

Why the problem of evil undermines the problem of divine hiddenness

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Abstract: The two most prominent arguments against theism are the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness. Here I argue that if the evidential problem of evil is truly forceful, it could block the ability of God to reveal His existence in a rationally indubitable way, which would in turn undermine the evidential problem of divine hiddenness.

Introduction

The problems of evil and of divine hiddenness are the most widely discussed arguments against theism in current philosophy of religion. Both can be divided into ‘logical’ and ‘evidential’ formulations.

Beginning with the problem of evil, the *logical* version can be stated as follows: since God is supposed to be all-knowing He knows any evil that is happening or about to happen; since He is supposedly all-powerful He is able to prevent and/or eradicate any such evil; and since He is supposedly wholly good He would surely do so. Hence if there were a God there would be no evil. But there is evil. Therefore there is no such God. (Alternative formulations of the logical problem proceed by reference to the massive *amount* of evil being incompatible with theism, or to particularly horrible *kinds* of evil being incompatible with theism.) By contrast, the *evidential* problem of evil leads to a weaker conclusion, namely the strong probability of atheism given the reality of evil (or, again, given the reality of the massive *amount* of evil or of certain *kinds* of evil). Proponents of the evidential argument differ on just how strong a probability of atheism the argument supplies, but presumably all hold it is well above 50 per cent.¹

With respect to hiddenness, Schellenberg (1993; 2007) formulates a logical version of the problem: on any well-formulated theism God loves us, and since

(1) love by its very nature entails the seeking of open relationship, and since (2) our ultimate well-being requires having a positive relationship with Him, *God would ensure that every mentally competent person is always able to engage in such a relationship just by trying*. Now, a precondition for engaging in such a relationship is belief that God exists, so God would ensure that there was no room for rational doubt about the truth of that belief. And yet we see that there are people who are willing to believe in God and willing to engage Him in relationship and yet who fail to believe – ‘non-resistant non-believers’. There is clearly room for rational doubt in our world. Since the existence of *any* non-resistant non-belief is inconsistent with theism, God does not exist. (Alternative formulations of the logical problem of hiddenness maintain that it is the massive *amount* of non-resistant non-belief that disproves theism, as in Drange (1993) and Keller (1995).) And just as the hiddenness argument can be formulated as a logical problem, it can likewise be put forth as an evidential problem, leading to the weaker conclusion that atheism is highly probable.²

While a substantial literature has developed on the problem of divine hiddenness in recent years, and a vast and ever-expanding literature on the problem of evil is a permanent feature of the intellectual landscape, relatively little has been written on the relationships between them. Schellenberg (2010) defends (quite effectively) the autonomy of hiddenness as a distinct problem. See also Schellenberg (1993, introduction). Van Inwagen (2002) likewise argues for their distinctness. Of course, seeing the problems as distinct requires taking ‘evil’ in the typical, narrower sense of ‘immorality and suffering’ as opposed to a broad sense of any state of affairs that is in some way negative. Taken in the latter broad sense, the problem of divine hiddenness collapses into the problem of evil; however, Schellenberg (2005, 210) rightly points out that when philosophers discuss evil they typically mean the problems of sin and suffering. And it is the relationship between divine hiddenness and the problem of evil in *that* sense which concerns us here. (If the reader prefers to define the problem of evil in the broader fashion, he/she can think of this article as a reflection not on the relationship between the problems of hiddenness and evil, but on the relationship between the problems of hiddenness and of sin and suffering.)

It is often thought that these two problems can work in tandem to constitute interlocking parts of a broader case for atheism. At first glance they certainly seem mutually reinforcing; and it is true that they can be taken as mutually reinforcing by those who employ logical formulations of each and view one or both arguments as decisive against theism. If one argument provides (or if both provide) a completely convincing disproof of theism, then they can certainly be used in tandem, even if one or the other may then seem redundant.

However, I suspect most philosophers who work on these arguments, including atheists, would admit that their force is not quite so decisive, which is one reason why many prefer an evidential formulation of both (with inevitable disagreements concerning the precise degrees of probability involved). To that audience I put the

following thesis: *the evidential problem of evil, if truly forceful to a high degree (while yet remaining a probabilistic argument), could block God's ability to reveal Himself in a rationally indubitable way, thus undermining the evidential problem of divine hiddenness.*

To preview the basic line of reasoning: to the extent that the evidential problem of evil makes for strong evidence against theism (even without functioning as an airtight disproof) it might constitute for some people (perhaps a great many) a rational defeater for theism. It might constitute a rational defeater even if theism were true, and even in the face of what might otherwise seem very good evidence for theism (such as universally accessible powerful religious experiences, impressive worldwide miracles, better arguments from natural theology, etc.). Evil might therefore constitute a powerful obstacle to God's being able to reveal His existence to people in a rationally indubitable fashion. So, even if God has adequate reason to allow the amounts and types of evil that He does, that evil might nevertheless forestall belief in God for some (perhaps many). Provided that God really is justified in allowing that evil, then He is off the hook for the attendant non-resistant non-belief that may accrue in its wake, since there may be nothing He can do to guarantee that non-resistant non-belief doesn't arise or become widespread.

