

Divine hiddenness as divine mercy

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Abstract: If God exists, why isn't His existence more apparent? In recent analytic philosophy this longstanding question has been developed into an argument for atheism typically referred to as the 'problem of divine hiddenness'. My goal here is to put forward a new reply. The basic idea is that there is some reason to think that for many of us, our moral conduct would not improve even if God's existence were not subject to doubt. However, immoral conduct in such a state of affairs would be even more immoral, and hence justly subject to greater punishment, than it is in a state of affairs in which God's existence is subject to doubt. As such, God mercifully remains 'hidden' in order to limit our moral culpability.

Introduction

If God exists, why isn't His existence more obvious, so obvious that most of us would be incapable of doubting it? Why do we have to live by faith rather than by sight? This issue has a long history of discussion, going back to the patristic era.¹ And it is not only a topic of in-house debate among theists, as Schellenberg (1993; 2007b), Drange (1993), Keller (1995), and Maitzen (2006) have all formulated arguments for atheism on the basis of this general worry. Their basic point is that if, on a well-formulated theism, God is supposed to love us, and if our ultimate well-being is supposed to require a positive relationship with God, then God would not allow so many of us (for Drange and Keller), or whole cultures (for Maitzen), or any person who is capable of belief in God and not resisting it (on Schellenberg's version), to be in a state of affairs where God's existence can be doubted. But many (people/cultures/individuals who are willing and able to believe) actually disbelieve in His existence. Therefore God does not exist.

Many have replied to this argument over the past fifteen years,² and Schellenberg has been especially diligent in issuing counter-replies.³ My aim

here is to put forward a new response to the problem of divine hiddenness. To summarize briefly: there is some reason to think that for many of us, our moral conduct would not improve even if God's existence were not subject to doubt. However, immoral conduct in such a state of affairs would be even more immoral, and hence justly subject to greater punishment, than it is in a state of affairs in which God's existence *is* subject to doubt. As such, God remains 'hidden' in order to limit our moral culpability and thereby limit the extent to which we are subject to just punishment. I'll refer to it as the 'divine mercy reply'. And while I do not take it to be entirely satisfactory in and of itself (as with the problem of evil, I suspect that a fully satisfactory solution to the problem of divine hiddenness requires a cumulative case involving multiple interlocking lines of reply), I think it draws attention to some important points that have been missed in the current literature.

The article is divided as follows. I begin by providing a bit more detail on the problem of divine hiddenness and discussing one prominent reply. This will clarify the problem and also serve further to motivate the divine mercy reply, which is presented in the section entitled 'The divine mercy reply'. Then in 'Some theological implications' I briefly outline four implications of that reply for some broader issues in the Judaeo-Christian theological tradition. Finally, in 'Some objections to the divine mercy reply' I consider ten objections.

The problem

In order for the problem of divine hiddenness *not* to obtain, what would the world have to be like? The four authors listed above do not all agree on the extent to which doubt would have to be eliminated in order for the problem to dissolve. Schellenberg's formulation is the most robust, since he holds that if even one person was able and willing to believe in God but was in a state of rational doubt concerning His existence, even for a limited time, then God must not exist. (This may seem extreme, but consider that on some formulations of the problem of evil, even one instance of genuinely gratuitous evil is enough to rule out God.) Consequently, Schellenberg holds that if God existed He would make His presence known to each of us via a direct and continuous religious experience beginning from early childhood:

This experience, let us say, is non-sensory – an intense apparent awareness of a reality at once ultimate and loving which (1) produces the belief that God is lovingly present (and ipso facto, that God exists), (2) continues indefinitely in stronger or weaker forms and minimally as a 'background awareness' in those who do not resist it, and (3) takes more particular forms in the lives of those who respond to the beliefs to which it gives rise in religiously appropriate ways Since the experience is

had as soon as a capacity for personal relationship with God exists, we may suppose that it occurs quite early on in the life of each individual, in particular, before any investigations as to the existence of God have been undertaken. We may further suppose that any investigations *subsequently* undertaken ... fail to undermine ... the beliefs formed by this experience. (Schellenberg (1993), 49)

