

# What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?

PETER VAN INWAGEN

What indeed? One possibility is that the words ‘the problem of the hiddenness of God’ are simply another name for the problem of evil: The world is full of terrible things and we observe no response from God when these terrible things happen – the heavens do not rain fire on the Nazis, the raging flood does not turn aside just before it sweeps away the peaceful village, the paralyzed child remains paralyzed. And in the works of some writers, it is hard to separate the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of evil. But if the problem of divine hiddenness just *is* the problem of evil – well, there already exist many discussions of this problem, and I do not propose to add to their number in this essay.

I think, however, that the problem of Divine hiddenness (whatever exactly it may be) is not the same problem as the problem of evil, for we can imagine a world in which the problem of divine hiddenness pretty clearly does not arise and in which the problem of evil is no less a problem than it is in the actual world. Imagine, for example, that to every Jew who was to perish in the Holocaust there had come, a few weeks before his or her death, a vision of a seraph, a being of unutterable splendor, who recited Psalm 91 in Hebrew – and then vanished. The doomed recipients of these visions, comparing notes, found that the visions were remarkably consistent. Learned Jews understood the seraph’s words perfectly. Less learned Jews recognized the psalm and understood bits and pieces of it, just as they would have if they had heard it recited in a synagogue. Others, less learned still, recognized the language as biblical Hebrew, and said things like, “It sounded like poetry – maybe a psalm.” A few wholly secularized Jews did not even recognize the language, but gave an account of the visual aspect of the apparition consistent with everyone else’s, and said that the apparition spoke to them in a language they did not understand. (But those victims of the Holocaust who were not Jews according to the Law but were Jews according to the Nazi Race Laws did not experience the vision at all; some of them, however, experienced other visions, of a kind I will describe in a moment.) There were, then, these visions, but that was all. Nothing else happened: Not a single life was saved, not a single brutal incident was in any way mitigated. With the exception of the visions, the Holocaust proceeded

exactly as it did in the actual world. And let us further imagine that many other victims of horrendous evil in our imaginary world, victims of horrendous evils throughout all its recorded history, have received, shortly before their final suffering and death, analogous or comparable “signs” in the form of visions incorporating religious imagery – every victim, in fact, who belonged to any cultural tradition that provided religious images he could recognize and interpret. It would seem that in this imaginary world, the problem of evil is no less pressing than it is in ours, but “the problem of the hiddenness of God” does not arise. Or at least we can say this: If the existence of the visions is generally known among the inhabitants of the imaginary world, writers of the sort who in our world speak of “the hiddenness of God” will not use that phrase (they will perhaps speak instead of the “passivity of God”).

The problem of evil and the problem of the hiddenness of God are, therefore, not identical. But is the latter essentially connected with suffering and other forms of evil? Would, or could, this problem exist in a world without suffering? I think that trying to answer this question will help us understand what the problem is. Let us imagine a world without suffering – not a world in which everyone enjoys the Beatific Vision, but a world that is as much like our world (as it is at present) as the absence of suffering permits. I will call such a world a “secular utopia,” because my model for this world is just that future of gleaming alabaster cities, undimmed by human tears, that secularists yearn for.

In the world I imagine, human beings are benevolent and nature is kind. There is no physical pain, or very little of it (just enough to remind people to take care not to damage their extremities). There is no premature death, whether by violence, accident, or disease. There are, in fact, no such things as violence and disease, and accidents are never very serious. (The inhabitants of this world all enjoy a vigorous old age and die peacefully in their sleep when they are well over a hundred years old – and the fear of death is unknown.) No one is a cripple or mentally retarded or mentally unbalanced or even mildly neurotic. There is no racial prejudice or prejudice of any sort. No one is ugly or deformed. Everyone is provided with all the physical necessities and comforts of life – but great wealth and luxury are as unknown as poverty. Consumer goods are produced in a way that does no violence to nature: the human and non-human inhabitants of the world live in perfect harmony.<sup>1</sup> Everyone has interesting and rewarding work to do, and this work is appropriately rewarded with respect and, if appropriate, admiration. No one covets anyone else’s possessions. There is no lying or promise-breaking or cheating or corruption – there is in fact nothing for anyone to be corrupt *about*, for there are essentially no government and no laws and no money. If there is any unhappiness in this world, it arises only in cases like these: Alfred has fallen in love with Beatrice, but Beatrice is in love with Charles; Delia has