That is the basic idea, to be developed in detail below. Clearly it is a very different sort of strategy for addressing the problem of divine hiddenness than that typically employed. Usually, both atheists and theists take it for granted that God *could* in any situation reveal His existence in a rationally indubitable way to anyone able and willing, and the question then becomes whether and how He could be justified in refraining from doing so. The theists argue that adequate justifications are available, while the atheists argue that they are not. Few have employed the alternative strategy of arguing that *perhaps not even God is capable of revealing His existence to all non-resistant people in a rationally indubitable fashion.*³

King (2008; 2013), however, has explored this alternative sort of strategy, and in great detail. He makes the case that even an omnipotent God may not be able to guarantee the absence of rational doubt among all willing people. King considers all the major models of divine revelation (e.g. direct religious experience, public miracles, granting us an inherent *sensus divinitatis*, etc.) and argues that given God's infinite perfection and omniproperties, none of these could succeed in revealing God's reality to us *specifically as God* in a rationally indubitable fashion. In making this case King references (among other sources) strains of Christian thought according to which direct cognitive access to God's essence is impossible for finite human intellects, strains present particularly in patristic and Eastern Orthodox theology.⁴ King then maintains that human interactions with God must always involve, in some way, an act of trust in God's self-testimony – our ineliminably finite cognitive capacities in the face of infinite Being simply require it.

The related idea I would like to explore here is that whether or not King's thesis holds true generally, in all possible worlds, it *does* hold true given the kind of world we are actually living in. That is, whether or not one agrees with King that in all

possible worlds human relations with God would have to involve an act of faith on our part that this being was indeed *God* specifically (as opposed to some really powerful demiurge etc.), it holds in our world, beset as it is with sin and suffering. So while anyone already sympathetic to King's position is liable to find mine agreeable as well, my case is narrower and could hold up even if King's more general thesis did not. To put the point a bit differently: one might maintain that in an evil-free world, God could reveal Himself to us *as God* in a rationally indubitable way via dramatic religious experience, even granting with King that that experience could not give us cognitive access to God's essence. Why? Because even a more truncated religious experience (merely hearing an awesome voice, feeling ecstasy, etc.), in the absence of any potential defeaters (like prevalent evil), might be sufficient to convince anyone able and willing that this being is what it claims to be (namely divine), in such a way that no act of faith on the part of the experiencer would be required. King would dispute this idea (and makes a plausible case for doing so). Still, one could grant it while yet maintaining that in a world like *ours*, where evil is prevalent, these more truncated modes of revelation might not suffice to trump the potential defeater that is the problem of evil. This is the idea I take up here – that, and the consequence flowing from it that the evidential problem of evil undermines the evidential problem of divine hiddenness.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: in the next section the argument I've sketched is developed in detail and set out in a more systematic premise/conclusion form. Then I take up eleven potential objections, while the final section sees some concluding remarks about the argument's implications.

How evil undermines hiddenness

When I teach the problem of evil in my introductory philosophy class, I like to get the discussion off the ground by asking students to recount some of the terrible things that have come up in the news over just the preceding week. (The last time I did this, the list included such items as the ongoing Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, a severe outbreak of the Ebola virus, a deadly volcano in Japan, ongoing civil conflict in the Ukraine, local murders, etc.) I then ask them to imagine the multiplication of such incidents millions of times over across the world, just in that same brief week-long time span, and then to repeat the thought for the previous month, the previous year, and the entire course of human history. This adds up to quite a mass of horrors. And this God that supposedly exists could stop any and all of it, at any point, and instantly remedy the after-effects. How then could a good, all-powerful Being who is aware of what is going on refrain from stepping in? At that point the theists in class are usually anxious to begin suggesting reasons why God might be justified in His usual policy of non-interference, and the discussion typically comes to centre on the pros and cons of free-will defences, soul-making theodicies, sceptical theism, and assorted faith-specific strategies (e.g. our sufferings can contribute to our own and others' redemption, God incarnate

experienced just as much suffering as we do, all will be rectified in the afterlife, etc.). As expected, reactions differ – some find such explanatory strategies compelling, others not. For some, reflection on the problem of evil is liable to transform agnosticism into atheism or to reinforce pre-existing atheism. How should a theist view such a reaction? Obviously she must think it problematic, since on her view it is inconsistent with a truth (a highly important truth at that). But the issues surrounding all of these arguments are complex and difficult. Moreover, some disputes surrounding traditional defences and theodicies seem to boil down to differences in deep-level moral intuitions, themselves the focus of perennial disagreement. Recall for example a common theistic point: God properly gives us freedom and preserves it despite its attendant risks of abuse by us, since freedom is a necessary precondition for genuine love. Coerced or pre-determined ‘love’ is not really love at all, or at the very least nowhere near so valuable a form of love as love freely given and received. And consider a common agnostic/atheist comeback: even if preserving our free will were necessary to preserve a capacity for genuine love, is such a capacity worth the risk of rampant murder and torture and child abuse and genocide? Mightn’t it be better to live in a loveless world provided it was guaranteed to be devoid of all *that*? The dispute here seems to turn on foundational (or near-foundational) differences in intuitions about (and perhaps personal commitments toward) the values of love and freedom, and it is far from clear how to adjudicate such foundational differences.

Consider then the following scenario: my agnostic and atheist students find Hick’s (1981) soul-making theodicy unconvincing, even though it is in fact true, such that the problem of evil is, objectively speaking, resolved. What exactly could be added to Hick’s own treatment to make the case more compelling? Certainly much of the secondary literature that surrounds his theodicy is valuable, but that literature includes both pro and con contributions, and it may or may not be that reflection on it will make the original case look more convincing. They may find that, even after a thorough examination, the problem of evil remains pressing. Now imagine that there is a dramatic, worldwide miracle – the stars being rearranged to spell a Bible verse (in English?) is a stock example. Is such an event bound to convince any rational, non-resistant non-believer? Must my atheist and agnostic students come to accept God’s reality, even though they lack what is (from their well-considered perspective) a good answer to the problem of evil? Frankly no. A rational person could still reason that while such worldwide miraculous events prove the existence of some immensely powerful intelligence, and perhaps even the being to whom divinity is attributed in the Bible, it would do nothing to show that this being is morally good. If anything one might think it tells *against* the goodness of such a being: clearly if it is powerful enough to arrange the stars in this way, it is powerful enough to have stopped the holocaust in its early days, prevented 9/11, cured cancer, etc. Not having done so, whatever being this is, it isn’t God.

