

2011 St. Thomas Summer Seminar
HIDDENNESS ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM

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SESSION 3: REPLIES TO THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

I will focus largely on attempted ‘common ground’ replies. And, of course, there will be suggested counter-replies to take our inquiry further.

(1) Attempts to show that it is or might be the case that nonresistant nonbelief never has occurred.

‘Might’ here carries the sense of strong epistemic possibility: a proposition is epistemically possible in this sense, I shall assume, iff we neither know nor are justified in believing that it is false. Are theological preconceptions required to make this move plausible? Is it plausible even then given the wide scope of ‘nonresistant nonbelief’?

(2) Attempts to show that even if it *does* occur, nonresistant nonbelief need not be a barrier to personal relationship with God, since such relationship can exist between God and us in a beneficial form in the absence of our belief that God exists.

Is this move going to look evasive in the context of philosophy? Does it, by assuming that the use of ‘meaningful conscious’ in the argument is philosophically unmotivated, depend on a reply of type (3)? Notice also the onesided focus on the instrumental value of relationship. Might this nonetheless in some way be made appropriate for theological consumption? (Perhaps if we felt we knew by revelation that God would not always be open to conscious relationship, this would console us?)

(3) Attempts to show that even supposing it *is* a barrier to the sort of relationship love would naturally seek, an unsurpassably loving God would or might have *sufficient reason* to permit nonresistant nonbelief at some time to occur, and thus would or might have *sufficient reason* to permit the door to such relationship with God to be at some time closed. Representative of reasons suggested are the following:

(a) A chance for God’s project of reconciliation, following on free rejection by early humans in circumstances like those envisaged by premise (2) of the argument, to take its proper course and be effective, leading us to see the deep submission God really wants instead of misleading us into sullen and superficial compliance (a variation on van Inwagen)

May seem suitable given certain theological assumptions about sin and revelation. But otherwise? Well, remember we don’t have to say more than that, if God exists, this (epistemically) *might* be the case. But would God give creatures such as those earliest humans

libertarian free will? (Why not wait until hominins grew up a bit more?) Even if so, and they used it to reject God, why should there afterward be *nonresistant* nonbelief? And if the suggestion is that there isn't any, then this reply appears to depend on one of type (1). Perhaps it could be added that the nonresistant, if such there be, would in some way be spiritually misled by having belief in God produced by signs and wonders. But why should God operate in such a manner? Because that is the only way of adding to the information that (as St. Paul says) is already available in the created world itself? More theological assumptions appear to be lurking here. And, in any case, why not something like Pascalian experience instead, which could draw both the nonresistant and the resistant – even if the God in question would have to be something other than Pascal's *Christian* God to be operating universally in this way! (“The God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses: he is a God who makes them inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who fills it with humility, joy, confidence, and love: who makes them incapable of having any other end than him.” *Pensées*, Fragment 449)

(b) The (by God) foreseen *indifference* or probable indifference of a person's response at (or for) a time, which would make relationship then of little value, even were the person's disposition then to be nonresistant (Chris Tucker)

More than the instrumental value of relationship matters in this context, given the nature of love. (And *disvalue* at or for a time could be prevented or cancelled or absorbed in the context of an ongoing unending relationship with God infused with experience of the Pascalian type. Really, this response is – perhaps barring theological assumptions – an insult to God!) Also: though relevant only in a context of free will, this move ignores the value of the *free choice* instantiated by a less than agreeable response. Moreover: God would surely wish to promote a better response – is a misleading withdrawal into hiddenness involving the loss of belief going to do it? Remember that a less complete withdrawal – refraining from explicit overtures though leaving one in a state of belief and free to make a better choice – is always possible.

(c) Avoidance of perhaps permanent rebuff from immature believers who would or probably would become resentful over evils they or their loved ones are made to suffer and blame God (Travis Dumsday)

Again a free choice, and one that could not readily be predicted beforehand, given a God even remotely as interesting as Pascal's; and even if it occurred, no reason to believe it would be *permanently* implemented by anyone nonresistantly disposed who is really brought in contact with a personal Ultimate in an infinitely rich medley of ways.

