions: (1) Prolegomena; (2) 'The' Hiddenness Argument; (3) Replies to the Hiddenness Argument; (4) New Versions (Extensions, Adaptations) of Hiddenness Reasoning**

The prolegomena perhaps the most important part of the whole discussion? (Fairly detailed notes here.)

40/20 minute split (at least) for lecture and discussion; feel free to break in for questions of clarification.

**Aims: informational and philosophically investigative**

Information for those who know little of the hiddenness discussion. But mainly inquiry together to determine how hiddenness reasoning is most forcefully developed. Not here as an apologist for atheism. In fact, an opportunity to take another look at the whole issue, putting it in a new perspective suggested by my recent work. Trying to achieve fuller clarity on a range of things.

**Themes: improving hiddenness reasoning, and distinguishing philosophical and theological agendas**

The second theme (a meta-theme?) I'm starting to see as important part of inquiry here. At any rate, something else I'm trying to get clearer about in this connection.

**Comments on the phrase 'Divine hiddenness'**

Prettier than 'inculpable nonbelief'! But can't be taken literally in philosophical context. For theology, God *is* literally hidden. Distinguish a thick and a thin sense of the phrase: in the latter sense, divine hiddenness is inculpable or reasonable or nonresistant nonbelief, or some related human phenomenon involving the unclarity or apparent unclarity of the truth on some religious matter, in particular the existence of God; in the former, this plus God's activity in permitting or bringing it about.

**Objective and subjective hiddenness**

Distinction just suggested: unclarity or apparent unclarity. My comments in the *Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Religion*: "Though others have spoken of 'Divine hiddenness' or the 'hiddenness of God' differently, contemporary philosophers who employ such expressions usually have in mind either (1) that the available relevant evidence makes the existence of God uncertain or (2) that many individuals or groups of people *feel* uncertain about the existence of God, or else never mentally engage the idea of God

at all. The first sort of hiddenness may be called *objective* and the second *subjective*. Of course there are various possible connections between these two, and both may consistently be affirmed.”

Note how this already suggests that we might expect to find *more than one sort* of hiddenness reasoning.

### **Some early voices on the rational bearing of hiddenness-related facts: Butler, Nietzsche, Hepburn**

Figures from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively.

Joseph Butler (in *The Analogy of Religion*): “If the evidence of revelation appears doubtful, this itself turns into a positive argument against it, because it cannot be supposed that, if it were true, it would be left to subsist upon doubtful evidence.” (Here obj and subj hiddenness are apparently conflated.)

Nietzsche (in *Daybreak*): “A god who is all-knowing and all-powerful and who does not even make sure his creatures understand his intentions – could that be a god of goodness? Who allows countless doubts and dubieties to persist.... Would he not be a cruel god if he possessed the truth and could behold mankind miserably tormenting itself over the truth?” (Here subj hiddenness is the main concern.)

Ronald Hepburn (in his essay ‘From World to God’): “One might be tempted to see in...[ambivalent evidence] a vindication of atheism. For how could such an ambiguous universe be the work of perfect love and perfect power? Could this be a way to love and express love, to leave the loved one in bewildering uncertainty over the very existence of the allegedly loving God? Would we not have here a refined weapon of psychological torture? That is: if the situation is ambivalent, it is *not* ambivalent; since its ambivalence is a conclusive argument against the existence of the Christian God.” (Here again we have both obj and subj hiddenness.)

Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century remarks, only in Hepburn, do we have the question why the *existence of God* isn’t clearer. In talking about ambiguity, Hepburn is joined by John Hick and my mentor, Terence Penelhum. It was in thinking about Penelhum’s work that I came to ask whether religious ambiguity, a sort of summarizing statement about religious evidence, might *itself* be evidence – perhaps *disambiguating* evidence against the existence of God. Later I saw Hepburn had had the same idea. But no one had thoroughly developed the *argument* lurking here.

