

Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence

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Abstract

Many people do not know or believe there is a God, and many experience a sense of divine absence. Are these (and other) “divine hiddenness” facts evidence against the existence of God? Using Bayesian tools, we investigate *evidential arguments from divine hiddenness*, and respond to two objections to such arguments. The first objection says that the problem of hiddenness is just a special case of the problem of evil, and so if one has responded to the problem of evil then hiddenness has no additional bite. The second objection says that, while hiddenness may be evidence against generic theism, it is not evidence against more specific conceptions of God, and thus hiddenness poses no epistemic challenge to a theist who holds one of these more specific conceptions. Our investigation leaves open just how strong the evidence from hiddenness really is, but we aim to clear away some important reasons for thinking hiddenness is of no evidential significance at all.

1 Hiddenness as Evidence

Are the prevalence of unbelief, the uneven distribution of religious experience, or feelings of divine absence—in short, *divine hiddenness*—evidence against the existence of God? A related question that has received much more attention in the past half century is whether the prevalence of evil and suffering are evidence against the existence of God. In this essay, drawing lessons from the so-called *evidential argument from evil*, we discuss an analogous *evidential argument from divine hiddenness* (Maitzen 2006; Anderson, forthcoming). This investigation provides answers to two important objections to such an argument.

Objection 1. The problem of divine hiddenness is just a special case of the problem of evil. Once the problem of evil has been properly taken into account, hiddenness has no additional bite.

Objection 2. While hiddenness may be evidence against a generic form of theism, it is not evidence against more specific conceptions of God—for instance, a God who is appropriately *transcendent*. So hiddenness is not an epistemic challenge to a theist who holds one of these narrower conceptions of God.

There is not just one respect in which God seems “hidden,” and accordingly there is not just one evidential argument from hiddenness. We will consider a few different versions as we go. But, to be clear, we are thinking about hiddenness as consisting in certain “ordinary” kinds of evidence—evidence about the distribution of religious belief and experience—rather than some kind of special “higher level” evidence about what the balance of all of our other evidence is like. (For this alternative approach see for example Schellenberg 1993, 208–9.) It is a common ground fact that there are many people who do not believe in God even after sincere sustained inquiry into the question, and likewise that many people feel that God is absent. In contrast, claims about the balance of all of our non-hiddenness-related evidence strike us as both more obscure and more tendentious.

Our approach deploys what we take to be the best general-purpose tools available for reasoning about evidence and its strength—the tools of Bayesianism, broadly construed. The main idea, in a slogan, is that *evidential support* is *probability-raising*. A simple example: smoke in the air is evidence of fire. The Bayesian construal of this fact is that $\text{Pr}(\text{Fire} \mid \text{Smoke})$, the conditional probability of Fire given Smoke, is higher than the unconditional probability $\text{Pr}(\text{Fire})$. Another equivalent formulation is useful: Smoke is more probable in the presence of Fire than it is in the absence of Fire. That is,

$$\text{Pr}(\text{Smoke} \mid \text{Fire}) > \text{Pr}(\text{Smoke} \mid \neg\text{Fire})$$

We don’t take these Bayesian formulations to provide a reductive explanation of evidential support in terms of a more basic thing, *probability*.¹ Rather, we are thinking of probability as a tool for regimenting and making precise questions of evidential support.

¹We also do not want to take on some controversial view about the nature of these probabilities, whether as psychological states (degrees of belief), or frequencies, or chances.

Outside of artificial examples or cases involving rich statistics, many of these probabilities are hard to get a fix on. When we ask about, say, the probability of there being widespread suffering conditional on there being no God, we shouldn't be confident in any very precise answers. But neither should we declare ourselves completely at a loss—we are not in a realm of, as Plantinga once put it, “difficulty, darkness, and despair” (Plantinga 1979, 10). Even without being able to put precise probabilities on (say) Smoke in the absence of Fire, we can still confidently say that Smoke is evidence for Fire. We can reliably make some comparative judgments, as well as imprecise judgments about probabilities that are particularly high, middling, or low (compare discussion in Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs 2016). Once the interaction between different pieces of evidence gets even a little complicated, doing simple calculations—even with made-up or imprecise numbers—can genuinely improve our understanding, by imposing some cognitive discipline that helps defend our judgments from the many cognitive biases that beset our ordinary intuitions. (For a popular overview, see Kahneman 2011, especially chapters 12–17; see also Alexander 2013.) Philosophers often talk about whether one piece of evidence “outweighs” another, or about the “balance” of evidence. These are hard quantitative questions; using appropriate quantitative tools can make a real difference.

What is evidence for what depends on the background context—on what *other* evidence has already been taken into account. What is the evidential context in which we are asking whether hiddenness is evidence against God? One natural thought is that we should be taking advantage of everything relevant that we already know. But this would trivialize the question, given that one of the things we already know about is hiddenness itself. If E is part of your background evidence, then the probability of E given your background evidence is one. Thus, given your background evidence, E is equally probable given any hypothesis. The result is that E is not evidence for or against any hypothesis. When asking what some of our evidence favors, we should not include *all* of our evidence as part of the background: some evidence should be “bracketed.”

Besides the evidence at issue itself, we know many other things that are closely related to it, which should also be set aside (compare Draper 2014, 134–35). In the philosophy of science, this is called the problem of “old evidence” (Glymour 1980; see also Howson 1991; Barnes 1999). To evaluate the evidential force of hiddenness, we need to bracket many things we know, including claims we have deduced from hiddenness, testimonial reports about hiddenness, and evidence about the effects of hiddenness. This is not straightforward, and it is not entirely clear

what should be set aside. We take this to be chiefly a pragmatic question: there is not a single correct way to bracket. The *reason* we are asking what *this* evidence supports is as a step on the way to evaluating what *all* our evidence supports. We are breaking up a complicated question into more tractable parts. Eventually, whatever is bracketed now will still need to be taken into account. Bracketing evidence is a matter of choosing a sensible *order* in which to take up evidential questions, since we can't tackle every question at once.

One kind of evidence that we will be bracketing—for now—is distinctively theological evidence. For instance, we can find in Plantinga the suggestion that the doctrine that “our world is fallen, broken, in need of restoration; and human beings ... are in need of repentance, reconciliation, salvation” (Plantinga 1996, 256) may have the status of *evidence*.² Including this sort of proposition as part of the background evidence will make data about evil and divine hiddenness substantially less surprising. Depending on exactly how we spell out this doctrine, perhaps it even entails such things. If such doctrines are themselves evidence, then in an evidential context where they are not bracketed, very plausibly neither evil nor hiddenness will count as evidence against theism.

In section 3, we will consider how distinctively theological evidence might make a difference. We think this is subtle, and there are pitfalls in appealing to such evidence. For the first part of this essay, we set it aside: we will bracket such propositions as the Fall, as well as theism itself, and related religious doctrines. But to be clear, this is not because we are assuming there can be no such evidence, nor that it is irrelevant. We just think it is complicated. One thing at a time.

² Plantinga (1996) argues against setting aside his *belief* in the Fall, in a context where he seems to be treating these beliefs as background evidence for the purpose of evaluating probabilities. We find the more explicit suggestion that this doctrine might be evidence by putting together some things Plantinga says in several different places. Consider this example from “Advice to Christian Philosophers”:

Suppose we say that T_s is the relevant body of total evidence for a given theist T Now what sorts of propositions are to be found in T_s ? Perhaps the propositions he *knows* to be true, or perhaps the largest subset of his beliefs that he can rationally accept without evidence from other propositions, or perhaps the propositions he *immediately-knows*, but does not know on the basis of other propositions. However exactly we characterize this set T_s , the question I mean to press is this: why can't belief in God be itself a member of T_s ? (Plantinga 1984, 260)

Plantinga might well say the same thing about other doctrines, such as the Fall. In *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) Plantinga argues that many substantive religious doctrines can be *known* (and perhaps *immediately known*) by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

2 Hiddenness and Evil

The first question we will investigate is how evidence from hiddenness interacts with evidence from evil. First, a ground-clearing point. Sometimes it is natural to think of putting together different pieces of evidence as simply a matter of “adding them up.” Common metaphors about “weighing” or “balancing” evidence suggest this picture. You have various pieces of evidence with different weights on theism’s side of the scale, and various other pieces of evidence on the opposite side, and the balance of evidence is a matter of adding up the weights on each side. But that isn’t generally how it works: different pieces of evidence can interact in non-trivial ways. Take a simple example. Your friend draws a card from a well-shuffled deck and tells you two things about it.

