

C. S. Lewis on the Problem of Divine Hiddenness

TRAVIS DUMSDAY*

Along with the problem of evil, the problem of divine hiddenness has become one of the most prominent arguments for atheism in the contemporary philosophy of religion. Roughly it is this: if there is a loving God, surely he would make his existence apparent to us, and in a way that we could not rationally doubt. Why? (i) Because it is of the nature of love that the lover will seek open relationship with the object of love, and (ii) because on most traditional theisms it is claimed that our ultimate well-being requires having a positive relationship with God, which relationship presupposes belief in God's reality. Yet as a matter of fact many people fail to believe in God, and that through no fault of their own. Such nonbelief is incompatible with the truth of theism. Therefore God does not exist. Here I explore how the writings of C. S. Lewis (probably the twentieth century's most popular Anglican author) can be brought to bear on the problem.

(1) Introduction

If God exists, why doesn't he make his existence more obvious, such that it could not rationally be doubted? This is a question of longstanding interest within Christian theology, going back to the patristic period.¹ More recently, it has been turned into an argument for

* Travis Dumsday is an assistant professor in the department of philosophy and religious studies at Concordia University College of Alberta, and a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada. He received his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Calgary in 2010, and works chiefly in analytic philosophy of science, natural theology, and the Scholastic tradition (medieval and contemporary).

¹ See, for instance, St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. A. Robertson (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), chaps. 11–15; St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1993), 106–118; St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, trans. T. W. Chambers (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889), homilies 2 and 4–8; St. Gregory Nazianzus, *Orations*, trans. C. G. Browne and J. E. Swallow (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), oration 28, chapter 12; and Origen, *De Principiis*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), book 3, chapter 1.

atheism popularly known as the “problem of divine hiddenness”: on any well-formulated theism, God loves us and so desires a relationship of explicit and reciprocal love with us, both because the seeking of such a relationship is entailed by the nature of love and because this relationship is required for our ultimate well-being as humans. But we cannot have such a relationship with God unless we first believe that God exists. Consequently, God would ensure that everyone (or at least everyone who was not actively resisting God) had a rationally secure belief in him at all times. But as a matter of fact, lots of people fail to believe in God, often through no fault of their own. The state of affairs we see in our world contradicts what theism would lead us to expect a priori. So which assumption should be jettisoned? The most basic assumption, namely that God exists at all.

While a number of authors earlier in the twentieth century provided valuable discussions of the problem,² its most focused treatment began in the early-to-mid-1990; it has since achieved considerable prominence in the contemporary philosophy of religion, finding advocates in such authors as Schellenberg, Drange, Keller, and Maitzen.³ They have all formulated versions of this argument, with some differences between them. Schellenberg’s formulation is the most robust, claiming that even a single instance of nonresistant nonbelief (non-belief on the part of someone who is otherwise willing to believe in God), even for a limited time, suffices to disprove theism. Drange and Keller adopt a weaker formulation, according to which it is rather the

² See for instance John Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” in *Encountering Evil: Live Opinions in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta, Ga.: Westminster John Knox, 1981), 39–52, reprinted in Michael Peterson et al., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 341–353; Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983); and Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992).

³ See J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), and *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007); Theodore M. Drange, “The Argument from Non-Belief,” *Religious Studies* 29, no. 4 (December 1993): 417–432; James A. Keller, “The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 13–24; Stephen Maitzen, “Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism,” *Religious Studies* 42, no. 2 (June 2006): 177–191.

huge amount of such unbelief that disproves theism, while Maitzen's concern is the fact that whole cultures are ignorant of God.

The literature on the problem continues to expand, with many replies⁴ and counter-replies⁵ issued. My aim here is to look at what the writings of C. S. Lewis have to contribute to this ongoing debate. For while he nowhere examines the problem in quite the form just laid out, he does have a good deal to say that is of relevance. In what follows I will outline and assess his various lines of thought regarding hiddenness. I will argue that some of his points are promising in themselves and prescient of recent developments in the hiddenness literature, and that one of his ideas supplies ingredients for a new response to the problem.

The paper is divided as follows: in the next section I look at an avenue of reply arising from Lewis's views concerning inherent obstacles to divine revelation; then in section three I examine an alternative, compatible response having to do with the indirect knowledge of God available via the transcendent moral law; section four sees a brief development of yet another line of response, one not explicitly present in Lewis's writings and which has not yet appeared in the hiddenness literature, but which can be extrapolated from Lewis's work. Finally I conclude with a short comment on the place of Lewis's argument as part of a broader, cumulative case strategy for addressing the problem.

