

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 11, Divine Hiddenness

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 11, Divine Hiddenness.

Okay, now we're going to turn our attention to a philosophical problem facing theists and, including specifically Christians, that has emerged in the last couple of decades through the work of a scholar named Schellenberg, and that's the problem of divine hiddenness, which some consider being an aspect of the problem of evil, others consider it to be a purely epistemological problem, and it just has to do with the fact that God has not made himself clearer and his existence obvious to everyone.

Isn't that a problem? And how do we reconcile this fact with the belief that we also hold that God wants people to know that he is real? So, Peter van Inwagen summarizes the problem of divine hiddenness like this: if God existed, then that would be a very important thing for us human beings to know. If God existed, he could provide clear signs of his existence. Therefore, if he existed, God would provide clear signs of his existence.

However, there are no such unmistakable signs of God's existence. Therefore, there is reason to doubt that God exists. So, how do we solve this problem? Assuming all these premises are correct, it's a valid argument, and then we face, you know, a kind of objection to rational belief in theism here.

Van Inwagen notes that even in the absence of evil, there could be a problem of divine hiddenness. You can imagine a world in which nobody ever committed any sins any moral evils; there was no stealing, there was no lying, and there was no rape or murder. You can imagine as well, in that world, there's no suffering, people don't become physically ill, there are no cancers, no heart disease.

In fact, there are no physical injuries. Even in that world where there's no suffering and no moral evil, there still could be a problem of divine hiddenness. And people are wondering, you know, how we got here? Even though many in that context would still believe in God, there would still be others who might be unsure.

So, the problem of divine hiddenness seems to be distinct from the problem of evil. As Van Inwagen puts it, in a world that lacks any real suffering, the problem of the hiddenness of God is a purely epistemological problem. Van Inwagen rejects the notion that God doesn't care why people come to believe in him, that this is a point of emphasis for him, and that this is essential to solving this problem.

God does care exactly how people come to believe in him or why it is that they believe in him. And so, ubiquitous miracles, such as constant divine messages in the sky or something like this, Van Inwagen says, would only prompt a bare belief in God, not personal transformation. God is interested in significant personal transformation, and his hiddenness contributes to that.

It makes such transformations, or the nature of such transformations, more significant than would otherwise be the case. Another scholar who has weighed in on this issue is Michael Murray. He applies a free will theodicy to the issue and asks, what is necessary for human free will? When it comes to, you know, a free choice or embrace of God and decision to follow God, to obey him and have a relationship with God, what are the necessary conditions for us to freely choose and follow God? Murray notes that there are certain conditions that need to be obtained, such as, especially, or I'm sorry, there are certain conditions that must not be the case, especially compulsion in the context of a threat, right? In order for us to freely choose God, we must not be compelled to do so, such as by a kind of threat that's so gripping that we really can't do otherwise than to believe in God and follow him.

So, this raises this question. What constitutes a significant threat? And there are a number of factors that are related to threat significance that Murray discusses, and what he's interested in doing here is seeing how God might alleviate the threat of hell, the threat of, you know, intense suffering and punishment for those who don't follow him. If he can alleviate that threat, you know, to where it isn't so significant, then we'll have more freedom to choose God.

We won't feel so, and we won't be so compelled. So, here are some factors that are related to threat significance that highlight some ways that God could potentially alleviate the threat significance or make the threat less strong. One has to do with the degree to which a person perceives the consequences of the threat to be harmful to him or her, and that just has to do with threat strength.

Another is threat imminence, which is the degree to which a person expects the consequences to follow given certain conditions. Murray notes three ways in which we can talk about threat imminence. One is probabilistic threat imminence; how likely is it that the consequences will follow if I, you know, don't turn to God? Temporal threat imminence, how soon will this happen, you know, following my rejection of God, and epistemic threat imminence, that has to do with how clear and unambiguous the threat is, and then finally, there is the consideration of the wantonness of the threatened, and that has to do with the degree to which the threatened person is likely to disregard his or her own well-being.

If a person doesn't really care about his or her own destiny, then, you know, any threat of ultimate suffering is not going to affect them that much, so that would be a way to alleviate the threat, ensure that people don't really care about their final

destiny. So, those are different variables that Murray discusses that have to do with threat significance. Now Murray concludes that the degree of compulsion in a threat is directly proportional to threat strength and imminence and inversely proportional to the wantonness of the threatened.

The greater the threat strength, the more imminent the threat, then the degree of compulsion is increased. The more wanton a person is, right, the less they care about their ultimate well-being, then the less compulsion, the more they care about their well-being, then the greater the threat, the less they care, the less the threat. So, for human freedom to be possible in the face of the threat of hell for wicked living, this threat must be mitigated somehow, and so which of these three factors could be mitigated to reduce threat significance? So, is threat strength what God chose to reduce threat significance? Murray notes no.

Eternal damnation, the threat of eternal damnation, is as strong as a threat gets, right? You can threaten someone you don't like, you know, with a lawsuit, or threaten them with, you know, physically, I'm going to punch you in the nose, but no human being has the capacity to threaten someone with eternal damnation, but God has done that repeatedly in scripture, so He didn't choose that route. What about the wantonness of the threatened? Did God make it such that people don't really care about their ultimate well-being? No, we do care about our ultimate well-being, and even if God did that, that would be irresponsible since concern for one's own being, for one's own well-being, is a good and a virtue. So, what about threat imminence? Threatened strength and wantonness of the threatened, if He didn't adjust those such that the threat significance would be reduced, it must have to do with threat imminence.