### **Theism, atheism, and ultimism**

God: (in some sense) necessarily existing creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and loving. Theism: the claim that there is such a being. Atheism: the claim that there is no such being. The theist is commonly regarded as one who *believes* theism; the atheist *believes* atheism. But maybe either belief or *acceptance* (L. J. Cohen) should be enough to make you a theist or an atheist, as the case may be.

Some wider issues neglected in philosophy. E.g., what makes theism *religious*? Perhaps the same thing that makes some other, rather different claims religious: appropriate connection to *ultimacy*. Three kinds: metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological. It’s by entailing the more general claim lurking here, namely that there is a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate reality, that theism is religious, if it is. Recall Anselm’s God: that than which a greater cannot be thought – ultimacy here, at least axiologically. Theist, in philosophy of *religion*, should really to be regarded as saying that God, as

necessary creator, is metaphysically ultimate; as possessor of a plethora of omni-attributes, axiologically ultimate; as unsurpassably benevolent and loving in relation to us, soteriologically ultimate. Oddly enough, no name for the more general claim theists fill out in this way, and which other forms of religion can be seen as filling out in their own way. I call it *ultimism*.

### **Theism as personal ultimism**

For philosophers, no special reason to restrict attention to theism in philosophy of religion. Ultimism is the more fundamental idea, and there can be various ways of filling it out. *One* of these invokes the idea of a person, and that is theism, or as we might just as appropriately call it, personal ultimism.

### **Members of the hiddenness argument family – so far!**

#### Parent ('the' hiddenness argument): the argument from nonresistant nonbelief

Focus of the next hour. Advances as a necessary truth that if a God of unsurpassable love exists, only their resistance to God could at any time prevent capable individuals from being in a position to enter into explicit relationship with God. Identifies doxastic consequences that are unrealized. Deductive argument.

#### Children: arguments from *types* of nonresistant nonbelief

*The Wisdom to Doubt*: some nonresistant nonbelievers are former believers; some lifelong seekers. Others are converts to nontheistic religion; and still others isolated nontheists. And drawing on considerations about responsiveness and caring, noncapriciousness and justice, faithfulness, generosity, truthfulness, nondeceptiveness, and providence, we can show the difficulty of squaring the existence of God with each of these types of nonresistant nonbelief. Some of the arguments involved here are deductive, and some proceed inductively – for example, by analogy with the behaviour of human parents.

#### Cousins: arguments suggested by Drange, Draper, and Maitzen

Ted Drange: if the God of evangelical Christianity were to exist, all, or almost all, humans since the time of Jesus would have come to believe the gospel message by the time of their physical deaths, and yet many have not. A kind of subjective hiddenness; reasoning deductive. Paul Draper: religious ambiguity is an objective indecisiveness in the evidence relevant to theism; each side has clear evidence that is “offset” by clear evidence on the other side. Add ambiguity: maybe now the evidence will no longer be ambiguous but rather evidence overall confirming atheism. Draper suggests this inductive argument on the basis of my work (I actually ended up emphasizing a form of subj. hiddenness: see ‘parent’ argument above), but he doesn’t think it succeeds: even if we assume ambiguity is less likely on theism than on naturalism, it remains unclear which side has the stronger evidence. Steve Maitzen: a specific version of Draper-style argument; he holds it is successful. The *uneven distribution of theistic belief in the world* is much more likely on naturalism than on theism. Subjective hiddenness, but Maitzen abstracts from individuals to large-scale facts about nonbelief. Why, e.g., should the demographics of theism be such that residents of Thailand experience twenty times the rate of nonbelief experienced by residents of Saudi Arabia? Difficult to explain on theism, but just what we’d expect if such natural forces as culture and politics alone were at work.

## Relations between hiddenness reasoning and the argument from evil

Nietzsche and Hepburn: painful uncertainty or bewilderment about the truth. Epistemic evil. But need not focus on this distress, or badness of unknowing. Maybe just the conflict between doubt and belief, and the motivations of love that would lead God to facilitate belief. Theist may keenly feel value of (what she takes to be) an existing relationship with God; may therefore be inclined to view anything contributing to its absence, such as nonbelief, as a bad thing. But atheist may be content to say that hiddenness is in conflict with the idea that a God of *fullest love* exists. What's distinctive about the argument from evil: appeals to the existence of things we would not expect from benevolence or moral impeccability *because they are bad*.