devoted her life to proving Goldbach's Conjecture, and Edward has published a proof of it when Delia had a proof almost within her grasp. And even in such cases, everyone involved behaves with perfect rationality and complete maturity, thereby keeping the resulting unhappiness to an irreducible (and usually transient) minimum.

Now let us suppose that, as in our world, some people believe in God – in a necessarily existent, omniscient, omnipresent creator and sustainer of the world. (The theists of our invented world would have trouble formulating the concept of “moral perfection” – but, if you could get them to understand it, they wouldn't hesitate to ascribe moral perfection to God, too.) And, as in our world, some people believe there is no such being. Could someone in this world, perhaps one of its atheists, raise the problem of divine hiddenness? Perhaps we can imagine a brief dialogue in which the problem is raised, a dialogue “purer” than any that could be imagined to take place in our world, purer because neither of the participants has ever known or heard of any horrendous evil.

*Atheist:* This God of yours – why does he hide himself; why doesn't he come out in the open where we can see him?

*Theist:* Your question doesn't make any sense. God is omnipresent. That is, he is totally present everywhere and locally present nowhere. A thing is locally present in a place (that is, a region of space) if it occupies or takes up or fills that place. And God occupies neither any particular place (as does a cat or a mountain) nor all places (as the luminiferous aether would, if it existed). He is totally present everywhere in that the totality of his being is reflected in the sustaining power that keeps every spatial thing everywhere in the physical universe in existence from moment to moment. Similarly, we might say that Rembrandt is locally present nowhere in “The Night Watch”<sup>2</sup> and totally present in it everywhere. (But the analogy is imperfect, since the human figures and inanimate objects and spatial relations in the painting are fictional, whereas the ones in the physical universe are, of course, real.) Only a locally present thing can reflect light, and thus only a locally present thing can be visible. Only a locally present thing can exclude other things from the space it occupies, and thus only a locally present thing can be tangible. Someone who wants God to ‘show Himself’ just doesn't understand the concept of God. Asking for that is like demanding that Rembrandt “show himself” in a painting. The complaint, “I can't find God anywhere in the world” is as misplaced as the complaint ‘I can't find Rembrandt anywhere in the painting.’

*Atheist:* Well, if he can't show himself by being present in the world, why can't he show himself by his effects on some of the things that *are* present in the world?

*Theist:* You haven't been listening. Everything in the world is his “effect.” He “shows himself by his effects” in the world just as Rembrandt “shows himself by his effects” in The Night Watch.

*Atheist:* That sounds good, but I wonder if it's any more than words. What I want is not "general effects" but, if I may coin a phrase, "special effects." Given your picture of God's relation to the world, everything will look just the same whether or not there is a God – wait, stop, don't tell me that that's like saying that "The Night Watch" will look the same whether or not there is a Rembrandt! I couldn't bear it. Let me put the problem this way. I have bought one of the modal telescopes invented by the great metaphysicist Saul Kripke, and I have looked into other possible worlds. In one of them I caught a glimpse of the following argument, in a book by a man named Thomas Aquinas (evidently a sound atheist like myself):

*Objection:* It is, moreover, superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, without supposing God to exist. For all natural things can be accounted for by one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be accounted for by one principle, which is human reason or will. Hence, there is no need to suppose that a God exists.

Surely this argument is unanswerable? Surely one should not believe in the existence of an unobservable entity unless its existence is needed to explain some observed phenomenon?

*Theist:* So what you are looking for is a particular event, an event that is not caused by any human action, whose occurrence resists any natural or scientific explanation, and which is evidently the work of someone trying to send human beings a message or signal whose content is that there is such a being as God. How about the stars in the sky re-arranging themselves to spell out 'I am who am'? Would that be satisfactory?