What about probabilistic threat imminence? Well, no, it's clear in scripture that suffering in hell is a certainty for those who are wicked and reject God. That definitely is clear in scripture, so that's not how God reduced the significance of the threat. What about temporal threat significance? Murray notes that that's somewhat relevant since people who are disobedient and wicked are not immediately cast into hell.

There's still time, you still have time, we don't know how much time. That kind of creates some uncertainty there in terms of how much the threat is alleviated just by temporal considerations. But because people are not immediately cast into hell, it does mitigate the threat a little bit.

But not as much as this third factor, which Murray focuses on, is the key way in which God reduces threat significance, and that's epistemic threat imminence. This is the means by which God, according to Murray, reduces compulsion from threat significance. God makes the threat epistemically ambiguous by hiding himself.

So, this is the conclusion to Murray's argument here: divine hiddenness, it seems, serves this vital purpose of preserving human freedom to obey or disobey. The fact that God is hidden, or at least somewhat hidden, there's a certain ambiguity about his existence that reduces the threat of ultimate punishment in hell enough to where those who choose God are able to do so more freely. They're less compelled precisely because God is hidden to a certain degree.

So, it's an interesting way of looking at it. Who knows the mind of God, what he was thinking, or why it is the case? As the prophet Isaiah says, surely you are a God who hides himself, by the way. It comes right from the mouth of an Old Testament prophet, granting the premise of all of this, that God is hidden to some degree, maybe to a significant degree.

But this would be a benefit as far as Murray is concerned. It reduces threat significance and, therefore, protects or ensures human freedom in choosing God. Now, a scholar named Lovering has weighed in on this issue and critiqued Murray's approach here.

He says that Murray's approach ultimately fails and actually provides grounds for concluding that God does not exist. And here's how Lovering's argument goes. First, he summarizes Murray's argument.

It's basically saying this. First, we have the ability to develop morally significant characters. Two, if God is not hidden, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters because we would be compelled to believe and act as we do.

So, God must be hidden in order to make such moral growth possible. Now, Murray makes a couple of key meta-ethical assumptions, according to Lovering. One is that there is a correlative relationship between morality and God's commands.

And two, that the moral status of actions is not determined by what human beings believe. According to Lovering, although being coerced is one way to lose the ability to develop morally significant character, it's not the only way. So, he's granting that Murray is right that coercion or compulsion would compromise our ability to develop a good moral character.

But there are other ways this could happen, and if you take Murray's approach, he says one of those other hazards in this regard emerges. Lovering says another way that you can lose your ability to develop morally significant character is through what he calls inculpable ignorance of the moral status of actions. If you are ignorant in a non-blameworthy way regarding how you should live, then you're not going to be able to develop a morally significant character.

In other words, choosing freely between good and evil actions is a necessary but not sufficient condition for developing moral character. Another necessary condition is the intention to choose morally good actions. And no one can intend to do a good act if they don't know what the good is, right? So, you have to know what the good is.

What Murray fails to see, according to Lovering, is that a person does not have the ability to develop morally if he or she is inculpably ignorant of what actions are right and wrong. Because awareness of what is good and evil is necessary for moral intentions. But if God is hidden, this is the key point: if God is hidden, then some people will justifiably give up belief in God and thus become inculpably ignorant of what the good is.

They will become moral nihilists. So, this whole idea of divine hiddenness then takes with one hand as it gives with the other. Maybe, you know, let's grant that it reduces compulsion by reducing threat significance, but then it also takes away kind of certainty or confidence about what the moral good is.

In other words, people will not be able to intend to do good actions because they won't believe that there are any truly good actions, and therefore, they won't be able to grow morally. So, Murray can't have it both ways, according to Lovering. Lovering concludes that if God is hidden, then we do not have the ability to develop morally significant characters, and that's a horrible loss.

Thus, since both God's hiddenness and God's non-hiddenness entail that we can't develop morally significant characters, then a contradiction with that first proposition that we can develop morally significant characters is unavoidable. So, Lovering concludes that God does not exist. This really amounts to a kind of argument for atheism.

So, what are we to say to this argument? How could God ensure that people do know the moral good without making himself so clear and evident that we are compelled to choose him? We're overwhelmed by the reality of God, and therefore, we don't have any real freedom to choose him. How could God pull this off? And there's something that Lovering overlooks that I think is really the Achilles heel in his argument, and that is basically the idea of natural law, which is a pretty clear theme in scripture that God has written on the human heart a basic understanding of right and wrong, what the good is. He's woven that into the human understanding so that people do basically understand the difference between right and wrong, good and bad.

You don't even need a written revelation from God to know basic right and wrong, the difference between virtue and vice, good and bad, and good and evil. So, Lovering dismisses that. He does consider it briefly, but he dismisses it too hastily

after considering only one version of that approach, which is receiving divine revelation about moral truth through the natural order.

But again, why couldn't God, through the way that he has constructed the human mind, build into our operating system, our cognitive structure, a kind of understanding of right and wrong? So that's what I would call, you know, I think it's a pretty straightforward and plausible view there. The possibility that God has given all people an innate awareness of basic moral truth through conscience or the law of God written on the heart. So, that would be a critique I would bring against Lovering's argument. So that's a little bit about divine hiddenness.

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