



God's Awful Majesty Before Our Eyes: Kant's Moral Justification for Divine Hiddenness



Tyler Daytas, Washington University in St. Louis

The Hiddenness of God

Clear knowledge of God's existence would deter us from worshipping false idols and from harming each other. It would also console us in hard times. It is thus difficult to understand why an all-powerful, all-loving deity would not make his existence evident to us. Some philosophers take this as strong grounds for skepticism about the existence of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition (Schellenberg 1993; Lovering 2004).



Although our perpetual ignorance of the divine is frustrating, Kant suggests that it is something to be celebrated rather than lamented. Near the end of the second *Critique*, he describes the consequences that would arise if our powers of reason were not limited in this way.

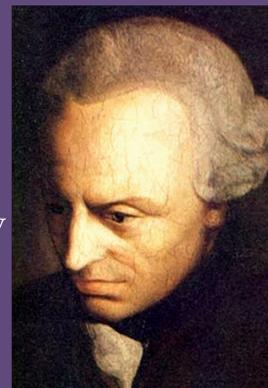
“Instead of the conflict that the moral disposition now has to carry on with the inclinations, in which, though after some defeats, moral strength of soul is to be gradually acquired, *God and eternity with their awful majesty* would stand unceasingly *before our eyes*... Transgression of the law would, no doubt, be avoided...but because the *disposition* from which actions ought to be done cannot be instilled by any command, and because the spur to activity in this case would be promptly at hand and *external*, reason would have no need to work itself up so as to gather strength to resist the inclinations by a lively representation of the dignity of law; hence most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, only a few from hope, and none at all from duty, and the moral worth of actions, on which alone in the eyes of supreme wisdom the worth of the person and even that of the world depends, would not exist at all.” (5:147)

The Moral Justification for Divine Hiddenness

1. The development of virtue requires an experience of conflict between self-interest and the law.
2. God's revealing himself would preclude the experience of conflict between self-interest and the law.
3. God's revealing himself would preclude the development of virtue.
4. A world without virtue would be a world without value.
5. God's revealing himself would render the world worthless.
6. An omnipotent, perfectly rational deity would not choose to render the world worthless.
7. God's keeping his existence hidden is consistent with his omnipotence and perfect rationality.

Virtue and Respect

Virtue is the strength to overcome the innate human propensity to privilege inclinations. The virtuous agent is one who prioritizes the dictates of the objective law. The means through which the moral law becomes an incentive for finite rational beings is *respect*. Respect comes about by two stages. In the first stage, the agent recognizes that the objective law is a constraint on her inclinations. The experience of the law as constraint is unpleasant. However, the second stage of the law becoming one's incentive has a positive affective component. The agent recognizes that the constraint provided by the authority of the law is *self-constraint*. Because the law's authority is sourced in one's own reason, the individual becomes conscious of the will's ability to *freely* submit to it. In becoming conscious of this freedom, one first experiences respect for the *moral law*.



The Fact of Reason

One can discover the positive freedom crucial for respect only by reflecting on the difference felt between, on the one hand, conflicts of different self-directed motives, and on the other, conflicts of self-interest and the law. Kant's example is a man who thinks himself incapable of overcoming lust. If asked whether he could control his lust under threat of hanging, “one need not conjecture very long what he would reply” (5:30). But if he faced a choice between those same gallows and slandering an innocent person, Kant remarks that “He would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would [sacrifice himself] or not, but he must admit without hesitation that it would be possible for him. He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him.”



Suppose we knew of an omnipotent and perfectly just deity. We would presumably be no less capable of recognizing the requirements of the objective law. But because we would know that obedience coheres with prudence (due to God's punishments and rewards), the constraint of the law would not be felt as *self-constraint*. We would never have the elevating experience of realizing our capacity for sacrificing everything we hold dear simply because pure practical reason demands it. We thus could not develop the *respect* for the dignity of the law that is the hallmark of the virtuous agent.