(E1) The card is either a heart or the ace of spades.

(E2) The card is either a diamond or the ace of spades.

Each of these pieces of evidence taken on its own is evidence for the hypothesis that the card is red. But, taken together, they tell you that the card is the ace of spades, and so not red.³

When you are aggregating evidence, you can consider the evidential import of each proposition one by one; but as you do, the context changes. At each step, everything you have already taken into account should be included as part of the relevant background evidence. In the example above, E2 taken in isolation is evidence for a red card, but with respect to background evidence that includes E1, E2 is evidence *against* a red card.⁴

³Plantinga (1979, 4) offers a similar example illustrating a closely related point.

⁴ There is a perfectly fine quantitative notion of strength of evidence that *can* be simply added up, as long as we are careful about the context in this way. The notion of strength of evidence we are relying on here is the *log Bayes factor*. The *unconditional* log Bayes factor for hypothesis H and evidence E is

$$\log \frac{\Pr(E | H)}{\Pr(E | \neg H)}.$$

The *conditional* log Bayes factor for hypothesis H and evidence E_2 given evidence E_1 is

$$\log \frac{\Pr(E_2 | H \& E_1)}{\Pr(E_2 | \neg H \& E_1)}.$$

There is nothing magical about using logarithms here: putting strengths on a log scale is just what lets us talk about literally adding the strengths together, rather than multiplying them. Then we can calculate the overall strength of evidence E_1, E_2, E_3, \dots for or against H by adding together the

With that out of the way, let's turn to the central question of this section. We have lots of evidence about various evils. We also have lots of evidence about various ways in which God is hidden or seems absent. How do these two kinds of evidence interact?

One natural thought that one often finds is that, if hiddenness is a kind of evil, there is no extra work for hiddenness to do once evil has been taken into account—there is no *special* problem of divine hiddenness. For instance, Kvanvig writes,

Yet, it is also obvious that the problem of hiddenness is but a special instance of the problem of evil, the epistemic weight of which has already been factored in. So how could hiddenness be a further problem, a further piece of information to be weighed in the balance? (2001, 160)

One very simple version of this thought gets things backwards. Here's an example. *Inhabited exoplanets* are a special instance of *exoplanets*. So if you already know there are inhabited exoplanets, then the evidence that there are exoplanets does nothing extra for you, since it follows from what you already knew. But if what you already know is that there are exoplanets, finding out that there is some special instance of exoplanets—for example, that there are *inhabited* exoplanets—is still very important and newsworthy. Likewise, if hiddenness is indeed a species of the genus evil (and we already know this) then, this means that hiddenness entails evil—not the other way around. So while hiddenness may still carry evidential weight conditional on evil, evil cannot carry evidential weight conditional on hiddenness. This version of the idea “hiddenness is a special instance of evil, so hiddenness does nothing once you have evil on the scales” has things backwards. (To be clear, we are not saying Kvanvig or anyone else endorses this simplistic

unconditional log Bayes factor for H and E_1 , together with the *conditional* log Bayes factor for H and E_2 given E_1 , and then the conditional log Bayes factor for H and E_3 given E_1 and E_2 , and so on. (An important fact is that the order in which we take E_1, E_2, \dots does not make a difference to the final result of this calculation.) In a way this way of thinking about the strength of evidence vindicates the “weighing” metaphor—except that the “weight” of an object in the balance depends on which other objects are already there. (Also, if the prior probabilities of the two sides are not equal, then the metaphorical scale should tip one way on its own before any evidence is added to it.)

Poston (2018) considers the simplified case where each piece of evidence E_1, E_2, \dots is *independent* of the others conditional on H , and also conditional on $\neg H$. This is sometimes called the *Naïve Bayes* condition. In this much simplified case, the unconditional Bayes factors are the same as the conditional Bayes factors, so we can simply consider the strength of each piece of evidence separately and add them up.

thought, but we think it is a natural enough mistake to be worth clearing up.)

That is to say, the evidence *that there is some evil or other* does not do further work, conditional on hiddenness (supposing hiddenness is itself known to be an evil). But the problem of evil does not arise merely from the existence of some evil or other: different kinds of evil matter in different ways. For a well-known example, Adams (1989) pointed out that the existence of *horrendous* evils poses a significantly different problem from the existence of evil in general. There is not just one problem of evil, but many. Hiddenness may well be one of them, but that does not mean it deserves any less special attention than any of the other problems of evil. Hiddenness and other specific types of bad thing can make different evidential contributions, and are worth considering separately. As it turns out, we think it's unclear that classifying hiddenness as an "evil" is really helpful at all. We will argue below that some of the reasons why hiddenness might count against theism don't owe their strength to the *badness* of hiddenness at all.

A different natural thought is that whatever *responses* we might have to the problem of evil will also be perfectly good responses to the problem of divine hiddenness. Again, Kvanvig expresses an idea like this:

If we consider the plausible candidates for such delimiting defeaters—the value of freedom, necessity for a greater good, the importance of soul-making, cognitive limitations, and the like—there is no particular reason to think that such responses succeed only for the general problem of evil but not for the specific problem of divine hiddenness. (Kvanvig 2001, 162)

We'll consider three ways of unpacking this idea.

The first version begins from a "logical" or "deductive" version of the argument from evil, which argues that evil is logically inconsistent with theism. If this were so, having Evil as part of one's evidence would take the probability of Theism all the way to zero. A *response* to this logical problem of evil would be a way of showing that it is possible for Theism and Evil to both be true. A classic example of such a response is Plantinga's free will defense (1974, ch. 10, 1978). Then this version of Kvanvig's idea says that, whatever your preferred strategy is for showing that theism is compatible with *evil* in general, this strategy will work equally well to show that theism is compatible with divine hiddenness in particular.

As a matter of logic, this doesn't have to work out. Let us continue to grant that divine hiddenness is just a special kind of evil. Still, just because hiddenness is a

kind of evil, and evil is consistent with theism, it doesn't follow that *hiddenness* is consistent with theism. By analogy, *horrendous evil* is a special kind of evil, but (as Adams (1989) argues) a generic way of showing that evil is consistent with theism need not show that *horrendous evil* is consistent with theism. Or for a simpler analogy, showing that *being square* is consistent with *being red* would not show that *being a blue square* is consistent with *being red*.

Even so, there is surely something to this idea. Consider some *defense* that responds to the logical problem of evil: a possible story that entails both theism and that there is evil. While such a defense does not *automatically* provide a response to the "logical problem of hiddenness"—since the story may not entail divine hiddenness—it isn't too much of a stretch to think that the kinds of defenses that are popular (freedom, soul-making, etc.) might be extended in a way that does include divine hiddenness.

Furthermore, we do think that the way things have gone with the logical argument from evil more broadly does strongly suggest that the prospects for a successful logical argument from hiddenness are pretty dismal. Something that the usual responses to the argument from evil show us is that there isn't as tight a logical connection between evil and theism as one might have concluded from, say, Epicurus's famous formulation or Mackie's (1955) classic presentation. The bridge principles that such arguments rely on, between the goodness of the world and the goodness of God, turn out to be subtle and far from evident. The same goes for hiddenness: the track record of logical arguments from evil give us strong reason to suspect that attempts at tight a priori derivations of a contradiction from the existence of a hidden God will have similar gaps. This isn't a proof or even much of an argument, but we think it is a pretty good hunch. In any case, we will not spend any more time on logical arguments here.

The second version of the idea we are exploring from Kvanvig takes up the opposite idea: not that evil or hiddenness might drive the probability of theism to zero, but that they might drive it down from one. How might this work? Plantinga has suggested that the existence of God might itself be part of one's evidence (see footnote 2). In that case, theism would have probability one conditional on all of one's evidence. If there is any evidential problem of evil or hiddenness for someone in such an epistemic position, then it must be because evil or hiddenness bring about evidence *loss*. Evil or hiddenness might *defeat* theistic evidence, in the sense that they block God's existence from being part of one's evidence at all.