Still, surely such an event would provide for rational doubt about atheism/agnosticism? Perhaps. However it would not clearly act as a rational defeater for either position, at least not for someone who thinks the problem of evil likely lacks an adequate solution. One might witness a miracle and still think, rationally, that the force of the problem of evil trumps it (even if the problem of evil is *not* taken to be a 100 per cent conclusive disproof of theism – remember, we’re still working with the evidential version). At best then, a worldwide miracle might compel someone to move from unfriendly atheism to friendly atheism (in Rowe’s sense of an atheist who admits that some theists are rational in accepting theism), but it wouldn’t compel an abandonment of either atheism or agnosticism.

If a global miracle cannot do the trick, given the reality of evil, might other forms of revelation? Consider for instance Schellenberg’s (1993, 49) own preferred model of divine self-disclosure, whereby every person, upon reaching the age of reason, is granted a powerfully convincing religious experience, one revelatory of God’s reality and love. This experience is then rendered continuous, or at least continuously available, to that individual for the remainder of her life, provided she does not actively resist it. Let’s assume then that preventing non-resistant non-belief (the prevalence or mere occurrence of it) would indeed require God’s provision of multiple, powerful religious experiences to every person on the planet. Even granting that is a necessary condition, would it prove sufficient? Contra Schellenberg, that is doubtful. This immensely powerful, seemingly good being with whom one is in regular experiential contact is obviously allowing a steady stream of torture and murder and disease and natural disasters etc. When this being, the object of these powerful religious experiences, is questioned concerning why He is allowing these horrors, He recounts something like Hick’s soul-making theodicy, or perhaps says that the answer is beyond our ken. Just as many now rationally find such answers unconvincing, some (many?) might continue to find them unconvincing when uttered by this being that claims divinity. After all, is He really as good as He seems? Wouldn’t He intervene more if He were genuinely good? If the problem of evil carries significant force, non-resistant non-belief may be rationally indefeasible for some people, even on Schellenberg’s preferred model of divine self-disclosure. That may be the case even if the problem of evil really does have a solution, indeed even if that solution has already been articulated in detail in the existing philosophical literature. And if *that* is the case, then the force of the problem of divine hiddenness is drastically lessened, for that problem rests on the assumption that God is able to prompt belief in His existence in any non-resistant non-believer.

It might be worth stating this defence against hiddenness a bit more formally:

Premise 1 – If the evidential problem of evil carries great force (a force which can persist rationally⁵ even in the face of correct solutions, as some friendly theists admit), then God cannot fittingly⁶ prompt theistic belief in all (perhaps even most) non-resistant non-believers.

Premise 2 – The evidential problem of evil carries great force (a force which can persist rationally even in the face of correct solutions, as some friendly theists admit).

Conclusion 1/Premise 3 – Therefore, God cannot fittingly prompt theistic belief in all (perhaps even most) non-resistant non-believers.

Premise 4 – If God cannot fittingly prompt theistic belief in all (perhaps even most) non-resistant non-believers, then the evidential problem of divine hiddenness is unsound.

Final Conclusion – Therefore, the evidential problem of divine hiddenness is unsound.

As seen above, the justification for premise 2 is found in (a) the high quality of atheist contributions to the debate on evil, (b) the seeming rational deniability of even the best theistic replies, and (c) the fact that that deniability appears to obtain even if those replies actually work. Premise 1 finds support in the fact that the rational force of the evidential problem of evil would not obviously be removed in the face of divine revelations of various kinds. Finally, premise 4 is entailed by the structure of the problem of divine hiddenness, which must assume that God is able to grant theistic belief to all (or most) non-resistant non-believers.

Objections

- (1) *Maybe God can't rid the world of all non-resistant non-belief, or even most of it, but He could lessen its prevalence by revealing Himself experientially to all agnostics and atheists who would be convinced by such a revelation (i.e. to all those who don't find the problem of evil to be so forceful as to constitute a rational defeater for theism even in the face of dramatic religious experience). So while the hiddenness problem as standardly formulated may fail on account of the force of the problem of evil, a revised version might not fail, provided its scope be restricted to those atheists and agnostics who aren't so bothered by the evidential problem of evil. Surely a loving God would make Himself known where He can. To put the point a bit differently: at best the above argument will simply prompt the advocate of the evidential problem of divine hiddenness to work with a different formulation of the problem, one that focuses not on the mere occurrence or prevalence of non-resistant non-belief, but rather on the mere occurrence or prevalence of divinely preventable non-resistant non-belief.*

It's worth observing first that such an objection concedes a good deal: that both the logical and evidential problems of hiddenness, as usually formulated, are unsound. (From a theistic perspective, that's some progress, at any rate.) The objection then suggests that by focusing on a much more specific *kind* of ignorance of God, theism can still be disproven. Similar concessions are sometimes made in

discussions of evil, with some maintaining that while God is justified in allowing large amounts and many kinds of evil, some specific kind of evil still suffices to disprove theism. (Think for instance of the dialogue in the *Brothers Karamazov* where Ivan tells Alyosha that God would be justified in permitting the widespread suffering of adults, since we deserve whatever befalls us, but that the suffering of children should turn one away from God's kingdom.)