Focus on things apparently contrary to the moral character of God? A similarity so general as to be useless. Like saying that because the teleological argument argues from things contingent, the teleological argument is reducible to the cosmological argument.

## Distinguishing philosophy (of religion) and (philosophical) theology and their agendas in relation to hiddenness – some proposals

Philosophical theology as theology: theology's fundamental and controlling motive is intellectual faithfulness to God (assumed to exist) and the theologian's religious community. *Faith* seeking understanding. Does this fit analytical philosophical theology as we know it? Seems so. Philosophical skill exercised, philosophical questions addressed, within defined parameters – perhaps the “great truths of the gospel” (Plantinga). Work here is disciplined by a particular set of religious intellectual commitments. Building, but with a given set of materials.

Philosophy, for better or worse, is given no materials other than reason and experience in the broadest senses with which to pursue (what is supposed to be) its fundamental motive: desire for the deepest possible understanding. Is not in a position to appeal to other authorities, whether personal or scriptural or experiential (in a specifically religious sense).

So there can't be *theistic* philosophy or *Christian* philosophy? One might think that even if one's theism is brought to philosophy (as is usually the case), it may still be *justified* in or through philosophy; and also that one can surely operate with more than one motive. But even if one's theism is justified philosophically, it still can't just dominate one's thinking from then on – perhaps with the help of one's religious tradition's views about free will, creation, heaven and hell, etc. -- without such thinking ceasing to be philosophy. And often, in philosophical theology, it seems to. Moreover, while in doing philosophical theology one may seek the deepest understanding much as in philosophy, in the former it appears not to be the *fundamental* motive. Does this matter? (Note that similar remarks apply to naturalistic philosophy. And don't get me wrong. Philosophical theologians may also do metaphysics or epistemology, say. I'm not denying that their work counts as philosophy when they are operating thus; but whether their work on *religion* always or often counts as philosophy is the issue here.)

The hiddenness argument itself as a test case. Only if theism dominates in a non-philosophical manner would an atheistic argument in any deep sense deserve to be labeled a *problem* (in the sense of worry). Such an argument represents possible *progress* for philosophy; here we have only the *question* of what positive role, if any, hiddenness reasoning can play in philosophical inquiry. But responses to the hiddenness argument so far have virtually all treated it as a problem to be defeated!

A possible course of action: clearly and explicitly distinguish phil/rel and phil/theol, freeing the latter to pursue its own course (Rea?). Think about the different standards applicable to each. Openness to different goals and different results in relation to things like hiddenness reasoning.

## My present approach to philosophy: temporal contextualism

What I'm most interested in and working on at present; may explain the tack I take at various points (and one or two possible goals mentioned below). Philosophy thinks of itself as keenly sensitive to the results of science. But some important results about *scientific time* largely overlooked. Descriptive claims that record these results plus descriptive claim that they have been overlooked plus *normative* claim that this oversight is important and needs to be remedied (roughly) equals *temporal contextualism*.

Geology, astronomy, biology: the perhaps 6,000 years of civilization on our planet wedged between 3 ½ billion years of evolutionary development on one side (life's past) and another billion on the other (life's potential future). A billion years is a period of time almost *one hundred and seventy thousand times* longer than the period of 6,000 years. (Latter as roughly one seven hundredth of an inch out of twenty feet.)

More specifically: hominids (or hominins). *Homo sapiens* started some 200,000 years ago. Average lifespan of hominins (20 or so species on our branch of the evolutionary tree) roughly 800,000 years. 600,000 years more for us may therefore be a realistic hope. And 6,000 years between 200,000 on one side and 600,000 on the other surely counts as a very modest beginning! Something like a twenty year-old who only started thinking seriously some six months ago.