Can evidence be defeated? Suppose you see someone put a red marble and a

black marble in a bag—so you have as part of your evidence that there is a red marble in the bag. They then randomly draw out a marble a hundred times with replacement—and it’s black every time. It is natural—though controversial—to think that this additional evidence *defeats* some evidence you initially had, namely, that there is a red marble in the bag (Williamson 2000, 221–22).

Then the second version of the idea is that reasons for thinking that evil does *not* defeat theistic evidence are also reasons for thinking that hiddenness does not defeat theistic evidence. On reflection, though, this is far from clear. First, we have no good theory of evidence defeat. By our lights, this area of epistemology is very up in the air.⁵ Second, though, even without a general theory we can see important asymmetries between evil and hiddenness. There is a classic distinction between *rebutting defeat* and *undercutting defeat*.⁶ Putting things very roughly, a rebutting defeater for *p* attacks the plausibility of *p* itself, whereas undercutting defeat casts doubt on the epistemic faculties that would deliver *p* as evidence. Now, while facts about suffering or moral evil may defeat evidence for God, it does not seem plausible that they are *undercutting* defeaters. But facts about hiddenness *do* seem to cast a shadow over our God-directed epistemic faculties. For example, suppose one can normally gain the existence of God as evidence through some quasi-perceptual *sensus divinitatus*. Then one of the things that the cluster of facts we call “divine hiddenness” shows us is that any such sense works at best very inconsistently across times and between different people. Facts about the distribution of unbelief and religious experience provide reasons not to trust one’s evidence that there is a God, even for those who are otherwise in a position to have it. By analogy, suppose you look in the street and see a dog. Ordinarily this would provide you with perceptual evidence that there is a dog. But if many other people look out the same window and report that they don’t see anything out there, this is the kind of thing that might well defeat your perceptual evidence. Hiddenness is a lot like this; evil is not. This structural difference is a reason to suspect that responses to evil as an evidence-defeater *won’t* generally give us responses to hiddenness as an evidence defeater. We won’t defend this further here—and we emphasize that we have no settled views on evidence defeat—but we think the disanalogy is suggestive.

For the third version, we now consider someone whose evidence leaves both atheism and theism open as live possibilities—the probabilities are neither zero nor

⁵See Lasonen-Aarnio (2010) for criticisms of some natural theories one might propose; see Goodman and Salow (2018) for an interesting recent alternative proposal.

⁶Pollock (1970) originally makes this distinction concerning justification; here we co-opt it for talking about evidence defeat.

one—and we consider arguments that merely aim to show that evil or hiddenness is *evidence against* theism. The third version of Kvanvig’s claim is that hiddenness does no extra evidential work beyond evil, because there are responses to the argument from evil that also respond to the argument from hiddenness.

So far we’ve been speaking abstractly and vaguely about the existence of some kind of evil or other, and the existence of some kind of hiddenness or other. We’ll now make things slightly more concrete. Instead of evil in general, let’s consider the somewhat more specific fact that some people suffer pain—call this fact Suffering. Instead of hiddenness in general, let’s consider the fact that some people do not know that there is a God—call this fact Ignorance.

The idea we are considering says that various ways of replying to the problem of suffering—possible stories about “the value of freedom, necessity for a greater good, the importance of soul-making, cognitive limitations, and the like” (Kvanvig 2001, 162)—also blunt the force of hiddenness. Let’s grant that there are stories like this that reconcile Theism with Suffering in the sense of showing these propositions to be mutually consistent. Let’s also grant that some of these stories *also* reconcile Theism with Ignorance in the same sense (though, as we noted, this does not come automatically). This is enough to block a *logical* argument from Ignorance against Theism. But it does not block an *evidential* argument from Ignorance against Theism—even if an evidential argument from Suffering has already been assimilated.

Let’s make this point more precise. Let a *p-defense* be a consistent proposition that entails Theism & *p*.⁷ When we say that Ignorance does nothing extra once Suffering has been taken into account, we mean that Ignorance is not evidence against Theism conditional on Suffering. For this, it’s not enough that there are *some* Suffering-defenses that are also Ignorance-defenses. What is required is that *every* Suffering-defense is an Ignorance-defense. If there is *any* consistent proposition *D* that entails Theism & Suffering but does not entail Theism & Ignorance, it follows that *D* & Theism & Suffering & not Ignorance has positive probability. In that case, Theism & Suffering does not entail Ignorance. Meanwhile, not-Theism *does* entail Ignorance: if there is no God, it follows that people do not know there is a God (since knowledge is factive).⁸ Likewise, not-Theism & Suffering entails

⁷Here for simplicity we will make the *Regularity* assumption that each consistent proposition has positive probability. In this case “*p* entails *q*” is equivalent to “the probability of *p* and not *q* is zero.” This assumption is dispensable, but it makes things a little easier to state.

⁸We are assuming that the background evidential context includes the fact that there are people.

Ignorance. So

$$\Pr(\text{Ignorance} \mid \text{Theism} \ \& \ \text{Suffering}) < \Pr(\text{Ignorance} \mid \neg\text{Theism} \ \& \ \text{Suffering})$$

This tells us that Ignorance is evidence against Theism conditional on Suffering.

Here is the lesson. For the *logical* problem of ignorance to be entirely subsumed under the problem of suffering, it is enough that *some* Suffering-defense is an Ignorance-defense. But for the *evidential* problem of ignorance to be entirely subsumed under the problem of suffering, what's required is that *every* Suffering-defense is an Ignorance-defense. Any story that reconciles Theism and Suffering but does *not* entail Ignorance provides a bit of the space of theistic possibilities that Ignorance rules out, and (putting things a bit roughly) ruling out such theistic possibilities is how evidence against Theism works.

Furthermore, it seems eminently plausible that *there are* Suffering-defenses that are not Ignorance-defenses: possible stories in which there is God and suffering, but no ignorance of God. Some vivid examples might be supplied by Ted Chiang's short story "Hell is the Absence of God," Milton's war in heaven in book VI of *Paradise Lost* (supposing angels count as people—note that Milton has Satan suffer pain), or when Adam and Eve are cursed in Genesis chapter 3. If these stories are consistent theistic possibilities, then they count as Suffering-defenses that are not Ignorance-defenses.⁹

This also illustrates a point we gestured at earlier: divine hiddenness need not be *bad* to count against Theism. In fact, for ignorance of God to count against Theism, all that is required is that given the truth of Theism, it might have turned out that everyone knew it was true.

So far, we have argued that divine hiddenness can do extra evidential work even once the problem of evil has been taken into account. In short, the problem of hiddenness is not subsumed by the problem of evil. But there is still something plausibly right in the vicinity: hiddenness is *weaker* evidence if evil has already been taken into account than it would be otherwise.

If we spell out strength of evidence in a standard way—see below—then we can say precisely what it takes for Ignorance to be weaker evidence against Theism given Suffering than it is unconditionally: this holds if and only if Ignorance and

⁹This is not entirely clear, though, since it is not clear whether the character called "God" in these stories really has the divine attributes of perfect goodness and power.

Suffering are *positively correlated* given Theism. This intuitively means that, conditional on Theism, Ignorance and Suffering each make the other more likely. It is very plausible that this is true. So plausibly there is a good sense in which the problem of evil *mitigates* the force of the problem of divine hiddenness, even though it does not completely *subsume* it.

But note that this relationship is symmetric. If Suffering and Ignorance are correlated given Theism, then likewise *Suffering* is weaker evidence against Theism in the presence of Ignorance than it would be otherwise. So by the same token, the problem of hiddenness mitigates the problem of evil (though again it does not subsume it). It's just a matter of historical accident that analytic philosophers of religion paid a lot of attention to the problem of evil *earlier* than the problem of hiddenness. This relationship gives no reason to think that one of these problems is more important than the other.