One response might be to stress the instability of resulting theistic belief. That is, while there may be some atheists and agnostics who would become theists if confronted with powerful religious experiences, despite the problem of evil, it is another question entirely whether they would *remain* theists in the face of new iterations and/or experiences of the problem. For instance, will Bob (a newly minted theist on account of his recent vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary) remain a theist after his son becomes a quadriplegic and God declines to heal him? Or, at that point, will the rational force of the evidential problem of evil be brought home more strenuously, prompting a return to atheism despite a previous (or even ongoing) religious experience? Or, more prosaically, an atheist or agnostic might think to him/herself 'I am not totally convinced by the problem of evil, and would accept theism if only God showed Himself to me somehow', and then experience such a revelation (or ongoing series of revelations) and yet eventually come to rethink the problem of evil and repudiate his/her newfound theism. The key point is this: if the force of the problem is truly great, such that it can function as a rational defeater for theism even in the face of powerful religious experiences, then non-resistant non-belief would remain a perennial risk for those (current) atheists and agnostics who believe (rightly) that they would accept theism (at least initially) upon receiving direct experiential evidence.

In other words, God may well be concerned that people come to believe that He exists, in so far as belief in theism is assumed (at least by Schellenberg) to be a necessary condition for a positive relationship with God.⁷ However, presumably He wants *stable*, persistent belief, including belief in the face of some rational doubt – in other words, the sort of belief that is often referred to as 'faith'. Blasting people with dramatic religious experiences or miracles might be effective in prompting initial belief in some who are currently atheists and agnostics, but it may not be the best way to lead them into a path of stable, long-term belief that is conducive to a truly deep and lasting positive relationship, especially in an evil-bloated world. Might there be a better way? Perhaps. Maybe part of God's strategy for building faith that will last is allowing people the space to develop a belief in Him using the existing (imperfect) resources of natural theology, the authority of certain religious traditions, etc. These plausible but questionable paths to theism might be just the ticket for building up the *virtue* of faith (remember, in some traditions it is viewed not merely as an epistemic state but as a moral virtue), which virtue, once acquired, can persist in the face of evil.

Such a strategy might involve the risk that some who genuinely need a dramatic experience to achieve initial belief will *never* achieve it. Is God bound to address

such cases? And if so how might He do so? First, it is not immediately clear that there actually are any such cases – that anyone truly *needs* such experience to acquire rational belief in the truth of theism. (Certainly the introspective evidence for it would be trickier to assess than the introspective evidence for mere non-resistant non-belief.) But even if the existence of such cases be granted, it may be that they are relatively rare, and that in such cases God *does* grant religious experiences. After all, religious experiences are actually quite common across the population, with a little more than one-third of all people having at least one powerful such experience in the course of a lifetime.⁸

In sum: God may have good reason not to grant personal revelations to all atheists and agnostics who would thereby probably convert to theism. Concerning those who would probably *only* convert on account of such an experience, one might plausibly question whether there are such people; and even if one grants that there are, they may be few in number and for all we know God may in fact already be granting them such experiences.

- (2) *You have way too pessimistic a view of God's capacity to make His reality apparent. True, perhaps a worldwide miracle wouldn't do the job in all cases, nor perhaps Schellenberg's preferred model of divine self-disclosure. But surely God, if real, could do something such that everyone (or at least all non-resistant non-believers) would be compelled to accept His reality, with no room for rational doubt from the problem of evil or any other source. How exactly would this work? Who knows? But there must be a way, and God would know it. Maybe He could implant directly a belief in theism in the minds of all people, or grant them all mystical experiences of such overwhelming power that their object would be rationally indubitable.*

Such a view is problematic. As noted in the Introduction, King (2008) examines in depth a number of different possible modes of revelation (miracle, personal religious experience, the direct implanting of strong intuitions in favour of theism, etc.) and short of what he terms 'eschatological revelation' (i.e., bringing on the apocalypse) he argues that all leave room for doubt on the part of free rational agents. Personally I am not sure that even eschatological revelation would do the trick, though at least in that case it is obvious why God might justifiably delay implementing the strategy.

God could directly plant either an explicit belief in Him, or at least an implicit disposition to come to belief under mild stimulation (as in Reformed epistemology). But King argues that in the end the resulting belief would still be rationally dubitable, in that we could rationally come to doubt the trustworthiness of the source of this implanted belief. And indeed, the prevalence of evil would give one powerful reason to doubt the benevolence and hence trustworthiness of any such source of theistic belief.

One might argue that God could nevertheless implant in us a belief in Him so strong that we would be psychologically incapable of coming to accept atheism, even if we came to believe that the problem of evil provided a rational defeater. An analogy can be found in external world scepticism: we are psychologically incapable of doubting the reality of the external physical world, even if we come to believe that the sceptical arguments rationally defeat that belief.

I am actually not sure that we are psychologically incapable of doubting the reality of the external physical world; a very good friend of mine is a committed Berkeleyan idealist. Similarly, I am not sure that even God could render us 'psychologically unable' to accept atheism (assuming of course that He is *not* overriding our free will). However, even if God could implant such a psychologically irresistible belief in us, recall that on the problem of divine hiddenness the whole point of having such a belief is that it is a precondition for pursuing relationship with God. And it's not clear that a belief of that sort, a belief that the person takes to be irrational yet can't help but accept, would serve as a proper precondition for seeking relationship. It might just as easily be resented, and/or actively (if unsuccessfully) resisted, such that no positive relationship would be forthcoming. In other words, even if God could do this, it's not clear that it would really serve the axiological purpose that grounds its relevance to the hiddenness problem.

As to the idea that God could give us overwhelmingly powerful mystical experiences: would these really be effective, especially long-term, after the ecstasy has ended and in the face of the latest news report of terrible natural disasters or murdered schoolchildren? As noted earlier, that seems doubtful, given the assumption that the evidential problem of evil is truly forceful.

