

THE NECESSARILY MORAL ASPECT OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS¹

Eric Roark

In “What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?” Peter Van Inwagen argues that, “the problem of divine hiddenness (whatever exactly it may be) is not the same as the problem of evil” (24). In support of this claim Van Inwagen asks us to imagine two very different possible worlds. The first world is much like ours, with a remarkably similar amount and magnitude of evil and suffering, the sole exception being that prior to death everyone experiences a Beatific vision. Van Inwagen maintains that this possible world contains the problem of evil, but no problem of divine hiddenness.² Alternatively, Van Inwagen’s second possible world is constructed to be a splendid secular utopia lacking the evil and suffering of our present world, while still containing epistemically interesting dialogues regarding divine hiddenness between atheists and theists. The lessons of such dialogues, Van Inwagen argues, “is that in a world that lacks any real suffering, the problem of the hiddenness of God is a purely epistemological question, or a cluster of epistemological problems” (29). Van Inwagen’s goal in devising his second possible world is to demonstrate the possibility of the antithesis of his first possible world; namely, that we can imagine a world in which divine hiddenness is a problem, while the problem of evil is not.

In this paper I will focus my attention toward Van Inwagen’s second possible world (his secular utopia). Van Inwagen fails in his attempt to demonstrate that in a world lacking any *real* suffering, the problem of the hiddenness of God can accurately be understood as a purely epistemological quandary. Specifically, I argue that any possible world which contains atheists or agnostics who use divine hiddenness as a piece of evidence to support their views regarding the possible non-existence of God is a world that necessarily includes the problem of evil.³ Thus, if divine hiddenness exists as a piece of the evidential argument for atheism, then the problem of evil, alive with a cornucopia of moral concerns, must exist as well.

In devising his secular utopia Van Inwagen is extremely careful to eliminate all instances of human inequalities, horrendous evils, natural evils, and most moral imperfections. Here is a glimpse of what Van Inwagen offers as a representation of his secular utopia:

In the world I imagine, human beings are benevolent and kind in nature. There is no physical pain, or very little of it (just enough to remind people to take care of their extremities)...No one is cripple....There is no racial prejudice or prejudice of any sort....There is no lying or promise-breaking or cheating or corruption— there is in fact nothing for anyone to be corrupt *about*, for there are essentially no governments and no laws and no money.
(25)

This is a world, according to Van Inwagen, where, because of the lack of horrendous evil and suffering, divine hiddenness can be discussed and appreciated as a “purely epistemic problem.” In other words, Van Inwagen’s secular utopia is designed to allow atheists and theists alike to *neglect* the moral problems that typically accompany concerns of divine hiddenness in our present world. Van Inwagen notes that such moral concern attached with divine hiddenness in our present world might suggest that, “the world is full of terrible

The Necessarily Moral Aspect of Divine Hiddenness

things and we observe no response from God when these terrible things happen” (24). The secular utopia is devised specifically so that such moral concerns, i.e., those typically associated with the problem of evil, cannot be brought into the fray of an epistemic discussion regarding divine hiddenness. There is no sense in asking why God stays *hidden* when horrible moral evils occur, because Van Inwagen suggests that in his secular utopia no horrendous moral evils occur at all.

This is where Van Inwagen’s argument for the detachment of divine hiddenness from the moral problem of evil begins to go wrong. He has not, despite outward appearance, created with his account of a *secular* utopia a world void of horrendous moral evils. If we can show that in Van Inwagen’s secular utopia horrendous evil takes place, then his claim that his secular utopia represents a world in which divine hiddenness exists while the moral problem of evil does not is misguided. Now I will discuss why there is good reason to believe that Van Inwagen has not offered a world in which we can imagine the problem of divine hiddenness existing absent the moral problem of evil. Moreover, I suggest, further, that any world in which persons use the notion of divine hiddenness to deny their formation of a loving relationship with God will necessarily contain the moral problem of evil, and as such planted in the very notion of divine hiddenness contains one seed of the moral problem of evil.

Van Inwagen’s analysis, while tantalizing to the epistemologist who seeks to divorce divine hiddenness from the problem of evil, neglects to consider that (horrendous) evil can arise even in the absence of *apparent* pain and suffering. Atheistic belief (and divine hiddenness in so far as it is used as a piece of evidence to deny God’s existence), in any possible world, causes an evil because it serves to prevent the atheist or agnostic from forming and maintaining a loving relationship with God. The moral implications resulting from the problem of evil do not cease simply because the conflicts amongst peoples do. Van Inwagen is wrong for thinking otherwise.