Again, let's spell this out in a bit more detail. Recall the standard Bayesian criterion for evidence: *E* is evidence against *H* if and only if

$$\Pr(E | H) < \Pr(E | \neg H)$$

There is also a standard Bayesian criterion for *how strong* evidence *E* is for hypothesis *H*: it is simply a matter of *how much greater* $\Pr(E | H)$ is compared to $\Pr(E | \neg H)$. If Smoke is *much* more probable given Fire than given no Fire, then Smoke is *strong* evidence for Fire. A standard measure is the ratio

$$\frac{\Pr(\text{Smoke} | \text{Fire})}{\Pr(\text{Smoke} | \neg \text{Fire})}$$

In general, the *Bayes factor* of evidence *E* for hypothesis *H* is the ratio

$$\frac{\Pr(E | H)}{\Pr(E | \neg H)}$$

A large Bayes factor indicates that *E* is strong evidence for *H*, a small Bayes factor greater than one indicates that *E* is weak evidence for *H*, and a Bayes factor less than one indicates that *E* is evidence against *H*. Intuitively, the Bayes factor describes how big a “boost” certain evidence gives you.¹⁰ Similarly, the *conditional*

¹⁰To be precise, it tells you by what *factor* the *odds* of H should increase—Bayes factors are multiplied, rather than added. (If you want something you can add, you can use the *log* Bayes factor discussed in footnote 4.)

Bayes factor of evidence E for hypothesis H given K is

$$\frac{\Pr(E | H \& K)}{\Pr(E | \neg H \& K)}$$

So the claim above—that Ignorance is weaker evidence against Theism given Suffering than it is unconditionally—can be restated like this:

$$\frac{\Pr(\text{Ignorance} | \text{Theism} \& \text{Suffering})}{\Pr(\text{Ignorance} | \neg \text{Theism} \& \text{Suffering})} < \frac{\Pr(\text{Ignorance} | \text{Theism})}{\Pr(\text{Ignorance} | \neg \text{Theism})} \quad (1)$$

What it means for Ignorance and Suffering to be *positively correlated* given Theism is

$$\begin{aligned} &\Pr(\text{Suffering} \& \text{Ignorance} | \text{Theism}) \\ &> \Pr(\text{Suffering} | \text{Theism}) \cdot \Pr(\text{Ignorance} | \text{Theism}) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

The mathematical point is that (1) and (2) are equivalent.¹¹ The basic idea is that, if you already know Theism is true, then both are ways of saying that, given Theism, Suffering makes Ignorance less unexpected, and vice versa.

One more point about the relative strength of these two pieces of evidence is worth making. It is natural to think that, supposing that a powerful God who loves God’s creatures exists, while ignorance of God is *somewhat* surprising, it is not *so* surprising—not nearly as surprising as the fact that creatures suffer pain. Suppose this much is right: Ignorance is less surprising than Suffering given Theism. It is tempting to conclude that Suffering is *stronger evidence* than Ignorance against Theism. (That is, taking each piece of evidence unconditionally.) But this conclusion does not follow.

¹¹This equivalence again turns on the fact that \neg Theism entails Ignorance. But there is a more general version of this fact as well, that holds for any evidence. E_1 is weaker evidence against H given E_2 than it is unconditionally iff E_1 and E_2 are *more* correlated given H than they are given $\neg H$. That is, to be precise:

$$\frac{\Pr(E_1 | H) \Pr(E_2 | H)}{\Pr(E_1 \& E_2 | H)} < \frac{\Pr(E_1 | \neg H) \Pr(E_2 | \neg H)}{\Pr(E_1 \& E_2 | \neg H)}$$

(The case discussed in the main text follows from this, since $\Pr(\text{Ignorance} | \neg \text{Theism}) = 1$ and $\Pr(\text{Ignorance} \& \text{Suffering} | \neg \text{Theism}) = \Pr(\text{Suffering} | \neg \text{Theism})$.) Note that this general relationship between E_1 and E_2 is, again, clearly symmetric. So the general point does not turn on the facticity of knowledge: if suffering attenuates the evidential strength of hiddenness, then likewise hiddenness attenuates the evidential strength of suffering.

Imagine a celestial being, Celeste, visiting Earth. Celeste is a committed atheist.¹² She learns about the existence of people and families and animals and such, but has not yet learned anything yet about suffering, or pain, or other kinds of negative experience. When she then finds out that some people suffer, this would come as at least a bit of a surprise. We can grant (as Draper argues) that human suffering is *less* surprising to Celeste than it would be to her theist counterpart. Still, this innocent visitor had no reason to expect suffering. She might well have, like Gulliver, found a planet of harmonious and serene Houyhnhnms. In contrast, given her atheism, Celeste was fully confident that she would find that people don't know there is a God. While Suffering is surprising, Ignorance is no surprise at all.

Now, here is how Suffering might be *more surprising* than Ignorance to the theist, while still being *weaker evidence* against Theism. What matters for the strength of evidence of E against Theism is the ratio between the probability of E given Theism and the probability of E given not-Theism.

$$\frac{\Pr(E \mid \text{Theism})}{\Pr(E \mid \neg\text{Theism})}$$

But even if the *numerator* is lower when we plug Suffering in for E than when we plug in Ignorance, the *denominator* is also lower for Suffering than it is for Ignorance. Suffering comes as at least some surprise for the atheist, while Ignorance is no surprise at all. So it could easily work out that the Bayes factor for Suffering is *smaller* than the Bayes factor for Ignorance.

For concreteness, let's plug in some numbers. (These numbers are just for illustration, and shouldn't be taken literally.) Suppose Suffering is more surprising than Ignorance given Theism:

$$\begin{aligned}\Pr(\text{Ignorance} \mid \text{Theism}) &= 1/6 \\ \Pr(\text{Suffering} \mid \text{Theism}) &= 1/10\end{aligned}$$

We also suppose that Suffering is fairly surprising given Atheism, too:

$$\Pr(\text{Suffering} \mid \text{Atheism}) = 1/2$$

Since knowledge is factive, we also have

$$\Pr(\text{Ignorance} \mid \text{Atheism}) = 1$$

¹²Draper (1989) uses a similar thought experiment to make a different point.

With these values, while Suffering is *more surprising* than Ignorance given Theism, Suffering is *weaker evidence* than Ignorance against Theism. We can calculate the Bayes factors:

$$\frac{\Pr(\text{Suffering} \mid \text{Atheism})}{\Pr(\text{Suffering} \mid \text{Theism})} = 5$$
$$\frac{\Pr(\text{Ignorance} \mid \text{Atheism})}{\Pr(\text{Ignorance} \mid \text{Theism})} = 6$$

So, given these parameters, Ignorance is *stronger* evidence than Suffering, despite being less surprising. The argument “evil is more surprising than hiddenness for the theist, so the argument from evil is stronger than the argument from hiddenness” is invalid.

We have argued for three main things in this section.

- (1) The problem of evil does not subsume the problem of divine hiddenness: in particular, Ignorance makes an evidential difference even after Suffering has been taken into account.
- (2) The problem of evil does plausibly *mitigate* the problem of divine hiddenness—and by the same token, the problem of divine hiddenness does plausibly mitigate the problem of evil. That relationship is symmetric.
- (3) Even if Suffering is less probable than Ignorance given Theism, Ignorance may well be stronger evidence than Suffering against Theism.

We should acknowledge that we stacked the deck a bit by focusing on *Ignorance* as our focal hiddenness fact throughout this discussion. We took advantage of the factivity of knowledge, so Ignorance is *sure* to be true if there is no God (and there are people). One worry about focusing on Ignorance is that for nearly *any* proposition p , the fact that not everyone knows p counts as evidence against p .¹³ But there may well be other evidence that counts just as strongly in the opposite direction. Consider *Ignorance of Atheism*: the fact that not everyone knows there is *no* God. This fact is clearly evidence *for* the existence of God: if there is a God, then Ignorance of Atheism follows, while if there is no God then it might have turned out that everyone knew this. So Ignorance of Theism is evidence against Theism, and Ignorance of Atheism is evidence against Atheism.

While this much is true, there is no reason why these two pieces of evidence have to

¹³The exceptional case is where our background evidence guarantees that if p is true then not everyone knows p : for example, let p be the proposition that someone does not know anything.

pull equally strongly in opposite directions. Both facts *together* will count against Theism, given the following natural assumption:¹⁴

$$\Pr(\text{Knowledge of Theism} \mid \text{Theism}) > \Pr(\text{Knowledge of Atheism} \mid \text{Atheism})$$

What this says is that the probability, given Theism, that everyone would know Theism to be true is higher than the probability, given Atheism, that everyone would know Atheism to be true. While this assumption is certainly not just a matter of logic, it does seem like a very plausible judgment. Supposing there is an all-powerful God that cares whether creatures know God exists, then it is reasonable to expect creatures to know God exists. In contrast, the absence of such a God does not raise the probability of our knowing about that absence to the same degree—it isn't as if the *absence* might will itself to be known and have the power to effect its will.