As a counter-reply, maybe God could give us a direct experience of the divine essence, i.e., the beatific vision, which would remain permanently indubitable even upon its conclusion. Well, it may be that *that* would permanently bestow belief in God, if indeed such an experience is possible for us (and as noted in the Introduction, King (2008) argues on both philosophical and theological grounds that it is not possible for anyone). But even those theistic traditions which admit of this conception of the beatific vision sometimes specify limits on who may properly enter it, and under what conditions. The standard Roman Catholic understanding, for instance, takes the virtue of faith to be a requisite precondition. It would not be seen as a proper solution to non-resistant non-belief generally.⁹

- (3) *Even if God can't reveal His existence directly, experientially, in a manner that would be rationally indubitable in and of itself, surely He could at least reveal the correct, currently unknown-to-us theodicy in a way that would defuse the problem of evil. Since He could do so, the problem of evil need not remain a perennial source of rational doubt, and so God once again is on the hook for non-resistant non-belief and the problem of divine hiddenness goes forward.*

Granting for the time being the objector's assumption that the correct theodicy is currently unknown to us, perhaps this theodicy (whatever it is) is actually beyond our finite understanding, such that God cannot reveal it to us. The idea that the warrant for evil at least *might* be beyond us is familiar from the sceptical theism literature, so this suggestion should not seem untoward in the present context. And if God cannot reveal His existence to us through direct experience, nor reveal to us the correct theodicy, then in the midst of an evil world that evil will continue to supply grounds for rational doubt that God cannot dispel.

As a counter-reply, a referee makes the following point, which I quote here verbatim:

Author's reply to this objection is that skeptical theism might be true, in which case it might be impossible for us to understand God's actual reasons for allowing evil. I agree that, if there were such reasons, it might be impossible for us to understand those reasons *without divine assistance*. But surely an omnipotent God could cause us to understand those reasons (perhaps by miraculously circumventing our limited cognitive faculties) even if those reasons are beyond our ken without God's help. (emphasis added)

However, I am not sure that divine aid could guarantee our ability to understand the reasons for evil. It may depend on the precise reasons for our inability. For instance, what if our inability to grasp the correct theodicy is rooted in the fact that this theodicy essentially references a quantitatively infinite set of states of affairs (e.g. future consequences of actions stretching into eternity, or a Molinist-style infinite web of possible people and their free acts)? Is it possible for a finite intellect to grasp an infinite set, even with divine assistance? This is at least unclear, which lack of clarity suffices to run the present reply. Or, for another example, consider the suggestion that the correct theodicy essentially references a *qualitatively* infinite state of affairs (e.g. perhaps the individual essence of the best-of-all-possible-worlds). Again, that may be beyond us, even with divine assistance. And for all we know there may be other sorts of reasons why the currently-unknown-to-us theodicy is inherently unknowable to a finite intellect, reasons having nothing to do with infinities.

(4) *The response just given still leaves room for one to run a probabilistic argument for atheism from hiddenness. That is, one could argue that while it is possible that not even God could enlighten us as to the adequate justification of His permission of evil, that state of affairs is unlikely. It is in fact more likely than not that an omnipotent God could convey the correct theodicy to us, and since it is clearly the case that He has not (thus allowing non-resistant non-belief), it is probable that there is no such God.¹⁰*

In response, I should note that how one assesses the relevant probabilities here is contingent on how one assesses the prior plausibility of sceptical theism (in its

various incarnations) as a response to the problem of evil. Views on this of course differ substantially; some philosophers view sceptical theism favourably, and they are in consequence liable to view my initial reply to objection (3.3) favourably. That is, they will think it a live possibility that God might be unable to tell us the correct theodicy (because that theodicy might well be beyond our ken, for whatever reason), and as such they will take seriously the possibility that God will be unable to reveal Himself to us (in the context of our horror-laden world) in a manner immune to rational doubt. Those who incline towards sceptical theism will thus not accept the referee's idea that a compelling probabilistic hiddenness argument will remain here; rather, they will maintain that the relevant probabilities are at best inscrutable, since it just isn't clear whether God is able to reveal to us the correct, currently-unknown-to-us theodicy.

On the other hand, many other philosophers (myself included) are dubious of sceptical theism, and incline instead to the view that the correct theodicy is probably already on the philosophical table, or at least that it is in principle knowable. Yet many philosophers (again myself included) also incline to the view that this correct, knowable theodicy *remains susceptible of rational rejection* (in company with many other sound philosophical arguments). In other words, many theistic philosophers would accept a sort of friendly theism – i.e. the view that theism is true (and rationally preferable) but that atheism can also be rationally maintained. At any rate, from our perspective one of the assumptions of objection (3), namely that the correct theodicy is currently unknown to us, is faulty. The rejection of that assumption would supply a way of responding to (3) while also sidestepping (4).

And yet, if the correct theodicy is known or knowable, that seemingly leads to another, closely related objection.

