

LOGOS QUESTIONS

Why Isn't God More Obvious?



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God—so we are told by Scripture and the Christian tradition—loves us and desires to be in a personal relationship with us, yet so many find it difficult to even believe that he exists much less love him back. If I see someone across the room whom I want to befriend I walk up and introduce myself. Ideally this introduction is the start of a relationship, but certainly it makes such a relationship possible. Why, then, does God not introduce himself to every person? Paul was blinded and called by God on his way to Damascus (Acts 9), but few people today claim to be beckoned by God in such an overt way. If God *really* loved us, after all, wouldn't he want to make his existence as obvious as possible?

This question has given rise to what philosophers and theologians have called “the problem of divine hiddenness.” Aside from the problem of evil, few questions have proved so troubling for Christians. If a loving God does exist, the argument goes, then he would make his existence obvious to all people. Since his existence is not obvious to all people, God must not exist. And yet God's hiddenness is not merely a matter for philosophical debate—it is, spiritually and existentially, a deeply troubling experience that even the most devout believers face.

Believer or not, this is a question that is as old as thinking about God itself—why isn't God more obvious?

“ If God really loved us, after all, wouldn't he want to make his existence as obvious as possible? ”

A Philosophical Problem

These questions alone are enough for many to feel—in their bones—the force of the objection, but let’s lay out the argument in its most forceful form before proceeding to responses. The problem from divine hiddenness proceeds like this:¹

- (1) If God exists, then he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If God is perfectly loving, then he is open to being in a personal relationship with every person at every time.
- (3) If God exists, then he is open to being in a personal relationship with every person at every time.
- (4) If God is open to being in a personal relationship with every person at every time, then God will make sure his existence is obvious to every person at every time so that every person can decide whether or not to enter into a relationship with God.
- (5) If God exists, then God’s will make sure his existence is obvious to every person at every time so that every person can decide whether or not to enter into a relationship with him.
- (6) There is at least one person to whom God’s existence is not obvious.
- (7) God does not exist.

If you look carefully, you’ll notice that (3), (5), and (7) are just the result of adding the previous two premises together. (1), (2), (4), and (6), then, are the premises that are up for

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debate. But before moving to reasons for doubting these premises, let’s look at some reasons for thinking they are true.

Few Christians will find fault in (1); in Scripture we are told that God is love (1 John 4:8) and God is envisioned as a parent (Psalm 86:5; Ephesians 4:6). Easy enough, right? So... what does it mean to be perfectly loving?

That is the question (2) seeks to answer. The answer it gives is that God is open to

¹The following argument is adapted from J. L. Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument with some minor tweaks in vernacular.

a relationship with every person at every time. Like any good parent, he wants to be in a relationship with his children—*all of them*. Further, he desires this relationship *at all times*. Since his love is perfect, we can't imagine God just not being up to a relationship at the moment. Of course, it's true that *every person at every time* is...a lot of love to give! But God is not limited in ways that we are; specifically, God's *love* is not limited.

Next, we might ask: what does it mean to be open to a personal relationship with every person at every time? That is the question (4) seeks to answer. The answer it gives is that openness requires an introduction (i.e. making existence obvious) of some kind. The idea here is that a perfectly loving person will want to be in a relationship with other people, but those relationships are impossible unless an introduction happens. Take this example: if I want to be in a relationship with Tim, but Tim does not know I even exist, then for this relationship to happen I must introduce myself. It's true that there might be other impediments to this introduction: perhaps Tim is on another continent. In this case, I could still be *open* to a relationship with Tim without an introduction because—
at the moment—I *can't* introduce myself. But God can, presumably, always introduce himself. He doesn't have limits like being restricted to one continent. So if God is open right now to a relationship with every person, then he would introduce himself to those who don't know him.

The final, and important, question then is this: does God introduce himself to everyone who doesn't know him? According to (6), he does not: there is at least one person to whom God's existence is not obvious. It may not be clear exactly what this means or how we would measure this, but most of us would probably want to say that this feels true. It's an intuition that we have. We might even know someone who would say something like: "I really *want* there to be a God, but I just don't see the evidence for one." Assuming this person isn't lying or deceiving themselves, they would be an example of a person to whom God's existence is not obvious.