So we don't think that the problem of Ignorance is so trivial that it was a waste of time to analyze it. Still, there is much more to be done. As we have noted, there are many different arguments from hiddenness—many different respects in which our epistemic and experiential condition is obscure, which might count against there being a God. These different facts can't all be dealt with in one go. Things are more complicated for hiddenness facts that are contingent given Atheism—such as that some people don't *believe* in God. The evidential force of these facts will depend on more plausibility considerations, and in general will not be quite as logically airtight as the case of Ignorance. Even so, the simple case illustrates some important structural points. The relationship between hiddenness and evil does not render hiddenness irrelevant once we have taken evil into account. But the substantive question of how significant various hiddenness facts really are needs further exploration.

3 Conceptions of God

Michael Rea writes:

¹⁴Write *KT* for Knowledge of Theism and *KA* for Knowledge of Atheism. For both ignorance claims together to count as evidence against Theism, it is sufficient that

$$\Pr(\neg KT \ \& \ \neg KA \mid \text{Theism}) < \Pr(\neg KT \ \& \ \neg KA \mid \neg\text{Theism}).$$

Since Theism entails $\neg KA$, the left side is equal to $\Pr(\neg KT \mid \text{Theism})$. Likewise, since $\neg\text{Theism}$ entails $\neg KT$, the right side is equal to $\Pr(\neg KA \mid \neg\text{Theism})$. So the left side is less than the right side iff $\Pr(KT \mid \text{Theism}) > \Pr(KA \mid \neg\text{Theism})$.

The *problem of divine hiddenness* ... depends for its traction on contestable theological assumptions. Accordingly, one might just as easily take the problem not as a referendum on the existence of God, but rather on the viability of certain ways of understanding the nature of God and God's attributes. (2018, 6, original emphasis)

Rea argues that the problem of hiddenness "*fails* to target belief in the Christian God" when this is spelled out in a theologically substantive way and distinguished from other "very different conceptions of God" (pp. 22–23, original emphasis). In particular, Rea argues that God is *transcendent*, where this is to be understood in a sufficiently "dark" way (see chapters 3–4), undermining "any reason for thinking that God's love would preclude divine hiddenness" (p. 8).

We will argue that, when the problem of hiddenness is understood as an evidential argument, there isn't a clean division between arguments against the existence of God and arguments against "certain ways of understanding the nature of God and God's attributes." In fact, the problem of divine hiddenness is both of these things.

We should again distinguish between *logical* and *evidential* arguments. If what you're trying to show is that hiddenness is not *conclusive* evidence against the existence of God, then it suffices to show that there is some epistemically possible way God might be that is consistent with hiddenness. But hiddenness can be strong evidence against the existence of God without being fully conclusive; and the fact that some conceptions of God are compatible with hiddenness does not show that this is not the case.

Moving from a broader "conception" of God to a more specific one means eliminating various live possibilities of how God might be. Unless this change is balanced off by also eliminating some ways the world might be if there is *no* God, then this means that the God possibilities make up a smaller proportion of logical space than before. This is precisely what disconfirmation amounts to in a Bayesian setting. So if divine hiddenness prompts us to adopt a more specific conception of God, without any other epistemic revision, then it *is* evidence against the existence of God.

Consider an analogy. You think that Aisha might give you flowers, though she also might not. You know the local flower shop sells several different kinds of flowers: roses, daisies, tulips. Your friend Orrie knows what Aisha is up to. You say, "I don't want to know anything else, but is Aisha giving me roses?" Orrie says no. If the only relevant thing you have learned is *Aisha is not giving me roses*, then this is

evidence against Aisha giving you flowers. You might be tempted to think, “Well, she still might give me daisies or tulips. I should just become *more* confident that it is one of those, without losing confidence that she will give me flowers.” This is half right: you *should* be more confident that Aisha is giving you daisies or tulips. But you should still be less confident that she will give you any flowers at all. In the diagram (fig. 1), when Roses are eliminated this leaves more room for the other possibilities: No Flowers, Daisies, and Tulips *all* get probability boosts. For example, if the prior probabilities are $1/2$ for No Flowers, and $1/6$ for each of Roses, Daisies, or Tulips, then the posterior probability for No Flowers goes up to $3/5$ and the probabilities for Daisies and Tulips each go up to $1/5$. So the probability that Aisha gives you flowers goes down from $1/2$ to $2/5$. In general, for any hypothesis H , any evidence that merely rules out a way for H to be true is *evidence against* H being true, while simultaneously being *evidence for* any remaining ways for H to be true. When we rule out “certain ways of understanding” H (namely Roses), this *also* amounts to evidence against H .¹⁵

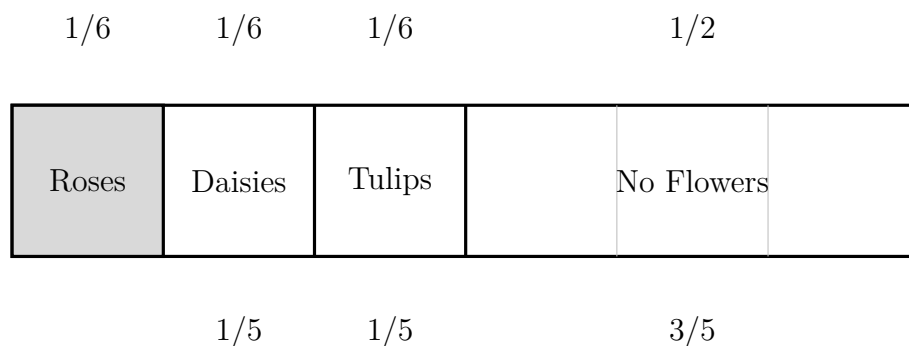


Figure 1: Eliminating one possible kind of flowers.

It’s very natural, when confronted with evidence against one’s view, to adapt the view to accommodate that evidence without losing confidence. But this is a mistake. Consider someone who believes the Earth is flat—call this the Simple Theory. When confronted with photos of the Earth taken from space they argue: “My view is not just that the Earth is flat, but *also* that NASA is attempting to deceive us into believing the Earth is round by publishing fake photos.” Call this the Extended

¹⁵Draper (2011) gives an analogous argument against a similar move made by the skeptical theist. Even if evil is not evidence against a *specific version* of theism—namely, *skeptical theism*—evil is still less likely given *theism* than it is given *atheism*, and thus still evidence against theism. This can be so even though it is also evidence *for* skeptical theism.

Theory. Note that the existence of photos showing a round Earth is *not* evidence against the Extended Theory: it is in fact exactly what the Extended Theory predicts. So the flat Earther supposes that they have no epistemic price to pay: the flat Earther merely adopts a more specific “conception” of the flat Earth, and this conception is not threatened by the photographic evidence.

It’s *true* that the photos are not evidence against the Extended Theory, but they *are* still evidence against the Simple Theory that the Earth is flat. Furthermore, the overall reasons against the Extended Theory, in the light of the photographic evidence, are at least as strong as the reasons against the Simple Theory: that is, the Extended Theory is even less probable than the discredited Simple Theory. This is not because the photos are *evidence against* the Extended Theory, but because the Extended Theory has much smaller *prior* probability than the Simple Theory—because it is much more specific. Thus its probability is lower than the probability of those two things both being true, which is to say:

$$\text{Pr(Extended Theory)} < \text{Pr(Simple Theory | Photos)} \ll \text{Pr(Simple Theory)}$$

So even though the photos are not evidence against the Extended Theory, this is not to that theory’s credit.¹⁶ The flat earther’s ad hoc shenanigans give rise to a theory with *lower* posterior probability, not higher—and this posterior probability is what matters in the end. You can always cook the books and hide disconfirmation, by trading it in for lower prior probability. But this is no help.