Reflection on these facts about the *full* picture of scientific time and the epistemic possibilities bound up with them can lead via temporal contextualization to a form of *evolutionary skepticism* (perhaps evolutionary *religion*, too, but can't get into that here). Need willingness to accept that even many 'sophisticated' religious ideas, fed by early experience and reflection, may be just *off*. (Interesting question: can philosophical theology accept such skepticism?) Evolutionary skepticism isn't all consuming; can focus, in response to desire for understanding, on unavoidable belief forming and revising mechanisms, including such as lead us to apparent necessary truths, and discriminate among propositions and issues on such grounds as complexity, profundity, and controversiality. Even where belief seems premature, can be willing to *accept* the presently most well-confirmed propositions. Ev. skep. probably rule out belief and maybe also acceptance of metaphysical naturalism, but leaves room for belief or acceptance of atheism *if* certain propositions I regard as necessary truths seem to warrant such a status. Much hiddenness reasoning amounts to a *proposal* to the philosophical community that certain hiddenness-related premises and inferences participate in necessary truth in this way.

## Discussion and evaluation of hiddenness reasoning: proposals on standards and goals

### IN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Consider, appealing to reason and experience in the widest senses, whether hiddenness reasoning can do any of the following: (1) demonstrate a philosophically useful proposition (e.g., 'God does not exist'), or some premise in an argument with such a proposition as its conclusion; (2) outright probabilify such a proposition or premise; (3) demonstrate the *prima facie* truth or probability of some proposition of one of the kinds just mentioned (where this is to show that in the absence of certain indicated factors, one of these things has been demonstrated); (4) *raise* the probability of some such proposition (here one seeks to contribute to a stronger argument or to a successful cumulative case, and the overall aim behind the attempt – to have such an argument or case – cannot be successful without other contributions); (5) show or contribute to showing that philosophical inquiry into religion may be in its early stages (because the reasoning is novel, where no novelty was thought possible), thus indirectly supporting (at least) skepticism about theism; (6) resist influential theistic or naturalistic prejudices about the content of the concept of God; (7) remove or contribute to removing vital components of a multi-faceted and interconnected theistic understanding of the world; (8) show or contribute to showing that the falsehood of theism should be accepted, even if not believed, in philosophy and that philosophers ought to move

on to the analysis and evaluation of *other* conceptions of the Divine (whether that involved in the general claim of ultimism, or conceptions involved in non-theistic elaborations of generic ultimism).

The disjunction of (1)-(8) as criterion of success?

### IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Two possibilities (note how both assume Divine hiddenness is a problem): (1) Try to show, using only material and results *common* to all parties in philosophy and theology, that hiddenness reasoning does not succeed in any of ways (1)-(7) above. The goal here is the *failure* of the reasoning: a theological goal. (2) Say: “Look, we *know* this reasoning fails. So our only job – still a large task, to be sure! – is to show *how* it fails and to explain hiddenness in ways that are coordinated/integrated with our own theological commitments and, if possible, further illuminating of them.” This too is a theological goal – though one more broadly and richly construed.

In both cases: can be sure of little until we’ve seen what hiddenness reasoning looks like when most fully and forcefully developed.

### **Would it be a category mistake to speak of hiddenness reasoning as successful in the context of – as *part of* – philosophical theology?**

Appears it would be: maybe only successful there in anything like a standard sense if it justified the claim that phil/theol *should cease to exist* (because of the failure to exist of its object)! But what about nonstandard idea of moving (or contributing to moving) philosophical theologians from confident belief to *acceptance* of theism? Another possibility: contributing to a move from more to less specific claims about the nature of the Divine (a move away from theism in that sense). If hiddenness reasoning can be aimed at achieving these results in phil/theol, perhaps its success is at least conceivable even there.

A starting point for research: J. L. Schellenberg, ‘Divine Hiddenness’ in Taliaferro, Draper, and Quinn (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2d ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 509-518