*Atheist:* It would.

*Theist:* You don't want much, do you? But it happens I can supply what you want. My own religion is called Julianism, after its founder, Julia, the great prophetess and author of *The Book of Julia* and the forty volumes of sermons we call *The Words of Julia*. Julia's message was so important that God granted her three times a natural span of life, as a sign of his special favor and to ensure that her teachings would have a chance to put down deep roots. Julia lived 326 years. And every physiologist agrees that it is physiologically impossible for a human being to live 326 years. Therefore, Julia's preternaturally long life must have been a sign from God.

*Atheist:* Well, that would be pretty impressive if it actually happened. But when did Julia live, and how do you Julianists know that she really did live that long?

*Theist:* Julia lived about two thousand years ago. We know of her long life and lots of other things about her because the facts of her biography are meticulously set out in the Holy Records of the Julian Church, which originally derive from the testimony of eyewitnesses.

*Atheist:* Forgive me if I'm skeptical. Stories can become distorted as they pass from mouth to mouth. As stories are passed from one teller to another, people unconsciously fill in or change minor details in the story. These minor

distortions can accumulate, and, given long enough, the accumulation of minor distortions can change a story till it's no longer really the same story. We know that this happens. Just last month, there was a rumor in Neapolis of a terrible tragedy somewhere in Asia – a woman had actually lost a *finger* in an industrial accident! The whole town was in an uproar. But when the dust settled, it turned out that what had really happened was that the Asian woman had got her finger badly mauled in a piece of machinery while she was daydreaming. The finger, of course, healed perfectly within a week. Now since we know from experience that stories can become distorted in this fantastic way – the very idea of someone's losing a finger! – and since we know from experience that no one in our modern record-keeping era has lived even 150 years, the most reasonable thing to suppose is that, although Julia may indeed have lived to be remarkably old, she certainly did not live to be 326; the reasonable thing to suppose is that what experience tells us often happens happened this time (that is, the story grew in the telling; it certainly had plenty of time to grow) and that what experience tells us never happens did not happen.

*Theist:* What you are saying seems to come down to this. You demand that God, in order to make his existence believable, cause some particular, unmistakable sign to occur somewhere in the world of space and time. But when you hear a story of some event that would have been such a sign if it had actually occurred, you refuse, on general epistemological grounds, to believe the story.

*Atheist:* My position is not so extreme as that, or so unreasonable as you make it sound. Take your first, hypothetical example. If the stars in the sky were suddenly rearranged so as to spell out 'I am who am', I'd believe in the existence of God then, all right. That would be a good, clear case of what I'd call "God's coming out of hiding." In such a case, God would be making it evident to human beings that Reality contained another intelligence than human intelligence – and not just any kind of intelligence, but an intelligence grand enough to be a plausible candidate for the office "God." And, obviously, this – or something along the same lines – is what such a grand intelligence would do if it wanted us to believe in it. If, *per impossibile*, the figures in "The Night Watch" were conscious beings and aware of (and only of) the objects in their little two-dimensional world, what reason could they have for believing in Rembrandt but something he put specially into the painting that was not a part of the natural order of things in the painting (his signature, perhaps). If he didn't do that, how could he blame the denizens of "The Night Watch" for not believing in him?

*Theist:* Let me make two points. First, these signs you want God to place in the world would have to recur periodically, or, after a few generations had passed, people like you would say that the stories about the signs had grown in the telling – perhaps from the seed of an astronomical prodigy that, remarkable as it was, had some purely natural explanation. Secondly, even the "I am who am" story wouldn't make the existence of *God* evident to a sufficiently determined skeptic – for even the (apparent) rearrangement of the stars could be the

work of a lesser being than God. We can imagine no sign that would *have* to be the work of a necessary, omnipresent, omnipotent being. Any sign you might imagine you could also imagine to be the production of a contingent, locally present being whose powers, though vastly greater than ours, are finite. I should expect that someone like you would say that if two hypotheses explain the data equally well, and if they are alike but for the fact that one of them postulates an unobservable infinite being and the other an unobservable finite being, one should always prefer the latter hypothesis, since it does the same explanatory work as the former, but is, literally, infinitely weaker.