This can be easy to miss, because our intuitive probability judgments are subject to cognitive biases. More specific, detail-rich stories often strike us as *more* plausible than simple, spare stories. A famous illustration of this is the “bank teller fallacy” (see Kahneman 2011, ch. 15): most people judge that it is more probable that a certain character, Linda, is a feminist bank teller than that she is simply a bank teller, given a background story that primes them to think of feminism. But of course the laws of probability guarantee that

$$\text{Pr(Feminist \& Bank Teller)} \leq \text{Pr(Bank Teller)}$$

The more detailed story coheres better and seems more vivid, and thus can seem more credible, even though it is in fact less likely to be true. Similarly, the Extended Flat Earth Theory can seem vivid and narratively satisfying in a way that belies its low probability.

¹⁶Compare Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs (2016, sec. 5). Perrine and Wykstra (2014, 150) give a different example to make a similar point.

Simple Flat Earth Theory

Round Earth

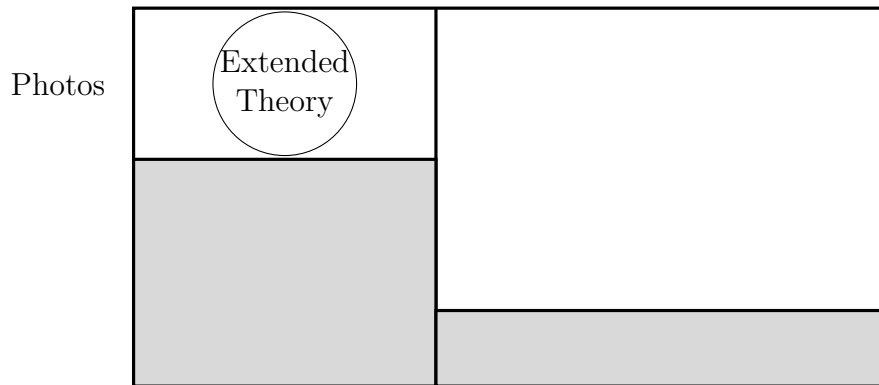


Figure 2: Switching to a more specific theory that fits the evidence. (Not to scale.)

The mere consistency of the Extended Theory *does* show that the Simple Theory is at least *consistent* with the photographic evidence—in other words, that evidence against the Simple Theory is not utterly conclusive. But that’s a low bar to clear.

The flat earther’s shenanigans are clearly disreputably ad hoc: the Extended Theory is just engineered to accommodate counterevidence, with no independent motivation. To be clear, we are *not* saying that this is what’s going on with transcendent conceptions of God like that which Rea defends—we are not accusing Rea of the same ad hocery as the conspiracy theorist. Rea’s motivation for accepting such a conception is not for the sake of an escape route from the problem of divine hiddenness; rather, he thinks that it is to be found in “the contents of scripture and tradition,” and he holds that “we need to conduct our theorizing at least to some extent, if possible, within a framework of concepts that are revealed by these sources” (p. 60). In this way, transcendence may be an *independently motivated* specification of theism, in contrast to the flat earther’s purely ad hoc Extended Theory.

The main point the flat earth example is meant to illustrate is that one cannot make one’s view more credible in the face of disconfirming evidence *simply* by adopting a more specific view—even though the more detailed theory may seem intuitively more satisfying. If responding to divine hiddenness by way of “historically and theologically informed exploration and defense of the assumptions about God” (Rea 2018, 7–8) is to provide an argument that hiddenness is *not* evidence against God,

then it has to be doing something else *besides* merely eliminating certain ways God might be from the space of epistemic possibilities. We'll consider two options.

First, theological inquiry might introduce *new* epistemic possibilities that were not previously under consideration. This usually goes under the heading of “expanding awareness” (for overview, see Schipper 2015; Steele and Stefánsson, forthcoming, and references therein). When a new scientific theory is proposed, such as evolution by natural selection or special relativity, this is a kind of epistemic advance that does not seem to consist in gaining evidence that eliminates certain epistemic possibilities. The most natural way to think about this kind of advance is as an *expansion* of the space of possibilities that are assigned probabilities at all. We might think about theological inquiry as working similarly.¹⁷

We think this is an intriguing idea well worth exploring, but there is not space here to do it justice—our remarks will be brief and tentative. Unlike the case of ordinary Bayesian updating by learning new propositions, there is no standard theory of updating by expanding awareness of possibilities—though there are various competing proposals (for example, Karni and Vierø 2013). Any application of this idea to the philosophy of religion must be speculative.

It is natural to think that introducing new theistic possibilities—say, a new conception of God as transcendent—would be a way of *increasing* the probability of theism. After all, the new conception should get some probability assigned to it, and it also doesn't seem like this should detract from the probability of the conceptions one already possessed. If adding a new conception of God increases the probability of theism, then when we go on to reject some of the *old* conceptions, theism may end up on net no worse off than it began. But we tentatively think that it should not really work this way. First, the facile argument we just suggested seems wrong. The probabilities of all the possibilities taken together should still add up to one, just like before, and the probability of the previously unconsidered theistic conception has to come from somewhere. So we can't add extra probability to a new conception without taking away from anything else—and there is no obvious reason why it should be only atheistic hypotheses that bear the loss.

Consider the example of Aisha's flowers again. Suppose you become aware of kind of flower you had never before imagined: *ranunculuses*. What should happen now to the probability you assign to Aisha giving you flowers? It's hard to say, but a natural answer is that it should stay the same. But it also doesn't seem like you

¹⁷Draper (2014, 172) considers this possibility in passing.

should become less confident that she will give you roses, or that she will give you tulips, etc. Rather, the view we prefer is that, given the possibility of being given ranunculuses, the original allocation of probabilities (1/2 to no flowers and 1/6 to each of roses, tulips, and daisies) was simply wrong—not proportioned to the evidence. The correct probability assignment would reserve some probability for other unimagined kinds of flowers all along. (For overview and critical discussion of various approaches in this spirit, see Steele and Stefánsson, forthcoming, sec. 6.2.) The probability of ranunculuses comes from the probability that you should have assigned to “unknown unknown” kinds of flower—the “none of the above” option, as it were.

In general, it would be hubris—and more to the point, not warranted by one’s evidence—to assign no probability to there being relevant possibilities that one has not considered. The picture is that the possibilities of which one is “unaware” are still lurking in logical space, receiving evidential probabilities—you just haven’t thought about those possibilities or their probabilities yet. This picture will, of course, be controversial, as will any view on this subject matter, but we think it is promising. If it is right, then even if theological inquiry does turn up new unconsidered possibilities, this is not a way of adding to the probability of theism; nor is it a way of avoiding the conclusion that the probability of theism goes down when the same inquiry leads us to eliminate theistic possibilities we had previously been aware of.

The second option for what might be happening in theological inquiry, besides merely eliminating theistic possibilities, is that one might be adducing evidence that also eliminates some *atheistic* possibilities. This might sound surprising—how could theorizing about God’s attributes tell us about what the world is like even if there is *no* God? We think this idea has some promise, though it is not a straightforward matter whether it will ultimately be defensible.

Buchak (2014) defends an idea proposed by Perrine and Wykstra (2014) that “learning which precisification of a general theory is the most plausible needn’t always make the general theory less likely relative to the alternatives” (Buchak 2014, 186). In their discussion, the “general theory” at issue is theism, and the “precisification” is *skeptical theism*. Perrine and Wykstra argue that the facts about evil might lead one to become more confident in skeptical theism, conditional on theism, without becoming any less confident in theism. Buchak says that this can be made sense of, if “what the data about evil supports is the *conditional claim* that if theism is true then skeptical theism is true” (2014, 182). Crucially, this

conditional claim should not be understood as a *material conditional*, equivalent to “Either theism is false or skeptical theism is true.” Updating on this material conditional would amount to simply eliminating certain theistic possibilities (the non-skeptical ones), which would diminish the probability of theism, as we have discussed. Rather, Buchak points out that the conditional claim can alternatively be construed as an *indicative conditional*, and that one can in principle learn the indicative conditional *if Theism, then Skeptical Theism* without becoming any less confident in Theism. She offers this analogy:

For example, you assign equal probability to the hypothesis that your friend is in town (A) and the hypothesis that he is out of town (\bar{A}). There are five coffee shops in town, three Pete’s and two Starbucks, and knowing nothing else, you assign equal probability to his being at each (with AB representing his being in town at a Pete’s and $A\bar{B}$ his being in town at a Starbucks). You then learn that he hates Starbucks, so if he’s in town, he won’t be there – therefore, you can rule out $A\bar{B}$. Intuitively, though, learning this fact shouldn’t make you think it more likely that he is out of town. (Buchak 2014, 184–85)

The picture is that one can redistribute the “in town” probability from Starbucks to Peet’s, while keeping its total probability the same.