Schellenberg may be correct in thinking that something like this model of divine self-disclosure would have to obtain in order to ensure that every living adult at all times had a rational belief in God. In fact, it might be needed even on the milder requirements of Drange, Keller, and Maitzen. If the large majority of people throughout human history and across cultures are to believe in God, it will not be enough that the arguments of natural theology be more convincing than they are now. Even in such a world (say, where the argument from design is more effective because scientists discover that the universe really is only 6,000 years old), there is no guarantee that people will be aware of the proofs. Perhaps there will be widespread ignorance of the relevant facts and reasoning. Or consider a world in which there are periodic global miracles. Here, van Inwagen's (2002, 28–31) point about such miracles carries some force, namely that they would still be attributable to a powerful demiurge rather than God. By contrast, a personal experience of the divine, one directly revealing certain attributes of God or aspects of His character on a personal level, might avoid this obstacle.⁴

However, Swinburne (1998, 203–210; 2004, 267–272) and Murray (2002), following a general strategy earlier outlined by Kant (1956, 152; 1978, 123), argue that such a continual experience of the presence of God would inhibit our moral autonomy. It is difficult to exercise one's free-will to do or not do some act with an Almighty Judge literally looking over one's shoulder. And since moral autonomy is necessary for the development of genuine virtue, and God wants us to become genuinely virtuous, God has good reason not to reveal Himself in the manner Schellenberg suggests.

Schellenberg has since admitted as much, but replies that there are

serious problems in the way of any attempt to apply it [the free-will defence], not only to a situation in which God appears *evidently and forcefully present on a continual basis* – where it is moderately persuasive – but also to a situation in which God only provides evidence causally sufficient for belief in the absence of resistance. (Schellenberg (2005b), 292; emphasis in original)

Presumably the next-best option is for God to give people *periodic* powerful religious experiences, beginning from an early age, rather than a continual one.

However, if the moral autonomy worry is a serious one, it might apply even to periodic experiences. It is plausible to think that for many people, periodic

(weekly? monthly?) appearances before an Almighty Judge might still function to inhibit autonomy, particularly if begun at a young age. So presumably God would have to perform a balancing act, granting these experiences often enough, and to enough people, to render theism rationally indubitable to all or most of those who are willing and able to believe, but not so often as to inhibit their autonomy. Just how common would such experiences be if this were the divine strategy? That is difficult to say; presumably Schellenberg expects they would be much more common than they are at present. But this is tricky, an empirical question rendered more complicated when one notes that religious experiences are already quite common, with approximately one third of the population having at least one such experience.⁵ The numbers are higher among the devout and lower among those who self-identify as non-religious (a quarter rather than a third).⁶ These numbers might not be as high as we would like or expect, but they are surely high enough to give atheists some pause. It may not be implausible to suggest that God has performed the balancing act and that, for the sake of moral autonomy, the frequency and nature of religious experiences have been calibrated in such a way as to provide good evidence for theism, enough to stave off well-informed and rational doubt for many, but not enough to guarantee its elimination from all.

These observations do serve to aid the free-will response; still, by itself it may not be as compelling as one would hope. After all, there are some who go an entire lifetime without such an experience, even though they appear as able and willing to receive it as those who do. We might suppose that their moral autonomy must be more fragile, but in the absence of any evidence to indicate as much, this may seem implausible.⁷ And in general, one might have contrary intuitions concerning the robustness of our moral autonomy in the face of the divine presence. Perhaps our moral autonomy can handle more certainty of the divine presence, either in the form of religious experiences or in the witnessing of miracles, than Swinburne, Kant and others suppose.⁸

While there is more that can be said in defence of the free-will response,⁹ in what follows my aim will be to lay out an alternative reply, one that allows for other intuitions concerning the robustness of our autonomy in the face of powerful religious experiences and/or miracles.

The divine mercy reply

Although the divine mercy reply should be applicable to any well-formulated theism, I hope I will not be out of line in introducing some biblical data to serve as examples. Consider the Israelites during the Exodus. They left Egypt after witnessing quite shocking miracles, miracles done for their benefit, and during their initial travels they were accompanied by continual signs of the presence of God. Despite all this, there were frequent complaints, then the golden calf incident with accompanying rampant debauchery, etc. In other words, the

biblical depiction is that fallen human beings, even when living in close contact with the divine presence and impressive miracles, are quite able to commit grievous sins in large numbers. The Exodus account provides what is probably the most striking example of this phenomenon, but comparable examples from various other eras of biblical history could be enumerated easily (the stories of Eve, Samson, Saul, David, etc.). To what extent one takes these stories as literally true is not important for present purposes; rather, they merely serve to indicate that the view of human psychology and moral autonomy present in the Judaeo-Christian tradition may not line up with the basic intuition employed in the free-will defence to the problem of divine hiddenness.