The theist in Van Inwagen’s secular utopia would almost certainly hold that her having a loving relationship with God is a moral good, and that the failure of others to have a similar relationship is a moral bad. Here, Van Inwagen might suggest that the theist in his secular utopia need not endorse such a suggestion. But what would such a theist who would not endorse my above suggestion be like? She would not be a serious Christian, Jewish, or Islamic theist. Indeed, theists of the above types aptly believe that their loving relationship with God is a moral good, and that this good is intimately linked with their God-believing epistemic position. There is something intrinsically worthwhile about the relationship we form with God; this is one reason why many theists consider it vitally important to help others form and appreciate such a relationship. Of course, theists will differ substantially on what it means “to have a loving relationship with God.” But such disagreement occurs when theists consider *how* to best have a loving relationship with God, not *if* having such a relationship is a moral good and its absence a moral bad.

The loving relationship that we have the opportunity to form with God, as opposed to our more typical interpersonal relationships, is eternally enduring. The relationships we form with our parents, friends, and lovers, on the other

hand, are temporally bound. This distinction is important because an eternally enduring relationship, as opposed to a temporally bounded relationship, is inescapable. God is always “in” a relationship with one who has so accepted, and what is more, He will eternally continue his involvement. No matter our flaws, faults, indiscretions, sins, and so forth, God does not run from us, He does not abandon us. This type of loving relationship with God involves a level of mutual commitment that simply cannot be qualitatively compared with typical interpersonal relationships. Once a loving relationship with God is established one may choose to neglect the relationship. However, unless one convinces themselves of the very unlikely belief that God can cease to exist, they can never actually abandon the relationship. God will meet them after they die a physical death, and their relationship will surely continue indefinitely. To be committed to loving God is to be committed to that which eclipses the bounds of self and time. It is to shed the selfishness and anxiety that have the great potential to consume our temporal relationships with one another.

An atheist living in Van Inwagen’s secular utopia might suggest that her decision not to enter into a loving relationship with God is neither good nor evil, but instead a personal neutral choice, or a choice that is fine “for them.” The choice, so the atheist might suggest, affects no one but them, and as such they cannot be deemed as acting in an evil fashion. In failing to form a loving relationship with God, however, she deprives herself the opportunity to reflect upon, enjoy, and worship, God. This self-denial of the greatest and most enduring relationship one can possibly enjoy is an evil. This formulation of what constitutes an evil, on my part, is unorthodox in a modern context. Typically, many in a modern context argue that moral evil is brought about by an outwardly intentional moral action, i.e., someone acts in such a way as to bring about an evil (a violation of rights or a lessening of well being) toward another. Morality, in this context, is a concern that arises out of conflicts between persons. As such if I do nothing to harm anyone else, then it is inaccurate to label my act as evil. Evil, however, as in the case of failing to form a loving relationship with God, may result as the product of self-depravation. Being unable to attend a beautiful performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony is bad or unfortunate, and surely one may deprive themselves of many beneficial types of value without acting in an evil fashion. Not forming a loving relationship with God, on the other hand, is an evil that deprives the individual of an eternally enduring relationship and is a case of self-depravation that is more than simply bad or unfortunate.

The situation is made no less evil because the person in question practiced *self-denial*. An autonomous action directed toward the self is no guarantee that the action is either good or neutral; such actions could be evil, as in the case of agnostic or atheistic belief.⁴ It is wrong to think of human evil as restricted to immoral behaviors that one person directs toward another. We can be the victims of our own evil actions. Surely, the interactional conception (X harms Y) represents one type of human evil, but it seems important also to consider the self-directed evil (X harms himself) created by the choice to forgo a loving relationship with God. I suspect that the prevalent, almost all-important, contemporary political emphasis placed upon autonomy, individualism, and the

The Necessarily Moral Aspect of Divine Hiddenness

liberal notion of the freedom to choose the “good life,” may well have unduly limited a proper understanding of evil.⁵

Evil, in the form of rejecting a loving relationship with God, can occur in the most peaceful and cordial of human environments, i.e., secular utopias. Van Inwagen could suggest here that he is restricting his notion of horrendous evils to humanistic secular concerns, at the exclusion of theological worries *per se*. But almost no serious theist is going to be satisfied with this move. Why restrict an understanding of horrendous evils to one that neglects our relationship with God? It would be strange indeed for the serious theist to hold that our relationship with God is the single most important aspect of our life, while at the same time maintaining that it is misguided to label the absence of such a relationship as evil.

Atheists and agnostics, additionally, make it more difficult for theists to share their love and faith of God in a communal setting; namely, because less of the community is theistic. One of the great benefits of believing in God is that one can share her love of God with others. Being a theist is a social as well as a personal commitment. Further, as one shares her love of God with others, God’s loving relationship expands to include more of His creations. Preventing or impeding this “shared worship” is an evil. Thus, not only do atheists in Van Inwagen’s secular utopia deny themselves the ability to benefit from a loving relationship with God, but they also impede the ability of theists to share their loving relationship with others.