The argument has put the theist in somewhat of a bind: deny that there are some persons to whom God's existence is not obvious—something our intuition might tell us is true—or deny that God exists.

Why God is Hidden: Responses to the Problem

What can be said to this argument? At first glance, the premises might seem like reasonable claims. Initially, this might be worrying or troubling...and that's ok. But there are some good responses available to them.

Let's start with (1) and (2). As a reminder, they are:

- (1) If God exists, then he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If God is perfectly loving, then he is open to being in a personal relationship with every person at every time.

Few Christians will want to deny (1) or (2). Some might even say that they are truths revealed by God. But others might respond with something like this: yes, it is true that God is personal, but God isn't just another person like we are persons. Consider this verse from Isaiah 55:8—"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" declares the Lord." The Christian tradition has usually affirmed that God is *transcendent*; that is, God is fundamentally other than us and totally unique. Why does this matter? The hiddenness argument assumes a great deal of similarity between human persons and God. It infers what God's love is like by reflecting on human love. This response protests that God's love is not a simple 1:1 comparison with human love, and even if there are some similarities any existing differences should not be grounds for denying that God is love. This, then, would cast doubt on (1) and/or (2).

Yet the more controversial premise is (4), which is:

- (4) If God is open to being in a personal relationship with every person at every time, then God will make sure his existence is obvious to every person at every time so that every person can decide whether or not to enter into a relationship with God.

There are a lot of different responses to this premise, but I'll mention two popular one's here.

First, God would not make his existence obvious because that could be coercive in some way. It is true that, in most human cases, a simple introduction is not coercive. But might things be different for the almighty creator of the Universe? To help visualize this, imagine if the leader of your country or a famous musical artist walked up and introduced themselves to you. In all likelihood, that person's fame, power, or greatness—or maybe all three!—would affect your desire to be in a relationship with them. How much more would this be true of God? If God made himself obvious, it might cause the person to believe in God or enter a relationship with him out of fear or, on the other end of the spectrum, desire for some reward. In either case, God making his existence obvious would have the opposite result from what God desires: the person *freely* entering into a relationship with God out of love for God.

A second response is this: God would not make his existence obvious because he desires human persons to be responsible for one another. This response suggests that our responsibility for other persons, including other person's knowledge of God, is a good thing. My having certain responsibilities helps form me morally, and challenges me to perform morally good actions. In this case, my having the responsibility to tell other people about God is a good thing *for me*, and for every person who already knows God.

Although, as noted above, (6) has a great deal of intuitive support, there might be reasons for denying it. As a reminder, (6) says:

(6) There is at least one person to whom God's existence is not obvious.

The common response to this is that God's existence is obvious to those who want it to be. According to Pascal, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of the opposite disposition."² The idea here is that God is obvious; those who cannot see him cannot see because they have blinded themselves. In theological terms, we could point to the effects of sin on our ability to see and know God. Any failure to see God, then, is due to some failure in the person.

While each of these responses have merit, I prefer a response which points to how God acts in the world. Often, God chooses to work *through other humans* to accomplish his purposes, and this includes the revelation of himself.

“ To many people, God is a stranger. God’s best chance at relationship for them very well might be to introduce himself through a mutual friend. They might be more receptive to him in that case than if he just popped up one day ”

In most cases of divine action in Scripture, God chooses a human mediator: Noah builds the boat to preserve God's people (Genesis 6:11-22), Moses leads the Israelites through the Red Sea to free God's people (Exodus 14:15-31), and Esther petitions

the King to save God's people (Esther 7:2-4). These stories—and many more—rarely include actions by divine *fiat*, but instead show God's cooperation with humanity.

²Pascal, *Pensees*, 81.

If God tends to bring about his purposes in conjunction with other people—that is, cooperatively—then why would the same not hold for introducing God? Even if this is descriptively true, we might wonder whether or not this is a good thing. But it turns out we have good reasons for thinking that this sort of cooperative introduction might, in many cases, make a person more likely to enter into a relationship with God. If you meet a stranger at a party, are you likely to form a lasting relationship with them? Although not impossible, it's pretty unlikely. What if you met the same stranger at the same party, but this time a mutual friend—whom you trust—introduced you saying “you would be great friends.” Most people would be much more receptive to a relationship with the stranger in the second case.