Now note another aspect of these biblical stories. The people involved all paid dearly for their sins, either by direct divine intervention or by God's allowing their sinful lives to take certain tragic courses (think of Samson and Saul). In some cases the punishments will no doubt seem appropriate, in other cases perhaps not. Think of Moses disobeying God by striking the rock rather than commanding it to gush water. For that *prima facie* small misstep, he was forbidden from entering the Promised Land. Or for a New Testament example, consider the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. For an act of deception, they were supernaturally executed by God. These cases are liable to strike us as puzzling, and the divine punishment disproportionate.

And yet there seems a consistent logic behind these biblical accounts, the idea being that increased knowledge carries higher expectations. Consider Luke 12:48, which follows on a metaphor concerning the apocalypse:

That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

This is what made Moses' sin more egregious than it might at first appear. He was entrusted with great knowledge and great responsibility. While this carries obvious benefits, it also has the effect of making him even more culpable for any immorality. The background intuition here is a common-sense one, and when it is applied to the case of interactions with, and responsibilities granted by, a perfectly holy deity, the stakes are ramped up. Eating an apple my brother properly told me not to eat is wrong, though a venial wrong. Eating an apple that I think my brother might properly have told me not to eat, but where I can't quite remember whether he did or not, is probably wrong, though less so. Eating an apple that I believe a morally perfect and almighty God doesn't want me to eat is worse, but the degree of my culpability is mitigated if my belief in the command and/or the God who supposedly gave it is subject to doubt. Finally, eating an apple that a morally

perfect and almighty God, to whom I owe my very existence, *personally* and *explicitly* told me not to eat, even warning me of the dire consequences of eating it, when I *know* that He is morally perfect and that I owe Him my very existence, is more than a venial wrong. To sin in the face of Moral Purity Itself is a serious offence and is plausibly worthy of serious punishment, more serious than if the same act of eating were carried on in a state of doubt concerning one or more of the points just named.

So imagine that Schellenberg and others had their way, such that each of us received just enough (or much more) in the way of powerful religious experiences (and/or public miracles, if one disputes van Inwagen's earlier cited point about their evidential insufficiency) to ensure that we all rationally believed in God (provided we weren't resisting that belief), while also ensuring that the divine presence wasn't so continual as to stifle moral autonomy.¹⁰ Since by supposition our moral autonomy would not be inhibited, in such a state of affairs we would still be able to commit sins of varying degrees of magnitude. If the biblical data are given any credence (even just as providing psychologically plausible thought experiments), many of us would continue to commit moral offences including deceptions, assaults, adultery, etc. And if my point is correct, then the immoral status of all of these acts would be substantially magnified by the very fact that none of us would have any rational doubt about God's existence. Having been granted the great privilege of first-hand contact with divine reality, we would have to be held to a higher moral standard, and would have to face the decidedly negative consequences of that fact in the form of more severe, justly administered punishments. I submit that this gives us reason to believe that God may have our best interests at heart in not granting to each of us a rationally indubitable belief in His existence in this life. God has some reason to remain 'hidden', even if it were the case that His presence would not inhibit our autonomy (indeed, *especially* if it wouldn't).

Before moving on to consider some objections, I would like to point out four interesting implications of the divine mercy reply for the broader Judaeo-Christian theological tradition.

Some theological implications

First, it may help to address the question of why God chose to reveal Himself in a progressive manner, starting with the nation of Israel and then spreading that revelation to the rest of the world via missionary activity. After all, why not just grant to every nation the same explicit revelation at the same time, backed up by comparable miracles? I think the Old Testament record may be intended partly as an answer to this question: with such revelation comes great responsibility and higher demands on a people. The history of Israel provides us with a record of what any human nation could expect of itself when faced with

those demands: continual blessings, yes, but also continual sin and the disastrous national consequences following upon it (continual national punishments, Babylonian captivity, etc.). Upon reading this account, we get a clue as to why God did not want to grant to every nation the status of chosen people. An explicit divine revelation had to be given as part of God's broader purpose of redemption, but in order to limit the damage, as it were, it was given only to one nation directly, and then spread through more indirect means. The very history of Israel may indicate part of the solution to the problem of divine hiddenness, and especially to Maitzen's (2006) formulation of the problem in terms of the ignorance of whole cultures.