- (5) *Assume instead that one of the existing theodicies – Hick's soul-making theodicy, say – is in fact true and in principle knowable by the finite human intellect. The author has claimed that this knowable theodicy nevertheless remains rationally susceptible of rejection. But since, by hypothesis, the theodicy is knowable, surely an omnipotent God could intervene and supply us with whatever additional information or base-level moral intuitions are required to render its rejection irrational. That is, once we understand Hick's theodicy, if our justification for rationally rejecting it is rooted in, for instance, an erroneous fundamental moral intuition (say, regarding the relationship between free will and genuine love), God could surely step in and correct this by granting us the true fundamental moral intuition.*¹¹

This might not fully resolve the problem. Imagine how this scenario might actually play out: Bob and Sue are both non-resistant non-believers due to the rational force of the problem of evil. In particular, they reject Hick's soul-making theodicy because they both (blamelessly) hold an incorrect fundamental moral

intuition regarding the respective axiological weights of love versus freedom. Now, one day Bob and Sue hear a voice coming from the heavens, which voice claims to be that of God. It says the following: ‘You rationally reject my existence because, through no fault of your own, you hold some incorrect fundamental moral intuitions. If you’ll just allow me to intervene in your cognitive/affective apparatus to adjust your fundamental moral intuitions, you will then see that the problem of evil is not decisive against theism, and will come to believe rationally in my existence. Will you allow me to thus correct your cognitive/affective apparatus, such that you will be able then to believe in me and enter into a relationship of love and devotion?’ Faced with this choice, Bob accepts the intervention and becomes a rational theist. Sue on the other hand, remaining sceptical of whether this being is telling the truth about Who it really is, declines to allow it to adjust her moral intuitions. She thus remains an atheist. The question now becomes: has Sue done anything blameworthy or irrational here, such that she loses her status as a genuinely *non-resistant* non-believer? Arguably not. In fact I think it is far from clear that she’s done anything wrong or irrational. After all, look at the situation from her perspective: a being who claims to control the world (and by implication claims to allow its constant stream of horrors) is offering to mess with her mind in order to make her believe it divine and thus facilitate her coming to love and worship it. *From Sue’s perspective*, is it really obvious that her choice to opt out of this cognitive/affective interference is either blameworthy or irrational? If not, my argument can go through.

Of course, one might suggest that this being should simply ignore Sue’s refusal and intervene against her will. But many theistic traditions (e.g. Orthodox Christianity) would deny that God would do this – indeed, they claim that His respect for our freedom is an important part of the correct theodicy that the hypothetical intervention is meant to render convincing. Moreover, if this being did ignore Sue’s refusal, that might subsequently give her rational grounds to doubt these new moral intuitions. She might ask herself: ‘Can I properly trust these new moral intuitions, given that they were granted me by a being who was willing to mess with my mind without my consent, indeed against my will?’

Alternatively, one might suggest that this being shouldn’t even ask Sue: It should just intervene and give her the correct moral intuitions, without asking. That way It wouldn’t be acting against her will.

In reply, while in that situation God would not be acting against Sue’s *explicit* wishes, such intervention might still violate her will in a meaningful sense, *if it remains the case that Sue likely would have refused, had she been asked*. And perhaps for many non-resistant non-believers, that is the case.

But what if Sue’s erroneous moral intuitions (whichever ones are interfering with her accepting the truth of Hick’s theodicy) were not freely acquired by her in the first place? What if she just blamelessly picked them up in early childhood, or through a quirk in her genetic programming? Surely in that case God’s intervention would not be overriding her freedom in any really problematic sense.

In reply, arguably our deep-level moral intuitions still remain subject to our freedom, at least indirectly. (For example, we may not be able to choose to change a certain deep-level moral belief *right away*, but we may be able to choose to open ourselves up to gradually shifting our perspective on the matter, over time.) Empirical evidence for this is found in the fact that people often differ in these intuitions (such that some find Hick's theodicy compelling and others don't) and sometimes change these intuitions, especially over time (such that some are gradually won over to or from Hick's theodicy). Consequently, for traditional theists who think that God rightly respects our freedom, this sort of intervention would still be seen as potentially problematic.

Of course, it must be granted that the relevant moral epistemology here is tricky; it is controversial whether and to what extent our deep-level moral intuitions are subject to free alteration. But to run this reply it is not necessary that I demonstrate the point – again, to cast doubt on the present objection, it suffices to show that the idea is plausible, and the fact that it is the subject of live debate in moral epistemology helps to indicate that in fact it is.

- (6) *Any atheist who remained an atheist after seeing the stars rearranged to spell out John 3:16 would ipso facto be a resistant non-believer. In other words, the problem of evil is not as forceful as you think it is – it is not sufficiently forceful to ground rational disbelief in the face of the sorts of experiential evidence referenced above. So if God existed, He'd provide just such a revelation.*

If someone is strongly inclined to think that an all-powerful, all-knowing, good God would not have allowed the holocaust or the holodomor or the bombing of Hiroshima or the daily ravages of malaria/blindness/brain injury/cancer/AIDS/tuberculosis/psychosis, etc., it seems that what is needed are some good reasons as to why a good God might allow those things (or at least a good reason to think that His reasons are beyond our ken). If one is not satisfied with existing defences and theodicies, mere displays of power may not fill that gap; indeed, as noted earlier, they might actually widen it. ('This being is clearly immensely powerful, so why doesn't it intervene?') Likewise, other, more intimate modes of revelation might not do the trick. True, all such purported revelations would affect the balance of probabilities. Few would claim that such revelatory strategies carry *no* evidential weight (except perhaps those who think the problem of evil carries not great force, but rather 100 per cent decisive force, which, as noted earlier, is a view I am not addressing here). However, the key issue is whether they leave room for rational doubt in the face of the problem of evil. It is plausible to believe that they do, and that plausibility is enough for the argument I've attempted to defend above.

- (7) *Your argument requires theists to admit that, in consequence of the evidential problem of evil, some doubt in theism is rational. In other*

words, the argument requires the adoption of friendly theism (to employ again the variant on Rowe's terminology). Some theists will resist this.

True – for instance, some theists respond to the problem of divine hiddenness by denying the existence of genuinely non-resistant non-belief, and would presumably maintain in consequence that atheists cannot be justified in their atheism.¹² Given the disputed status of that view, even among theists, it makes sense to try to develop alternative strategies for addressing the problem of divine hiddenness, of which the present effort is one.