(d) A chance to develop deep longing for God (Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty)

Remember the multi-layered nature of relationship with a personal Ultimate (and the desires that the perhaps just-out-of-reach depths of God might provoke); also the ‘dark night of the soul’, compatible with relationship, in which there can be deep longing. (The mystics, like Pascal, help our imagination here – and this even if they should be in touch with no Divine reality, or at least with no personal Divine reality.)

(e) Genuine or deep freedom to choose the bad (Swinburne et al.)

We are capable of deep self-deception where temptation is concerned, a capacity that would not be taken away by, say, an appropriately modulated sense of God's presence (continual signs and wonders might be another matter). Even if we could not choose the very bad, we would have the opportunity to nurture a choice of the good for the right reasons; and the realm of supererogatory goodness would continue to present the possibility of morally deep choices.

(f) The opportunity to exhibit a noble sort of courage or love that sacrifices itself for the good even where no belief in a happy afterlife exists to diminish its value (Andrew Cullison)

More forceful. But does belief in a happy afterlife really enter into noble sacrifices (for those who hold it) or really make them easier, given our biologically-based urge toward self-preservation? Even if it does, 'the dark night of the soul' is again relevant. And why must the afterlife expected be 'happy' in a manner immediately effective given our prudential desires instead of *demanding* – requiring a courage all its own as one is invited to plunge deeper into relationship with God?

(g) The possibility of cooperative investigation into God's existence (Swinburne)

Many *deeper* investigations than ones into God's existence might be undertaken cooperatively by finite persons who nonresistantly fail to believe – and perhaps with much more zest! – if instead they believed in God.

Several general themes that emerge in the counter-replies to these reasons. (1) Reasons offered are sometimes more likely to seem plausible in some form of theology than in philosophy. (2) There are ways in which, given the infinite richness and depth of any God there may be, various goods can be accommodated *within* explicit relationship with God – which would itself be capable of an indefinite degree of development, with always more to discover and overcome for one who participated in it. What points like those listed provide us with reason to suppose God would value are often broad *types* of things – such as courage – that can be tokened in various ways, and also in a developing relationship with God. If this is so, and if there is so *much* room for development in a real relationship with God, why should such relationship ever be postponed or interrupted for those goods? (3) Also a way of deepening this response, one which apparently enables the hiddenness arguer to deal even with goods from the list that most seem to require the absence of belief in God's existence. This returns us to the literal meaning of 'Divine hiddenness,' reminding us that there is a kind of Divine withdrawal that can occur *within* relationship with God – the 'dark night of the soul' *after* belief which, especially in its emotional effects, may readily substitute for a doubt *inconsistent with* belief in the production of various goods, and without misleading the nonbeliever on religious matters or removing the possibility of spiritually significant choices that strengthen the relationship.

A general point about these reasons, in relation to the hiddenness argument: to succeed, the claim that their influence on God (taken individually or jointly or disjunctively) is epistemically possible must be more plausible than the claim that premise (2) of the argument is true. Are they that strong, assuming a philosophical context of evaluation?

Notice that if one accepts premise (2*), such reasons must provide that level of support for the claim, more specifically, that the *overall or deepest* good of some finite person depends (or might depend) on hiddenness. Do they?

If not, are there any better reasons, that do rise to this level?

(4) Attempts to show that even if the available reasons for the door to meaningful conscious relationship with God to be at some time closed are all *failures*, there may yet be good reasons we don't know about for God to permit this.

Does this response too function differently in philosophy and theology? Obviously one will have recourse to it in theology if theological explanations of hiddenness fail – though note that theology is faith seeking *understanding*! But in philosophy the move is fraught with peril: a danger of begging the question; and the move is linkable to a larger problem of total evidence that threatens theism.

Any other replies?

Can the hiddenness argument (in one form or another) be defended adequately against such replies?

Suppose there is some question about this. In an evolutionary context, might there ever be good reason for philosophers to (in a nonbelieving sense) *accept* some premise or inference of the hiddenness argument even if belief seems unjustified, or even if *theologians* were in some way to be justified in believing that the argument goes wrong somewhere? Might the latter themselves be pushed back to acceptance of the claim that God exists?

Might the philosophical case for accepting the hiddenness argument as sound reasonably be made as follows? “If this argument isn't strong enough for at least acceptance, then none are, and inquiry can't proceed. But inquiry must proceed – it is a central aim of ours that it should do so. Thus we should accept the argument.”