Second, the divine mercy reply sheds new light on a traditional facet of Judaeo-Christian spirituality, namely the fact that people are told *not* to pray for or otherwise actively seek visions, private revelations, etc. The usual justification for this is the possibility of receiving a deceptive experience from a non-divine source. But mightn't another reason be that those who receive such experiences, and especially those who receive a truly powerful one or multiple such experiences, will thereby have more demanded of them morally and spiritually, for which they might not be ready? It is interesting to note that while there are supposed cases in both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions of people having frequent powerful religious experiences, or even a constant sense of the presence of God, these people tend to be clerics living lives of profound sanctity. Perhaps only saints can handle the increased moral and spiritual responsibilities that come with living a life in real communion with the divine. 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God' (Matthew 5:8).

Third, it might provide further justification for the Christian idea that we are saved by grace through *faith*. Why? The usual answer is that it is because we're too corrupt, and cannot save ourselves via good works. I would add that we may be so morally corrupt that if we had the same kind of experiential exposure to God that the Israelites had, it would only be detrimental to us. For we would continue to sin, but now we would be sinning with the added culpability that accompanies sinning in the open presence of God. So if we are to be redeemed, God must work with us indirectly, so to speak, through a believing community (for Christians, the Church) which bears testimony to Him, but in which He himself does not come to us with the kind of experiential presence that the ancient Israelites knew. We need to be redeemed through faith, since being redeemed 'by sight' is not an option for most of us.

Fourth, note how this also links in with traditional debates in Judaism about why the age of prophecy ended several hundred years before the common era, and in Christianity over why the early church knew such wonders and miracles, but we have proportionately fewer (though perhaps far more absolutely, given the sheer number of Christians in the world today). Part of the answer might be that since it is better for us that God remain to some degree 'hidden', then as soon as

the truth of revelation is initially vouchsafed by miracles, later peoples are better off learning of that revelation by testimony than by constantly renewed campaigns of miracles.

Now on to some potential problems. I will have to be brief, and I do not pretend that these replies are fully adequate to the objections, or that I am covering all of the worries that could be raised.

Some objections to the divine mercy reply

(1) There's a reductio lurking here. If in order to avoid harsher punishments it is better that we have some room for doubts about the truth of theism, surely it would be even better to be wholly ignorant of God, and so be subject to even less punishment.

It's a balancing act. On the one hand, according to traditional theism (and, Schellenberg thinks, any well-formulated theism), a positive relationship with God is necessary for our ultimate well-being. So it would be bad for us to be permanently ignorant of God. Yet, as I've indicated, it's probably bad for most of us in this life to have a rationally unquestionable belief in God, given the extent of our moral corruption.¹¹ So the best state of affairs may be the one we're actually in: we have a fair amount of evidence for God's existence from religious experience, religious history, and natural theology,¹² but arguably this evidence is not indubitable or of such strength as to compel belief in any but the unwilling. This way our moral culpability is decently limited while we are still able to learn about God and develop a relationship with Him.

(2) Why all this talk of greater or lesser punishment on the basis of sin accompanying more or less certain belief? Hell is supposed to be a pretty horrid place whatever one's route to it.

But it is not equally horrid for all its inhabitants. As already indicated, from a Christian's perspective there is some scriptural warrant for maintaining that there are different degrees of punishment in the afterlife. There is also warrant from early tradition,¹³ and I think there is common-sense warrant as well. Of course, I am making a number of assumptions about the afterlife here, including the assumption that there is punishment for some after death (though I do not here require the assumption that that punishment be unending). But this is an assumption of most religious traditions, and has some backing in natural theology, as does belief in an afterlife generally.¹⁴ At any rate, given these assumptions it is not implausible to think that the particular weight of one's sins may make a great deal of difference to one's state of being after death. If for many or most people a certainty of God's existence would help lead to a worse state in the afterlife (whether in a permanent hell or in something more akin to purgatory), this gives God very good reason to avoid granting most of us such certainty.

(3) *Doesn't the divine mercy reply sit quite uneasily with the previously cited sociological data on the commonality of religious experience? Why would these be so common if they carried such risks?*

Again, the balancing act. In a world in which we read about such experiences in sacred texts but found that no sane person ever experienced them in modern times, we would have much more reason to doubt God's existence. But in a world in which more than a third of the population has them, they supply good evidence, and their commonality is a sure guard against fraud even if not naturalistic explanations (40 million Frenchmen can in fact all be wrong, but they can't all be lying). Yet they are neither so ubiquitous nor so frequent in most people's lives that they supply indubitable proof. Indeed, sometimes even those who have had a powerful religious experience will come to doubt the existence of God. All this seems to fit with the model supposed in the divine mercy reply.