Buchak (2014, 185) considers various non-standard rules from the Bayesian literature for updating on indicative conditionals that deliver this result. We prefer to focus on a less revisionary version: we don’t need a newfangled updating rule if we accept the straightforward view that an indicative conditional expresses a proposition that is stronger than a mere material conditional. That is, an indicative conditional is true at some worlds and false at others, and it need not be true in every world where the antecedent is false. One popular theory like this (Stalnaker 1968) says that the conditional *if A, then B* is true at just those worlds such that the *closest A-world* is a *B-world*. In the coffee shop example, the indicative conditional *if my friend is in town, he isn’t at Starbucks* does not *merely* rule out the possibility of being in town and at Starbucks. This alone would disconfirm him being in town. But this information *also* tells us something non-trivial about what the world is like if your friend is out of town: it rules out those out-of-town worlds for which the closest in-town world is a Starbucks-world. Furthermore, in this story it is natural to say that the probability of these out-of-town worlds exactly balances off the probability of the corresponding in-town worlds: whether the friend is in town or out of town does not make a difference to which coffee shop he goes to

if he is in town. (For the out of town worlds, we might imagine that the closest in-town world is one that matches his coffee-shop-choice dispositions, and those dispositions are the same whether or not he is in town. Note that if we know *if he is in town, he is at Peet's or Starbucks*, then by the Stalnaker semantics we also know the disjunction *if he is in town, he is at Peet's or if he is in town, he is at Starbucks*: so, in particular, every out-of-town world is one where one or the other of these conditionals is true.) So there is no change to the overall probability of being in town.

In Town	Out of Town	
Peets		} If In Town, Peets
Starbucks		
		} If In Town, Starbucks

Figure 3: Learning an indicative conditional.

But we need not get bogged down here in technicalities; we can make the central point without worrying about the semantics of conditionals. In the coffee shop case, it is easy to find *non-conditional* evidence that does the relevant work. The way you learn *if my friend is in town, he is not at Starbucks* is by learning the stronger and more straightforward proposition *my friend hates Starbucks and never goes there*. It is clear that there are worlds in which this proposition is false and the friend is out of town. Indeed, this information is on its face independent of whether your friend is in town. (There is no reason to think your friend's coffee preferences are connected to his travel plans.) You do also learn that the material conditional is true—*either my friend is not in town or my friend is not at Starbucks*. But if you already know *my friend is not at Starbucks*, then the material conditional does not tell you anything extra. So, while the material conditional on its own is evidence against your friend being in town, when it is combined with the additional information that your friend never goes to Starbucks, it is not.

Recall the contrast between the flat earther’s obviously ad hoc modification of their theory and the much less conspicuously disreputable move from generic theism to a more specific conception of God as appropriately transcendent, which Rea motivates by appeal to scripture and tradition (rather than as a mere escape hatch from counterevidence). The question is whether this helps: that is, whether this appeal to additional theological data can get you from generic theism to the more specific version without losing any probability along the way. The way this might work is if the theological data tells us something non-trivial about what the world is like if there is no God. We have now seen one way that this can work in principle. Apparently “theological” evidence, like the indicative conditional *if Theism, then Skeptical Theism*—or likewise, *if Theism, then God is transcendent*—can work like this. There are epistemically possible worlds in which there is no God and the conditional is false.

It can be tricky to pin down the truth conditions of indicative conditionals. As in the coffee shop case, though, often the way we learn a conditional is by learning something stronger—like *my friend never goes to Starbucks*. We can make headway by just focusing on the more straightforward stronger information. In the case at hand, the stronger information that Rea appeals to is “the contents of scripture and tradition.” Scripture and tradition need not have said precisely what they do, supposing there is no God. So propositions of the form “scripture and tradition say . . .” rule out not just certain theistic possibilities, but also certain atheistic possibilities. They could, in principle, be the sort of additional information that makes transcendence an independently motivated modification of theism rather than merely ad hoc.

There are two different reasons for believing the theological conditional *if there is a God, God is transcendent*. One reason is that we might infer it from divine hiddenness facts. But this way of learning the conditional lowers the probability of theism to precisely the extent that divine hiddenness counts as evidence against theism. So learning the theological conditional this way does not help the probability of theism. But another reason for believing the conditional is on the basis of scripture and tradition. The question before us now is whether this reason counts as suitably *independent* from the reason given by divine hiddenness facts themselves—in particular, whether this might be a way of learning the theological conditional that does *not* lower the probability of theism.

Let’s consider a simple toy model. Imagine that we do not know yet whether God is hidden. (We will use “God is hidden” as a shorthand for some fact about the dis-

tribution of religious belief and experience—say, that many people do not believe in or experience God. In particular, God being hidden should not be understood to entail that God exists.) Suppose that we do know that *if* God exists and is hidden, then God is transcendent, and likewise that if God exists and is not hidden, then God is not transcendent. (This is obviously an over-simplification, but it will help keep things tidy.) Let the probability that God is transcendent conditional on theism be $1/2$. We will conduct some basic theological inquiry by consulting a local prophet. To keep things simple, suppose we know that the prophet is a perfectly reliable reporter on God’s attributes *if* there is a God—but not otherwise. The prophet comes down from the mountaintop and announces, “God is transcendent.” One thing we thereby learn is *if there is a God, God is transcendent*. We learned this conditional by way of a simpler unconditional piece of information: *the prophet says God is transcendent*.

How should we update on this information? This depends on something we have not specified in the story so far: what we think the prophet is up to *if there is no God*. When the prophet goes up the mountain, if there is a God she receives the truth about God’s transcendence, and faithfully reports it. But if there is no God, what then? Let’s suppose that the prophet simply makes her best guess as to what God is like, supposing there is a God. We can consider two different versions of how this story goes in the case where there is no God.

First version. The prophet does not already know whether God is hidden. Then the prophet also doesn’t know (if there is a God) whether God is transcendent. So we’ll suppose she guesses at random: she is equally likely to say “God is transcendent” or “God is not transcendent.”¹⁸

In this case, the evidence *the prophet says God is transcendent* is independent of theism. If there is a God, then the probability that the prophet would say God is transcendent is $1/2$ (because that’s how likely it is to be true). And if there is *no* God, then the probability that the prophet would say this, by guessing, is $1/2$ again. So in this version of the story, we do learn from the prophet the conditional information *if there is a God, God is transcendent* in a way that does not lower the probability of theism.

This illustrates the best-case scenario. In this situation, the theological views we derive from the prophet’s report are genuinely *independently motivated*. It is pos-

¹⁸More generally, if the $\Pr(\text{Transcendence} \mid \text{Theism}) = p$, then the prophet should decide what to say based on flipping a weighted coin which comes up heads with probability p .

sible to learn conditional facts about God in a way that does not merely eliminate theistic possibilities, and so does not disconfirm theism, and which sets theism up to escape disconfirmation by hiddenness as well. The key thing that makes this possible is that the prophet’s report is contingent *given atheism*, and not just given theism; and furthermore, this report is unlikely given atheism to the same degree that it is unlikely given theism.

Theism	Atheism	
Transcendent God	(Prophet guesses transcendence)	} Prophet says God is transcendent
Non-Transcendent God		

Figure 4: First version of the prophet toy model (not to scale).

Second version. In this version, the prophet *does* know whether God is hidden—that is, she knows about the distribution of religious belief and experience. Now what does the prophet do, in the case where there is no God? There are two possibilities. The first is that the prophet knows that God is indeed hidden. Then she also knows the conditional *if there is a God, God is transcendent*. So she will say “God is transcendent.” The second possibility is that the prophet knows God is *not* hidden—that is, she knows that religious belief and experience are pervasive. If she knows this, we suppose that she will say “God is not transcendent.”

In this version, the news *the prophet says “God is transcendent”* is itself evidence against theism, as long as hiddenness would be. For in fact, in this version of the toy model, we know in advance that the prophet will say “God is transcendent” if and only if God is in fact hidden: the two pieces of evidence are equivalent. So the prophet’s report is evidence against theism to the very same extent as divine hiddenness.

