

Of Providence and Puppet Shows: Divine Hiddenness as Kantian Theodicy

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I. The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

- A. Belief in God allows for many practical benefits, including emotional consolation, deterrence from immoral conduct, and a meaningful personal relationship with God.
- B. Hence, if God exists, it would make sense for Him to do everything in His power to make His existence evident to everyone (or at least to all those who are open to believing).
- C. The fact that there are many “non-resistant non-believers” is taken by some to constitute independent grounds for atheism (Schellenberg 1993; Lovering 2004; Maitzen 2006).

II. The Standard Free-Will Response

- A. Given the conception of God as morally perfect and all-powerful, decisive evidence for God’s existence would make it painfully obvious that immoral conduct is contrary to long-term self-interest.
- B. A perfectly just God will presumably punish transgressions and reward those who avoid wrongdoing, especially under circumstances in which He has done us the service of removing all obstacles to knowledge of His existence.
- C. With God continuously in view, any temptation to sin would be swamped by the desire to please God and to avoid the dire consequences of violating divine law.
- D. God chooses to remain hidden because the disvalue resulting from the loss of freedom outweighs whatever benefits would arise from God’s revealing Himself (Swinburne 1998; 2004).
- E. The problem with this response is that there are numerous cases of individuals who, despite their strong belief in God, continue to struggle against the temptation to transgress. This suggests that knowledge of God would not preclude the possibility of acting wrongly (Schellenberg 2005; Watkins 2009).

III. Kant’s Moral Justification for Divine Hiddenness

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* (for what we can prove perfectly holds as much certainty for us as what we are assured of by our sight). Transgression of the law would, no doubt, be avoided: what is commanded would be done; 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. As long as human nature remains as it is, human conduct would thus be changed into mere mechanism in which, as in a puppet show, everything would *gesticulate* well but there would be *no life* in the figures. (CpV 5:147)

A. Kant's remarks of often read as advocating a version of the standard free-will response. However, the discussion of freedom earlier in the second *Critique* suggest a different interpretation.

B. The Gallows Man

C. My reconstruction of the argument:

(1) Development of virtue requires an experience of conflict between self-interest and the moral law.

(2) God's revealing himself would preclude experience of conflict between self-interest and the law.

(3) God's revealing himself would preclude the possibility of virtue. (from 1-2)

(4) Without the possibility of virtue, human existence would be meaningless.

(5) God's revealing himself would render human existence meaningless. (from 3-4)

(6) A perfectly rational deity would not choose to render human existence meaningless.

(7) God's keeping himself hidden is consistent with his perfect rationality. (from 5-6)

D. Kant's argument is stronger than the standard free-will response because it doesn't imply that knowledge of God would make transgression impossible. What such knowledge would preclude is the ability to act rightly against one's perceived self-interest.

IV. Kantian Theodicy

A. Kant claims that traditional attempts to vindicate divine providence in the face of moral evil, suffering, and injustice are doomed to failure. Even the best attempts at theodicy either undermine moral responsibility or rely on claims to knowledge that go beyond the boundaries of reason. Further, such attempts implicate the theodocist in servility and insincerity.

B. Kant believes that the apodictic certainty of the moral law and the moral necessity of God are sufficient for a faith that is rationally justified.

C. A defense of the reasonableness of faith in response to the problem of evil does not require bold claims to knowledge about the supersensible realm. All that is necessary is a reasonable explanation for how a perfectly just God could allow evil in the world.

D. While the absence of a plausible response to the problem of evil doesn't render theism completely untenable, it does substantially weaken its grounds.

E. Kant's insights pertaining to divine hiddenness provide the foundation for a formidable defense of providence in the face of seemingly unnecessary suffering.

1. The existence of naturally occurring suffering is among the strongest grounds for non-belief.

2. A world devoid of natural evil would be one in which many people would take God's existence to be obvious from the beginning.

3. These individuals would not be able recognize their true freedom and develop respect for the moral law as the incentive to their right conduct.