(4) *The biblical accounts of people sinning in the face of an omnipotent deity are psychologically implausible. We would be too cowed by such direct contact to think of stepping out of line. In consequence the divine mercy reply falls apart.*

True, if it is wholly implausible that we would be capable of sinning when possessed of a clear knowledge of God's existence, then the divine mercy reply fails. But if it does, then the free-will response of Swinburne, Kant, and others becomes correspondingly stronger. Consequently, those who advocate atheism on the basis of the problem of divine hiddenness face a dilemma: affirm the robustness of human autonomy and face the divine mercy reply. Deny it and face the free-will reply.

(5) *Consider a state of affairs in which we all had a rationally indubitable belief in God, but in which we were ignorant of God's moral commandments. Wouldn't that state of affairs get us what we need from the divine hiddenness reply, namely, mitigated moral culpability? Why then shouldn't God hide His moral laws rather than Himself?*

It is not at all clear that God could reveal Himself to us as God without revealing to us something of His moral perfection, and by implication His desires for how one should live. How would we know it was really God if we were not made aware of His holiness, given that moral perfection is a necessary divine attribute? Recall that this was one of the reasons for favouring personal religious experience over dramatic miracles as a means of divine self-disclosure.

(6) *It may be true that someone sinning with a full awareness of God's reality is liable to greater punishment. However, it is surely also true that someone with a full awareness of God's reality is more likely to (eventually) seek God's forgiveness and thus avoid the attendant punishments. Wouldn't it be more merciful of Him to show*

Himself and thus encourage our eventual repentance, instead of hiding Himself in order to lessen our culpability?

Is it really more likely that a person who has spent his or her life openly sinning in the presence of God would be more likely eventually to repent, more likely than someone who has sinned in a state of doubt or disbelief? I have my doubts. One might think instead that a life spent sinning in full awareness of God's presence (or even just awareness of God's reality, proved through past experience) would involve one in a sort of moral corruption over and above 'normal' wrongdoing. Consider someone contemplating shoplifting. The agnostic shoplifter who goes ahead with the crime will perhaps suffer some further corruption of character, will descend just a little bit further into viciousness (the crime will be easier to commit next time etc.). A shoplifter fully aware of God's reality will have that loss of character and still more. His action will carry the additional effect of his becoming more used to defying God openly. And the more one sins in such a state of awareness, the more one's character becomes accustomed to such defiance. One could argue that all sins, including those committed by atheists and agnostics, involve an implicit defiance of or disdain for God, and that this makes all sin that much worse. But sins knowingly committed in a full awareness of God would involve this feature to a much greater degree. And so the habit of sinning while in a full awareness of God would therefore entail a further, even more pernicious corruption of character, in that the person sinning would also be developing the habit of knowingly defying or disdaining God. A lifetime of sin with that level of awareness might so deform one's character as to severely decrease the chances of eventual repentance (and especially of genuine repentance as opposed to a last-minute fear-of-punishment-induced verbal disavowal of sin). Consequently a key premise of the present objection appears to falter.¹⁵

(7) What if the picture implied by the divine mercy reply could entail greater aggregate moral wrongdoing? That is, in our present state of affairs many people fail to fulfil certain duties to God, such as worshipping Him, as a result of their non-belief. Some might think this neglect is sinful. Hence, rampant non-belief leads to a great deal of sin that would be much lessened in a world where a rationally indubitable belief in God was available to anyone willing to believe. Similarly, perhaps there are many people who currently lead dissolute lives but who would commit far fewer sins if they had a rationally indubitable belief in God – perhaps these are people who are inwardly open to God but in consequence of their ignorance lead far worse lives than they would in a state of awareness. Further, perhaps there are many who lead morally average lives but who could be saints if only they believed. Other such scenarios could be outlined. The point is, even if God's granting us all rationally indubitable belief would involve us in increased sin, it would reduce sin in other ways. Maybe on the whole it would reduce sin more than

it would promote it. At any rate, who's to say the numbers come out as the divine mercy reply requires?