The atheist could suggest that they are not preventing shared worship at all. After all, theists can still find other theists to share their love of God. Yes, the theist could do this, but this does not close the discussion. There still exists the moral problem of there being less of a human community to share God’s loving relationship. This is not to suggest that numbers are all-important for the theist, but fellowship is extremely important not just for the theist’s self-affirmation, but to enhance the practice of virtues such as selflessness and compassion as well. In addition, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the denial of others to bring a loving relationship with God into their life causes great emotional pain for many theists. In so much as this pain impedes the theist from contemplating and loving God, then an evil has occurred. The greatest evil often confronting the theist is not the threat of physical pain, but instead the emotional pain and confusion attributed to living and interacting in a world with those who actively deny themselves the opportunity to form a loving relationship with God.

Van Inwagen might stop the discussion here and ask, “Are you really talking about a horrendous evil when you bring up your concerns of the refusal to form and maintain a loving relationship with God? If not, then perhaps we can still imagine a world where atheists worry about divine hiddenness, but the moral problem of evil does not exist.” I would respond, yes one’s denial of a loving relationship with God is a horrendous evil. The serious theist is likely to suggest that the greatest good in our present life, as well as salvation in our next, is inextricably linked to our relationship with God. Often, in our present world other types of horrendous evil obscure such concerns, and we neglect the fact that not having a loving relationship with God is a horrendous moral evil. Van Inwagen’s secular utopia, by eliminating normally thought of horrendous evils,

actually makes the evil implicit in atheism that much more clear. Van Inwagen does not isolate the epistemic aspect of divine hiddenness. This is an impossible task in any world wherein divine hiddenness is used to justify the choice to forgo a loving relationship with God; instead, he unwittingly leaves implicit an important moral aspect necessarily attached with the use of divine hiddenness to deny the existence of God.

There exists at least one (evil) moral problem that is not purely epistemic in Van Inwagen's "secular utopia," namely that some deny themselves the opportunity to form a loving relationship with God, and hence impede others from sharing their love of God. Thus, by constructing a possible world with a dialogue between a theist and an atheist, Van Inwagen has failed to separate the problem of evil from divine hiddenness. Divine hiddenness is a problem because some use it as a piece of evidence to deny the existence of God; in any such case, this presents a moral problem related with the unwillingness to form a loving relationship with God. Divine hiddenness offers the atheist a piece of evidence that they believe they can use to deny the existence of God. Such a denial results in the formation of an evil, and hence contributes to the problem of evil. In this fashion it is impossible to disjoin divine hiddenness from the problem of evil. Thus, Van Inwagen is wrong to suggest that a secular utopia, which contains atheists and agnostics, could offer a clear epistemic examination of divine hiddenness detached from the moral problem of evil.

NOTES

¹ I would like to give special thanks to Professor Jonathan Kvanvig for giving helpful comment and guidance on earlier drafts of this paper. Additionally, thanks to Justin Mcbrayer for gladly offering helpful critique with the core ideas of this paper as they were in their infancy. Lastly, many thanks to the New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society for giving me an outlet in which to formerly present and improve upon the ideas of the paper.

² Van Inwagen's description of this possible world (one containing the problem of evil, but no problem of divine hiddenness) seems right.

³ By this I do not mean to suggest that the atheist must appeal to divine hiddenness. I only suggest that if divine hiddenness is used in an atheistic appeal, then the problem of evil must exist as well. Hence, there are no possible worlds in which divine hiddenness may be used as evidence by the atheist and the problem of evil be rendered irrelevant or unimportant.

⁴ While I do suggest here that atheistic and agnostic belief constitutes a moral evil. The implications of how this evil is best dealt with are a separate matter of concern. When X harms Y it is not very challenging to suggest that X owes Y some type of just compensation or possibly restitution for the harm. But what should happen when X harms himself by failing to form a loving relationship with God? It does not seem to follow, for instance, that if X brings about a horrendous evil by failing to form a loving relationship with God, then she should be punished with any traditionally understood notion of punishment. Perhaps, the best course of action is to best help X come to form a loving relationship with God (ending the horrendous evil in question) by loving as opposed to traditionally punishing X. I leave the question of how to best deal with the evil brought about by atheistic or agnostic belief open.

⁵ Interestingly, along these lines Van Inwagen would almost certainly admit that a moral evil was taking place if X prevented Y from forming a loving relationship with God, i.e., from freely

The Necessarily Moral Aspect of Divine Hiddenness

practicing his religion. The moral evil in this case is two-fold, 1) force is being unjustly used and 2) one is being denied the opportunity to form a loving relationship with God. But if this is the case, then, in regard to the second evil, why should it matter if X is preventing Y, or if X is preventing himself? Isn't an evil occurring in either event?

WORKS CITED

Van Inwagen, Peter. "What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?" *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. Eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 24-32.