*Atheist:* Well, perhaps you're right when you say that to be convincing the signs would have to recur periodically. I don't see why I shouldn't ask for that, and I don't see that it will weaken my argument if I do. And the more I think about it, the more inclined I am to accept your second point as well. Your argument has convinced me of something you didn't foresee: that you theists have imagined a being whose existence no one could possibly rationally believe in, since the hypothesis that He exists is necessarily infinitely stronger than other hypotheses that would explain any possible observations equally well. And if you haven't "imagined" Him, if He really does exist, even *He* couldn't provide us – or any other finite beings He might create – with evidence that would render belief in Him rational. If He exists, He should approve of me for not believing in him, and disapprove of you for believing in Him.

Let us at this point leave our dialogue and the secular utopia in which it was imagined to occur, and return to the real world. The lesson of the dialogue is that in a world that lacks any real suffering, the problem of the hiddenness of God is a purely epistemological problem, or a cluster of epistemological problems: Can one rationally believe in God in a world devoid of signs and wonders? Under what conditions would it be rational to believe a story that reports signs and wonders? Could any possible sign or wonder or series of signs and wonders make it reasonable to believe in a necessarily existent, omnipresent, omnipotent Creator and Sustainer of the world of locally present things?

These epistemological questions obviously have the same force in the real world as in our secular utopia. We might say that in the real world, the problem of the hiddenness of God has two aspects, a moral aspect and an epistemic aspect. But it would be better to say that there are two "problems of the hiddenness of God": a moral problem and an epistemic problem, or a cluster of moral problems and a cluster of epistemic problems. The cluster of moral problems is collectively called the problem of evil. The cluster of epistemic problems, I have laid out in the above dialogue. I have said that I shall not in this essay discuss the problem of evil. But I want to draw some analogies between the two problems, for they are similar in logical structure. Each is the problem of meeting a challenge to belief in the existence of God that has the general

form, “If there were a God, the world would not look the way it does.” In the case of the problem of evil, the challenge takes this form: It tells us that if there were a God, we should not see certain things that we do see: vast amounts of horrendous suffering. In the case of the epistemic problem, the challenge takes another form: It tells us that if there were a God – at any rate, a God who cared whether we believed in him – we should see certain things that we do not see: signs and wonders. (Or at least that challenge is one part of the epistemic problem; as we have seen, there is also the problem whether even repeated, ubiquitous signs and wonders would be sufficient to render belief in God rational.) Since the two problems are similar in logical structure, it is natural to wonder whether the techniques that theists have used to respond to the problem of the presence of evil could be applied to the problem of the absence of signs and wonders. The main technique that Christian philosophers (and Jewish and Muslim philosophers) have used in their treatments of the problem of evil is that of story-telling: They tell stories that fall under two headings, *defense* and *theodicy*. A “defense” in the weakest sense in which the word is used is an internally consistent story according to which God and evil both exist. Sometimes the following two requirements are added: The evil in the story must be of the amounts and kinds that we observe in the actual world, and the story must contain no element that we have good scientific or historical reasons to regard as false. A theodicy is a story that has the same internal features as a defense, but which the theodacist, the person telling the story, puts forward as true or at least highly plausible. Students of the problem of evil will know how this story-telling technique has been applied by various authors and the kinds of problems and arguments it has generated.

I want to suggest that the epistemic problem be approached in the same way. Christian philosophers – or other theists who are philosophers – should meet the challenge raised by the absence of signs and wonders in the following way: They should tell stories that entail the following proposition:

The world was created and is sustained by a necessary, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being – that is, by God. There are rational beings in this world, and God wants these beings, or some of them at some times, to believe in his existence. The world is devoid of signs and wonders – of “special effects.” Or if the world contains any such events, they are so rare that very few people have actually observed one or even met anyone who claims to have observed one. (In the latter case, among those people whom God wants to believe in his existence are many of the people who are distant in space and time from any of the very rare signs and wonders.)