In the first version, the prophet’s report is arrived at independently from divine hiddenness. Accordingly, it provides an independent motivation for the theological conditional *if there is a God, God is transcendent*, and provides a way of learning this without becoming any less confident in theism. Once this conditional is

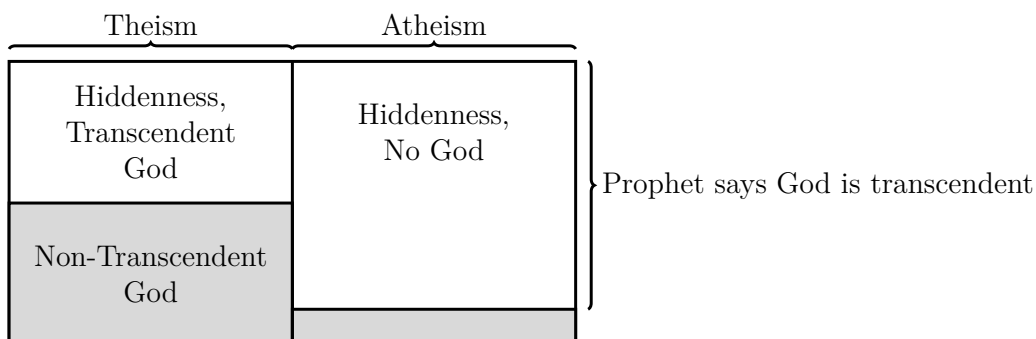


Figure 5: Second version of the prophet toy model (not to scale).

known, divine hiddenness itself comes as no surprise conditional on theism, and so it does not make theism any less probable either. (In fact, now divine hiddenness *confirms* theism!) In the second version, though, the prophet's report is itself informed by divine hiddenness, rather than being arrived at independently. In this case, the prophet's report is itself evidence against theism: hiddenness is evidence against theism, we can deduce from the prophet's report that God is hidden. After we have updated on the prophet's report, hiddenness itself does not provide any *further* evidence against theism, but that's just because the damage is already done.

Obviously both versions of the toy model are simplistic, but they illustrate an important point. Insofar as the contents of scripture and tradition are shaped by divine hiddenness (as in the second version), rather than independently from it (as in the first), two things happen. The good news for the theist is that, if you have already taken this scripture and tradition on board, then divine hiddenness itself will not do much extra work. If you already know for theological reasons *if there is a God, God is hidden*, then divine hiddenness is unsurprising and does not tell against theism. The bad news is that the evidence against theism has simply been relocated. The theological data itself counts against theism. Basically, in this case the theological data encodes divine hiddenness: it says what it says in response to the evident fact that not everyone shares the same experience of the divine. So this data is itself evidence against God, to the same extent that divine hiddenness is evidence against God in the absence of that theological data. The epistemic cost of divine hiddenness has been woven into the theological tradition itself.

Moreover, it seems clear that scripture and tradition—and in particular the support

they give for the view that God is transcendent in a way that inspires humility in our expectations of epistemic access to God—*are* shaped by divine hiddenness, rather than arising independently from it. So while of course neither version of the toy model is realistic, it is plausible that actual scripture and tradition is more like the second prophet than the first.

Recall the claim from Rea we began this section with: that the problem of divine hiddenness is not a “referendum on the existence of God, but rather on the viability of certain ways of understanding the nature of God and God’s attributes” (Rea 2018, 6). Rea himself seems to be focusing on *deductive* arguments against the existence of God; we have been investigating whether this move can be effective against an evidential argument from divine hiddenness. We first observed that if one deems certain ways of understanding God unviable, and makes no other epistemic change, then this is a way of lowering the probability that God exists. So if the move is going to work, something else must be happening. We considered two ways this might go. First, theological inquiry might introduce new epistemic possibilities. Our investigation of this idea is only preliminary, but we are not optimistic that this will help theism. Second, theological inquiry might *eliminate* certain atheistic possibilities. We have seen that, in principle, this can work, and keep theism from being disconfirmed by hiddenness. But it won’t work if the theological data that forms the basis for one’s conception of God itself smuggles in the problem of divine hiddenness.

In any case, the challenge is clear. In order to argue that the evidential problem of divine hiddenness can be avoided by adopting a more specific conception of God, motivated by scripture and tradition, the following question must be answered: what should we have expected the contents of scripture and tradition to be like in the case where there is no God? The challenge for those who wish to appeal to scripture and tradition to escape the evidential argument from hiddenness is to make it plausible that scripture and tradition provide a conception of divine transcendence which—supposing there is no God!—is not itself based on observing divine hiddenness.

Worries have often been raised about appealing to distinctive religious doctrine as a response to problems for theism. For example, Schellenberg (2007, 197–98) writes that “our job as philosophers ... is to think for ourselves”; so “we cannot take as our guide a picture of God fashioned by theology.” And Plantinga protests,

But am I not somehow begging the question by bringing in these other religious beliefs, such as that God’s creatures have fallen into sin?

Well, why so? Can't I use all that I believe in this context? (1996, 256–57)

Note that the challenge we have raised here is different. The difficulty with appeals to “theological data” is not that they are illegitimate, unphilosophical, question-begging, or circular. The problem is that taking this kind of data seriously just doesn't help as much as you might think. A theological tradition that contends with divine hiddenness, and provides resources for explaining it, can make divine hiddenness unsurprising. But in so doing, that theological tradition itself can count as evidence against theism just as strongly.

We have been discussing evidence of the form “scripture and tradition say p .” But we should also consider an alternative construal of the evidence provided by scripture and tradition. What if the proposition p itself were part of your evidence instead? As we noted in footnote 2, we can find an argument for this kind of view in Plantinga. For example, perhaps the original authors of scripture gained knowledge of what they spoke by direct illumination from God, and then they successfully transmitted this knowledge through testimony.

This kind of picture makes things very simple. One of the propositions among the contents of scripture and tradition is that God exists. If this proposition is part of your evidence, then, given this evidence, *nothing* counts as evidence against the existence of God.¹⁹ In that case, there are no evidential arguments against the existence of God, whether from evil, divine hiddenness, or anything else. (Likewise, for anyone who has the *nonexistence* of God as part of their evidence, nothing further would count as evidence for or against the existence of God, either.)

It not clear whether anyone really has such religious doctrines as evidence. There are many points of controversy here, including whether the doctrines are true, whether a sufficiently broad conception of evidence is correct, and whether evidence that might be available via testimony or other kinds of revelation is disrupted by defeaters. But even those theists who think that theism *is* part of their evidence can take some lessons from this essay's explorations.

First, it is interesting and non-trivial to investigate the structure of evidential support among their *other* beliefs, setting direct theistic evidence aside. Second, even if religious propositions are part of *some* people's evidence, many other people do

¹⁹If the existence of God is part of your evidence, then it has probability one conditional on your total evidence. So no other evidence can lower its probability, unless it can make you lose the evidence you already have.

not have this advantage: clearly many people do not know that they are true. This includes atheists and agnostics; it also includes many who *believe* these doctrines, and perhaps for whom the doctrines are *probable* on their evidence, but for whom they do not rise to the status of *evidence* themselves. We are interested in the rationality of belief or disbelief in God for these people, too, and not just for the evidentially most advantaged.

Finally, the main thing we have been doing in this essay is responding to certain objections to an evidential argument from divine hiddenness: first, that it is subsumed by the problem of evil, and second, that it can be successfully responded to by adopting a more specific conception of God. But if the existence (or non-existence) of God is itself treated as part of one's evidence, that wouldn't make these objections correct. Instead, the argument from divine hiddenness would simply be trivialized in a way that has nothing to do with the problem of evil or conceptions of God. This dialectic makes the most sense in a context where the question of the existence of God is treated as live.

Our world is one in which knowledge and experience of God are elusive. This is by no means conclusive evidence against God's existence, but that is not to say it is not powerful evidence even so. This evidence interacts with other relevant evidence in subtle ways. It is not subsumed by the problem of evil; neither are those two kinds of evidence completely independent. Nor is it easily escaped by those who have already embraced God's obscurity as a deliverance of their theological tradition. We have not argued directly that divine hiddenness *is* strong evidence against the existence of God, but we have cleared away some important reasons for thinking that it is not.

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