- (8) *The evidential problem of evil carries very little force, whereas the evidential problem of divine hiddenness carries a great deal. As such, the former does not undermine the latter.*

This objection targets premise 2 of my argument, and it is true that an advocate of the hiddenness problem could make this move. However, it is a move that many atheist and agnostic thinkers would resist. Moreover, it would leave untouched a key idea, namely: *to the extent that the evidential problem of evil carries great force, it will undermine the problem of divine hiddenness, thus blocking the development of a cumulative case for atheism employing both of the two most prominent arguments for that position.*

- (9) *It is widely acknowledged that God already has lots of reasons to prevent evil. But given the first premise of the argument formulated above, it might be thought that God now has even more reasons than we thought. This is because, the intrinsic badness of suffering aside, if God permits lots of evil, we're going to have a bunch of non-resistant non-belief to deal with. Put another way, it seems as though the problem of evil could be intensified by the problem of divine hiddenness – making evil even more problematic. But then the problem of divine hiddenness is still playing an important role, if not a fully autonomous role: it intensifies the problem of evil.¹³*

This objection would imply that even if the problem of evil undermined the problem of divine hiddenness, the prospect is raised that the overall case for atheism could conceivably be strengthened, by way of hiddenness intensifying the problem of evil.

I think this is actually a worry. If the amount of evil in the world really does inhibit God's ability to make Himself known to us in a rationally indubitable way, that is indeed another reason, at least *prima facie*, why He shouldn't permit that amount of evil in the first place. That doesn't render the evidential problem of evil indefeasible; there may yet be workable defences out there. But it does apparently strengthen the problem.

Nevertheless, this objection does not actually conflict with my thesis, namely that to the extent that the evidential problem of evil carries great force, it

undermines the evidential problem of hiddenness. That remains a significant conclusion, even if, from the perspective of natural theology, it does raise the unwelcome spectre of a 'two-steps-forward-one-step-back' scenario here.

- (10) *There is a level of evil, L, in the world. Let us grant that this gives significant counterweight to any claim that there is a God. But let us also grant that there is some positive evidence for God, of level E, which all (or most) enquiring non-resistant non-believers have ready access to. One way of putting the evidential problem of evil is that E is less than L in some sense. Under this way of formulating the evidential problem of evil, it then seems that if God could raise the level of positive evidence from E to E', such that E' is now greater than L, then any non-resistant person with access to E' and L should now believe. This might be done by creating some new evidence or by showing them evidence already given by God which they had not yet seen or understood. Since moving from E to E' seems consistent with (and perhaps the same as) a reduction in divine hiddenness, then it does look as if the evidential problem of evil can be supplemented by atheists appealing also to the problem of divine hiddenness: if God would just raise E to E' then the relevant person might believe.¹⁴*

This objection can be dealt with in an analogous manner to the reply provided for (1). For while it's true that there might be circumstances where the force of the evidential problem of evil could be overridden for some individual by the provision of further evidence of theism, the difficulty remains that the resulting situation might well be unstable. Should the individual encounter more evil, or new kinds of evil, for instance, the weighting might well change once again. One might propose that whenever this occurs, God should simply up the ante and provide yet more evidence for theism. But surely in many cases the individual might become disillusioned with the whole process, and begin to think that since the evidence for evil has won out continually in the past, it is liable to continue to do so well into the future, no matter what new miracles/religious experiences this seemingly callous supernatural being supplies to act as a sop for continual non-intervention. Again, the better strategy for God to pursue might be one involving the attempted inculcation of *faith* for the sake of stable belief, including stable belief in the face of rational doubt arising from evil.

- (11) *Here's a way God could deal with non-resistant non-belief (or for that matter any kind of non-belief): simply override people's free will such that they find themselves believing in His existence, and totally unable to doubt. So long as God does this, nothing could undermine belief in theism, no matter how wretched the amount of evil. Consequently there would be no more worries about the potential evidential insufficiency of worldwide miracles, religious experiences, etc., in the face of*

evil. Moreover, in order to do this God would not have to take away our free will altogether; He would just have to take away our free will with respect to theistic belief. We could still choose freely whether or not to love God etc.

Schellenberg (2007) has floated this sort of idea, namely that the good of knowing that God exists (if indeed He were real) would be such a centrally important good that God would be justified in overriding our free will in order to grant it to us – indeed, that His love for us would *demand* this overriding of our freedom.

Several things might be said by way of reply. First, as noted above, many traditional theists (e.g. Eastern Orthodox Christians, Orthodox Jewish believers, etc.) will reject this idea as incompatible with authoritative religious teachings. On their view, God made us free and is settled on respecting that freedom. This is part of the significance of the story of the fall (whether interpreted literally or as a myth indicative of certain theological and moral truths): that biblical story tells us that God loves us, but it also tells us that He will respect our moral autonomy, come what may. Philosophers can of course question whether that degree of regard for personal freedom is really morally justifiable; there may be good arguments on both sides. But many Christian¹⁵ and Jewish philosophers are dogmatically¹⁶ committed to rejecting the present objection. Thus, one reply an Orthodox Christian or Orthodox Jewish thinker could make to this objection would go as follows: that objection might apply if levelled against *generic* theism (combined with a lower view of the moral import of human freedom), but it has no application against *Judaeo-Christian* theism. At least, it has no application in the following sense: Christian and Orthodox Jewish philosophers will simply not find it convincing. As a counter-reply one might argue that that merely goes to show yet another problem with Judaeo-Christian theism: an implausible over-emphasis on the importance of human freedom. That will of course lead into a larger debate that cannot be adjudicated here.