Such stories, of course, must be internally consistent, and they will certainly be of more philosophical interest if they contain nothing that is known to be false on historical or scientific grounds. Philosophers who present such stories may present them as defenses or as theodicies, according to their philosophical

purposes, just as in the analogous case of the problem of evil. (The root ‘-dicy’ in the word ‘theodicy’, when this word is used in connection with the epistemic problem, may be taken to refer to what may be called God’s “epistemic justice”: For many will argue, with our imaginary other-worldly atheist, that it would be “epistemically unjust” of God to expect us to believe in his existence without evidence – ‘evidence’ being appropriate signs and wonders.)

In discussions of the problem of evil, the kernel of every defense and every theodicy is a *reason* (or a set of reasons), God’s reason or reasons for permitting the existence of evil. So it should be with discussions of the epistemic problem: The kernel of every defense and every theodicy should be a reason or reasons, God’s reason or reasons for not providing the human species (some of whom, at least, he wishes to believe in His existence) with ubiquitous signs and wonders.

I will not in this essay attempt to construct a defense or a theodicy. I will say just two things; I will give two pieces of advice to anyone who sets out to construct a defense or theodicy. First, note that the proposition: *God wants people to believe in His existence* does not entail the proposition: *God wants people to believe in His existence and He does not care why anyone who believes in Him has this belief*. The former proposition, in fact, is consistent with the proposition that God would value the following states of affairs in the order in which they are presented:

- (1) Patricia believes, for reason A, that God exists.
- (2) Patricia believes that God does not exist.
- (3) Patricia believes, for reason B, that God exists.

It is, for example, consistent with God’s wanting Patricia to believe in Him that He regard (1) as a good state of affairs, (2) as a bad state of affairs, and (3) as a bad state of affairs that is *much* worse than (2). (And this would be consistent with reason B’s being an epistemically unobjectionable reason for belief in God: reason B might be, from the point of view of someone interested only in justification or warrant, a perfectly good reason for believing in the existence of God.) And this is no idle speculation about a logical possibility. Most theists hold that God expects a good deal more from us than mere belief in his existence.<sup>3</sup> He expects a complex of things, of which belief in his existence is a small (although essential) part. It is certainly conceivable that someone’s believing in him for a certain reason (because, say, that person has witnessed signs and wonders) might make it difficult or even impossible for that person to acquire other features God wanted him or her to have.

My second piece of advice is directed at Christian philosophers who attempt to construct defenses and theodicies. I recommend serious and sustained reflection on the possible meanings of two texts: Luke 16:31 (“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded



if someone should rise from the dead”), and John 20:29 (“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are they who, not seeing, believe.”).

The burden of this essay is this. I recommend thinking of “the problem of the hiddenness of God” not as a single problem but as two distinct problems, a moral problem – what has always been called the problem of evil – and an epistemic problem. But I have argued that the two problems are similar in their logical structure, and I recommend that, because of this similarity, theists who attempt to solve the epistemic problem employ the same methods and techniques – *mutatis mutandis* – that theists have generally employed in their attempts to solve the problem of evil.

### Notes

1. Those who think that the sufferings of nonhuman animals that are unrelated to the acts of human beings are relevant to “the problem of the hiddenness of God” should feel free to imagine that our invented world is one in which animals in the state of nature never suffer. It is not easy to imagine in any detail a biologically rich world without animal suffering unless one imagines it as a world of ubiquitous miracles – a world in which, for example, fawns are always miraculously saved from forest fires. The imaginer had better take care to make these miracles “unnoticeable,” at least in those epochs in which there are human beings to notice them, for if the ubiquitous miracles were *obviously* miracles, this would defeat our purpose in trying to imagine a utopia in which “the problem of the hiddenness of God” could be raised.
2. In our secular utopia, Rembrandt has apparently painted a picture called “The Night Watch” that is not the picture that actually bears that name; there would of course be no such thing as an armed company of men in the secular utopia.
3. James 2:19: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and they shudder.”