At least two things can be said in reply here. First, the objection grants that there is uncertainty concerning the numbers. In so far as the divine mercy reply can be thought of as a defence rather than a theodicy (i.e. as a possible scenario that could serve to explain divine hiddenness rather than a scenario put forward as *the* explanation of what is actually going on), it is perfectly consistent with uncertainty on this point. Second, the objector may be correct in thinking that in some possible worlds where God's existence is rationally indubitable for all, fewer sins of certain kinds would be committed, and more righteous acts by some. But even in worlds in which there are numerically fewer sins and more righteous acts there might be far greater moral culpability, with most people justifiably subject to much greater punishments than they are in our world. This would be the case if it were true that sins committed in a state of rationally indubitable belief in God are justifiably subject to greater punishment than sins not committed in such a state (even sins that are otherwise identical in type). I have argued that there are reasons to think this might be how culpability works; certainly it seems to be the biblical model. So there is some reason to think that a merciful God would prefer to order things in the way they actually are ordered in our world.

(8) There is more than one way for God to show us mercy. True, one way would be to limit our culpability by limiting our knowledge of Him. But another, perhaps better, way would be for God to just forgive us for our sins after the fact.

True, if God wishes to avoid punishing us there are different ways He could go about it. One way might be for God simply to forgive wrongdoers and hence not punish. However, other moral concerns, notably justice, might impose limits on the exercise of God's mercy to sinners (especially to unrepentant sinners). The very nature of forgiveness may also impose certain limits; consider that on some accounts forgiveness must involve a restoration of relationship and hence real remorse on the part of the offender. But there are no limits (or fewer limits?) on the extent to which God might try to limit our culpability beforehand. The divine mercy reply presents one possible strategy here.

(9) What of people who are thoroughly virtuous, such that, even if they were to become aware of God's reality, they would not have to fear greater culpability or moral corruption? Why does God remain hidden even to truly virtuous atheists and agnostics, or, for that matter, hidden to truly virtuous believers who nevertheless have some doubts and have never had a dramatic religious experience?

If one is a Christian, then arguably an earlier-quoted verse (Matthew 5:8) answers this question: if anyone is truly pure in heart then she will experience God's presence. Perhaps in this life, or perhaps in the next, but definitely

at some point. Of course, reference to an afterlife will seem to some like a desperate move. More tellingly, it is perhaps not entirely to the point. If my claim is that God refrains from revealing Himself to many of us – in this life – in order to spare us greater moral culpability for sins we will probably commit whether or not we are aware of His reality, then what of the privileged few who are not at risk of this greater culpability? Why should they be subjected to the same silence? I think it may come down to the numbers game. Suppose that the degree of virtue required for reliable safety from increased culpability is way beyond what we are typically familiar with – true saintliness perhaps. This seems a reasonable supposition, if one grants that any sin committed in open awareness of God is substantially more serious than it would have been otherwise (think again of the apple example). Suppose further that very few people attain this saintly state, which also seems plausible. Now, if they were few enough, then it would be consistent with available empirical data for me to claim that anyone who does reach that state *is* rewarded with a dramatic religious experience in this life. However, if on the other hand one were to claim that such saintliness is actually comparatively common, such that the empirical data does contradict my view, then it would be plausible to reply that the objector may be too liberal in his predications of saintliness. Either way, the force of the present objection is muted.

(10) If the divine mercy reply is supposed to be consistent with a biblical view of divine-human relations, how does it square with Romans 1:18–21? ‘The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that all men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.’

This does at first seem to conflict with the divine mercy reply. But it is not entirely clear whether this passage is meant to indicate that all people *at all times* have a knowledge of God, or if instead Paul’s reference class is more limited. A bit later in the same chapter, Paul writes of how people who originally had a knowledge of God gave it up, and God allowed them to drift into a state of ignorance. ‘They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator. . . . Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done’ (Romans 1:25, 28). That is, the widespread knowledge of God was lost, even if in some sense it remained naturally available. Perhaps those who initially gave up this knowledge were morally blameworthy in a

special way for doing so, but it may be that their descendants, born into this depraved state of affairs, through no fault of their own (or at least a lesser fault) lack a rationally indubitable belief in God. And perhaps, given their fallenness, this lack is not an entirely bad thing. Certainly Romans 1 has to be squared with Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17. Like the passage in Romans, Paul makes reference to idolatry and a lack of knowledge, but the emphasis is different. Here is what he says in Acts 17:24-31:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your poets have said, 'we are his offspring'. Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice . . .

