

The Hiddenness of God: The Apologetics Challenge

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1 The Argument from Hiddenness Stated

1. If God exists, he is perfectly loving.
2. If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur.
3. Reasonable non-belief does occur.
4. Therefore, no perfectly loving God exists.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

2 Rebutting Strategies

2.1 The Way of Counterbalancing Evidence

We can infer the denial of premise 3 from the following two premises, the latter of which is supported by either evidence from natural theology (cosmological, teleological, ontological, moral, etc.) or evidence grounded in the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit:

2. If a perfectly loving God exists, then reasonable non-belief does not occur.
6. A perfectly loving God exists.

Therefore:

7. Reasonable non-belief does not occur.

2.2 The Way of Malfunction

The *way of malfunction* offers reason to reject premise 3; while God has provided sufficient evidence for His existence from nature and conscience, it is only due to pervasive moral and spiritual corruption that creatures are blind to that evidence (Rom.1:18-21). Hence the irrationality of all non-belief is explained in terms of cognitive faculties that are malfunctioning due to the presence of moral and spiritual corruption.

“The most serious noetic effects of sin have to do with our knowledge of God. Were it not for sin and its effects, God's presence and glory would be as obvious and uncontroversial to us all as the presence of other minds, physical objects, and the past. Like any cognitive process, however, the *sensus divinitatis* [the divine sense in humans] can malfunction; as a result of sin, it has indeed been damaged.” -Alvin Plantinga

2.3 The Way of Defense

Broadly, *the way of defense* takes aim at premise 2 of the argument and sets out to identify possible reasons God might have for creating a world in which reasonable non-belief occurs. A philosophical ‘defense’ aims to describe a possible way the world could be that includes both the existence of God and reasonable non-belief, and that is true *for all we know*.

The *way of defense* argues that premise 2 mistakenly assumes that God could not possibly have morally sufficient reasons for permitting reasonable non-belief. As such, the premise ought to be revised to:

- 2* If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur, unless God has a morally sufficient reason to permit its occurrence.

To preserve the argument's validity, we need to alter premise 3 to the following:

- 3* (a) Reasonable non-belief occurs, and (b) at least some of it occurs for no good reason.

2.3.1 Improper Response Defense

For all we know, God might have good reason for withholding overwhelming evidence of his existence from certain individuals, in so far as his providing incontrovertible evidence for God would elicit an improper response and thereby impede their coming to know God in the proper way.

“Is it not possible that grains of sand bearing the legend ‘Made by God’ (or articulate thunder or a rearrangement of the stars bearing a similar message) would simply raise such emotional barriers, such waves of sullen

resentment among the self-deceived, that there would be no hope of their eventually coming to perceive the power and deity of God in the ordinary, everyday operations of the things he has made?" -Peter van Inwagen

2.3.2 Freedom Defense

Divine hiddenness may be, for all we know, a necessary condition for a world containing free creatures that possess the kind of freedom and integrity that is pertinent to the moral life (genuinely free choice between good and bad courses of action).

3 Undercutting Strategy

3.1 The Way of Inscrutability

The *way of inscrutability* argues that we have been given no good reason to affirm premise 3*b, that reasonable non-belief occurs for no reason. The atheist assumes that we have good grounds for thinking that we are in an epistemic position to discern God's reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief if they were there. The utter immensity of God's knowledge and goodness, as well as the finitude of human cognitive and moral faculties, indicate that such an assumption is misplaced.

Atheist's Noseum Inference: since we can't see or conceive of God's reasons for allowing reasonable non-belief, it's reasonable to conclude that there are no such reasons.

What constitutes an *unobjectionable* noseum inference?

Right Location: one must have good reason to think that one is looking for *x* in the right location.

Expectation: one must have good reason to think that one would see (discern, detect, conceive, etc.) *x* if it really were there.

Key Question: Is the atheist's noseum inference more like the one in the case of the milk in the fridge or germs on the needle?

4 Pascal, the Heart, and Seeking the Hidden God

Pascal thinks that given God's overarching and ultimate aim of love and union with his creation, evidence for God's existence will be widely accessible:

Wide Accessibility: evidence for God is be widely available and not difficult to acquire. (Rom 1)

At the same time, since God desires *loving* union with creatures (and thus are not compelled or forced to love or be united to him), such evidence must also be easily resistible:

Easy Resistibility: the widely accessible evidence for God is less than fully compelling, i.e. not forced on creatures, and is relatively easy to reject if so desired. One's perception of the force of the evidence can be overridden by affective and volitional factors (Rom. 1).

If God is to reveal himself in a way that treats persons *as persons* (and not as God's toy pets or robots), then he must keep a certain *epistemic distance* from his creatures in order to properly relate to them (e.g. Incarnation, Phil. 2; transfiguration). God gives enough light of his existence to keep us from being in utter darkness, yet remains hidden enough for us to seek him with the intent of finding him. (Jer. 29:13; Acts. 17:26-27)

- The idea of seeking implies that the thing sought is not yet found and is hidden to some extent.
- Why does God want us to seek him? Seeking implies a posture of the will that is directed toward the object sought. (one only seeks what one *wants* to find).
- God will further hide from those who resist and harden their hearts towards him. (Ezekiel 39:25-29; Mt. 13:10-15)

Pascal: "It was not right that he should appear in a manner manifestly divine and absolutely capable of convincing all men, but neither was it right that his coming should be so hidden that he could not be recognized by those who sincerely sought him. He wished to make himself perfectly recognizable to them. **Thus wishing to appear openly to those who seek him with all their heart and hidden from those who shun him with all their heart, he has qualified our knowledge of him by giving signs which can be seen by those who seek him and not by those who do not.** There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition." *Pensees*, 149

5 Apologetic Strategy

Pascal: "We think playing upon a man is like playing upon an ordinary organ. It is indeed an organ, but strange, shifting and changeable. Those who only know how to play an ordinary organ would never be in tune on this one. You have to know where they keys are" (*Pensees* 55)

DIAGNOSING THE CONDITION OF THE HEART: Is unbelief a matter of a perceived lack of evidence? Or a matter of the heart?

- Question: "Would you be ready to humble yourself and submit your life to a perfectly loving God if he were to satisfy your demand for compelling evidence for his existence?"