Rather than just holding true in some cases, it seems to me principally true that the introduction and recommendation of close friends makes me far more likely to befriend a stranger. Why would the same not be true in the case of God? To many people, God is a stranger. God's best chance at relationship for them very well might be to introduce himself through a mutual friend. They might be more receptive to him in that case than if he just popped up one day. If this is the case, it gives us a good explanation for why some persons don't know that God exists at *all* times—we just think he's working on it.

Image of the Invisible God: A Lingering Problem

The responses above are meant to undercut a philosophical problem by providing some good reasons for why God is hidden or appears to be hidden. Yet this does not mean that divine hiddenness ceases to be a problem. For many, this problem is deeply existential or spiritual and remains even if satisfying answers are given to these questions.

To this lingering problem, what is often required is not a stronger argument but a personal relationship. To this, we can only point to where—or more properly ‘through whom’—God has made himself known.

In Colossians 1:15, the Apostle Paul calls Jesus Christ the “image of the invisible God.” One important point of note: Paul does call God *invisible*. Yet theologians have historically seen in this passage, literally, more than meets the eye. The 3rd century church father Origen, for instance, sees this as a reference to how we *know* God not just how we see him.³ If we want to know God, we must first know Jesus. This is the claim of John 1:18: “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

The important conclusion of the early Christian creeds was that Jesus was both fully man and fully God. As technical and tedious as these conversations could get, there were a lot of important practical implications. One of which is that, through the Holy Spirit and in Jesus Christ, we can actually know and relate to God. Being fully God, Jesus is no mere ‘middle man’ but the actual embodiment of God on earth. Like other persons we know, he can be related to and known.

“ The problem of divine hiddenness is, most properly, solved by Jesus Christ. He is God’s revelation to us; he is the way God, who is otherwise invisible, has made himself known. ”

At the end of the Gospel of John, the disciple Thomas is overcome with his doubts. Deep reflection on divine hiddenness makes it easy for us to relate to Thomas: the lack of tangible evidence makes us wonder if God can really be as near as we’re told. Yet later in the story, Jesus appears to Thomas *while he’s among other believers*. Certainly, Jesus can appear to individuals as well. But often he chooses to show up in a group of believers. Today, Jesus’ presence is perhaps most likely to be

³Origen, On First Principles, 1.1.8.

experienced in a church committed to worshipping him. It is in that early gathering of that first congregation that Thomas comes face-to-face with Jesus, and the interaction leads to that famous confession that we too are invited to affirm of Christ: “my Lord and my God!”

The problem of divine hiddenness is, most properly, solved by Jesus Christ. He is God’s revelation to us; he is the way God, who is otherwise invisible, has made himself known.

Conclusion

This short booklet might leave you with more questions than answers—that’s ok. God’s hiddenness has been wrestled with for a long time. In some sense, it’s not meant to be “solved.” Divine hiddenness is not a well-fitted piece of furniture in a room: it is deeply disturbing. Our concern is justified. Yet we are reminded that God’s obscurity, at least partially, is not due to his design. The first problem of hiddenness is humanity hiding from God, not the other way around (Genesis 3:8).

It remains true that God is not as obvious as we might expect. Here, God’s transcendence consoles in two ways. First, in the knowledge that God is no mere projection of us. Paul exclaims: “How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” This echoes a theme that our expectations about how a god should behave are set aside when approaching the living God.

A second way is well-stated by Saint Augustine: God is “more intimate to me than I am to myself.” This is a reminder that God’s presence is present in a different kind of way than we are used to, and experiences of him can waft through the air of a summer breeze or dance through the tune of well-played music.

However, God’s transcendence—his *invisibility*—never has the last word. God is visible—known, experienced, related to—in his image: the man Jesus Christ. Whatever may be said regarding the hiddenness of God must first be filtered through him who discloses God in human flesh.

Further Reading

1. *The Hiddenness of God*, Michael C. Rea, Oxford University Press, 2018
2. *The Hiddenness Argument*, J. L. Schellenberg, Oxford University Press, 2015
3. *Pensees*, Pascal, Penguin Classics, 1995 (many version available)

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