The picture painted to the Athenian philosophers does not contradict the one presented to the church at Rome, but it is quite a different angle on the same state of affairs. Here, Paul seems to allow that idolaters might be such out of genuine ignorance. Perhaps this ignorance finds its ultimate origins in sin, but that is not the emphasis in this passage.

A good deal more would need to be said to provide a thorough reply to the present objection, but doing so would involve delving into biblical exegesis in considerably more detail than is proper for a work of philosophy. So I will just say that I think a case can be made for the consistency of the divine mercy reply with the picture of revelation and human responsibility provided in the bible.

Conclusion

The divine mercy reply provides a new and interesting way of addressing the problem of divine hiddenness. As noted in the introduction, I also suspect that taken by itself it is not fully satisfactory. As with the problem of evil, the best approach is probably a cumulative case combining multiple compatible and interrelated strategies of reply. But that is a longer project for another day.

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Notes

1. See for instance St Athanasius (1892), chs 11–15, St Augustine (1993), bk. 3, St John Chrysostom (1889), homilies 2, 4–8, and St Gregory Nazianzus (1894), 28.
2. See for instance Aijaz and Weidler (2007), Dumsday (2010a; 2010b), Evans (2006), Henry (2001; 2008), Howard-Snyder (1996), McKim (2001), Moser (2008), Murray (2002), Oakes (2008), Poston and Dougherty (2007), Rea (2009), Swinburne (1998; 2004), van Inwagen (2006), and Tucker (2008).
3. See his (1996; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2007a; 2008a; 2008b).
4. Though it will later be noted that even if one disputes this point, it will not affect the divine mercy reply.
5. For a summary of survey data collected over the past forty-five years see Spilka *et al.* (2003), 299–312. A representative example: in a 1978 study Hay and Morisy sampled 1,865 people in Britain. Thirty-six per cent responded affirmatively to the question 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?'. For further data and analysis see also Hay (1994). With respect to multiple such experiences across a single lifetime, Fenwick (1996), 170, writes that 'although about a third of all people have had the experience, only 18 percent have had it more than twice and only 8 percent 'often' and more'.
6. See Spilka *et al.* (2003), 308.
7. This worry would be lessened if van Inwagen (2006) were correct in thinking that in balancing acts of this sort there is no precise cut-off point. (Van Inwagen develops this notion in relation to the problem of evil and to why some are spared certain natural evils but not others; however, it seems applicable here. My thanks to Ted Poston for pointing this out to me.) As such, we will inevitably be left wondering why a particular individual lacks such experiences. On this view, the only answer is 'because someone had to'. There is a reason why *some* people lack such experiences, but there may not always be a specific reason why some *particular* person lacks it. This general point, if correct, might also help to address some of Schellenberg's (2007b, ch. 10) especially troubling cases of hiddenness.
8. Conflicting intuitions here may run deep; compare the mediaeval debate over whether one could sin even when faced with the beatific vision. Obviously those who thought that one could do so (like Ockham) held a much more robust view of the autonomy of the will than is allowed for by Swinburne *et al.* See Gaine (2003) for a review of some of the major moves in the debate. (Though note that a very high view of the will's natural autonomy is strictly consistent with holding that the vast majority, when faced with the vision, would give in to a compulsion to love God; in other words, one might maintain that the vision would impair moral autonomy without entirely wiping it out. And arguably impairment is all that is needed for the free-will defence.)
9. I pursue this in some further detail in my (2010a), though the main focus of that paper is the development of quite a different reply.
10. Assuming that it is possible that our moral autonomy would not be stifled in such a state of affairs, which will be a controversial point.
11. This point is one that can be made independently of any formal doctrine of the fall of man or original sin.
12. In fact I think traditional natural theology has a great deal going for it, and that it has received unfair criticism in some of the hiddenness literature. The commonality of religious experience across the population is also neglected.

13. See for instance Chrysostom (1889), homilies 16, 39, and 41, for references to differing degrees of punishment in hell.
14. For a recent argument for life after death on the basis of general as opposed to explicitly Christian theism, see Layman (2007), 189–192.
15. One might develop these points into another form of divine mercy reply: God mercifully refrains from granting us an indubitable awareness of Him in order to prevent the corruption of our character. The emphasis here would *not* be on God's wanting to spare us greater culpability and hence greater punishment, but rather on God's wanting to spare us from greater moral viciousness, because corruption of character is inherently bad – and, one might add, because a thoroughly corrupt individual is less likely to repent and less likely to develop a positive relationship with God.