Second, the objection may be underestimating the degree of divine compulsion this would involve (underestimating in a different way than that just suggested). It was observed earlier that an implanted belief or tendency to believe would still rationally be subject to doubt, as the individual could come to doubt the source of the implanted belief. On the model being suggested here, God renders the individual unable to doubt the belief. But how? This would seem to involve a sort of layering: God would have to eliminate not only the ability to doubt the propositional content of the belief, but also eliminate the ability to entertain doubts about the reliability of whatever cause may have implanted that belief. And He would have to eliminate the still higher-level questioning by the individual as to why she finds herself unable to doubt these things, and to eliminate any doubts that may arise upon *that* realization, etc. In other words, God's compelling a belief in theism, such that it cannot be doubted, could well entail a much greater

degree of cognitive interference than at first appeared. And that might make the proposal still more worrisome.

Conclusion

After introducing the problems of evil and divine hiddenness and distinguishing between their logical and evidential formulations, I outlined briefly my argument that the evidential problem of evil undermines the evidential problem of divine hiddenness. I further classified the argument as falling under the same sort of strategy of reply developed by King (2008; 2013), while yet distinct from his particular version of that strategy. Then I developed the argument in greater detail and presented it in premise/conclusion form, and proceeded to consider potential objections.

What is the upshot? For atheists who employ the evidential problem of evil as an argument against theism, it means that the evidential problem of divine hiddenness is cut off as an argumentative resource (except in so far as hiddenness can play the indirect role of strengthening the problem of evil, noted in the reply to objection 9 above). For theists on the prowl for novel defences against the evidential problem of divine hiddenness, the present argument can be employed, though at the cost of adopting friendly theism: the idea that there is such a thing as rational atheism. There are people who rationally and through no fault of their own reject the reality of God (in this case due to reflection on the evidential problem of evil). For some theists, this cost will be regarded as a substantial one, indeed perhaps too high a cost to bear. However, for those already inclined toward friendly theism, this will be no cost at all. (And obviously one can grant that the evidential problem of evil provides rational grounds for atheism without thereby admitting the stronger claim that it rationally *compels* atheism.)¹⁷

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Notes

1. The precise characterization of the distinction between the logical and evidential problems of evil has been a matter of controversy. However, the characterization used here does reflect the majority view in the current literature.
2. Note that I am passing over some other significant differences between these authors. Thus while Schellenberg, Keller, and Maitzen (2006) target what might be termed 'generic' theism (i.e. any well-formulated theism from any religion or philosophy), Drange specifically targets *Christian* theism. And Keller employs his argument not to advocate atheism, but to advocate a version of process theism in which God is not omnipotent.
3. It is somewhat ironic that even today's advocates of the hiddenness argument do typically take it for granted that God, if He existed, could reveal Himself as God to any non-resistant non-believer via direct religious experience. (Schellenberg (1993, 49) for instance argues that if God were real His preferred model of revelation would be to grant all people an ongoing series of powerful religious experiences beginning in early childhood, such that rational doubt could never get a foothold – more on this below.) After all, in the philosophy of religion literature of the 1950s and 1960s essentially the opposite was taken for granted: given an empiricist epistemology (often paired with a verificationist theory of meaning), it was assumed that an allegedly immaterial being could not possibly make its reality apparent via experience. Religious experiences could properly be dismissed as non-veridical *a priori*, and commonly were. The problem of divine hiddenness would thus have been seen by most atheist philosophers of that era as a non-starter, which is one reason why the problem doesn't get picked up again in the literature until the 1980s and 1990s, well after the death of logical positivism.
4. For some relevant theological differences here between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox conceptions of the beatific vision, see King (2008, 92–97).
5. Note that there are important complexities lurking here concerning the precise understanding of 'rationality', complexities that need further exploration in the context of the problems of evil and hiddenness. For some helpful discussion with respect to the latter see King (2008, 206–219). The situation is not aided by the fact that the nature of rationality is the subject of ongoing dispute in the broader philosophical literature – consult Mele and Rawling (2004) for an entry point into that broader literature.
6. By 'fittingly' here I just mean 'without overriding human free will'. Some argue that such an overriding would actually be appropriate in this context. I'll take up that claim shortly.
7. Of course, this has been questioned; some replies to the hiddenness problem focus on the possibility of having a positive, deeply meaningful relationship with God even in the absence of conscious belief in theism. See for instance Evans (2006).
8. For a summary of relevant survey data collected by sociologists and psychologists of religion 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’.

9. If these obstacles are really so persistent, then shouldn’t God just override our freedom concerning whether or not to believe in His reality, and compel belief? I treat this as a separate objection below.
10. My thanks to the same referee for raising this counter.
11. My thanks again to the present referee for pressing me on this.
12. See for instance Azadegan (2013) and Henry (2001; 2008).
13. My thanks to Jason Marsh for this objection, which I reproduce here verbatim. My thanks also to an anonymous referee for challenging my initial reply, which was unsound.
14. My thanks to Rolfe King for this objection, which I reproduce here verbatim.
15. I say ‘many’ because there are of course some denominations (e.g. traditional Reformed /Calvinists) who reject a belief in libertarian free will.
16. I don’t intend ‘dogmatically’ in the often pejorative sense with which the notion of ‘dogma’ has unfortunately been associated, namely ‘unthinking’. I simply mean it in the traditional sense of ‘official teaching of the belief system’.
17. I would like to extend sincere thanks to Benjamin Cordry, Rolfe King, Stephen Maitzen, Jason Marsh, and an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* for their detailed comments. The article is much improved on account of their valuable input. Work on this project was completed with support from the Canada Research Chairs programme, for which I am grateful to the government and taxpayers of Canada.