⁴ See for instance Imran Aijaz and Markus Weidler, "Some Critical Reflections on the Hiddenness Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61, no. 1 (February 2007): 1–23; Ebrahim Azadegan, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Sin: The Noetic Effect of Sin," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 69–90; Andrew Cullison, "Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2010): 119–134; Terence Cuneo, "Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013): 151–164; C. Stephen Evans, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (July 2006): 241–253.

⁵ Significant contributions include Benjamin Cordry, "Divine Hiddenness and Belief *De Re*," *Religious Studies* 45, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–19; Robert P. Lovering, "Divine Hiddenness and Inculpable Ignorance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 89–107; Stephen Maitzen, "Does Molinism Explain the Demographics of Theism?" *Religious Studies* 44 (2008): 473–477; J. L. Schellenberg, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 201–215, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 287–303, "Reply to Aijaz and Weidler on Hiddenness," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008): 135–140.

(2) Lewis on the Inherent Difficulty of Divine Self-Disclosure

One underlying assumption of the problem of divine hiddenness is that God is able to reveal himself *as God*, and with no room for rational doubt, to any nonresistant nonbeliever. One might assume that God's omnipotence guarantees that such self-disclosure would be unproblematic. However, this is not entirely clear; there may be inherent barriers to rationally indubitable revelation, even for an omnipotent being. Thus, as part of his well-known argument from conscience and the moral law to theism, Lewis writes:

We want to know whether the universe simply happens to be what it is for no reason or whether there is a power behind it that makes it what it is. Since that power, if it exists, would be not one of the observed facts but a reality which makes them, no mere observation of the facts can find it. . . . If there was a controlling power outside the universe, it could not show itself to us as one of the facts inside the universe—no more than the architect of a house could actually be a wall or a staircase or a fireplace in that house.⁶

God, being immaterial and “outside” space and time, cannot possibly be attained via ordinary empirical examination of the things present in the space–time world. Lewis reiterates this point elsewhere; in response to a quip by some Soviet official noting that their cosmonauts had yet to discover God in outer space, Lewis mocks the idea that God could be literally, empirically accessible via scientific discovery. In the essay “The Seeing Eye” he writes: “Looking for God—or Heaven—by exploring space is like reading or seeing all Shakespeare’s plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters or Stratford as one of the places. Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in every play. But he is never present in the same way as Falstaff or Lady Macbeth. Nor is he diffused through the play like a gas.”⁷ Applying this to the hiddenness issue, it can be noted that at least in one sense God’s seeming unavailability is unsurprising, since God is inherently inaccessible to our sense faculties.

These observations naturally give rise to an objection: while it may be that God cannot be observed literally and directly, God can

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 32.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, “The Seeing Eye” (1963), in C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), 213.

presumably manifest himself indirectly via visible signs and wonders—think of the burning bush and the voice proceeding from it, for instance. Why does God not manifest himself to all of us (or at least the willing) in this way?

Lewis has already answered this objection, if implicitly. For the burning bush, and the voice proceeding from it, are still furniture within the world. In and of themselves, they cannot reveal transcendence; at best the voice can claim to be from a transcendent being, to reveal through dialogue. And Moses was then faced with a choice, namely whether to believe the voice or not. In other words, there was room for rational doubt at this point. And if Moses had opted to suspend belief as to the identity of whatever was causing the voice, what would have rectified the situation, what would have moved him from doubt to trust? Would the provision of further signs and wonders have done the trick (parting the Red Sea, and so on)? Not necessarily. Again, these are all physical phenomena which might, in theory, be explicable in terms of unknown (but intelligent) physical forces or supernatural but less-than-divine forces, and similar points have come up in recent literature. For instance, Peter van Inwagen notes that even a worldwide miracle (perhaps the stars being rearranged to spell out a Bible verse?) would not establish unambiguously the existence of God; the wonder might still be attributable to a powerful demiurge or some other force rather than a divine source.⁸ Even the incarnation, the most direct manifestation of God in the world, via the union in one person of the disparate divine and human natures, would not in and of itself necessitate belief. Lewis goes on to write:

For the Christian story is that Christ was perceived to be God by very few people indeed; perhaps, for a time only by St Peter, who would also, and for the same reason, have found God in space. [As the astute reader of Shakespeare finds him “in” the play.] For Christ said to Peter, ‘Flesh and blood have not taught you this.’

⁸ Peter van Inwagen, “What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?” in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24–32. Indeed, one might add that an atheist or agnostic who is particularly struck by the force of the problem of evil could potentially look at such a wonder and take it as further evidence *against* this being’s divine status: after all, if it’s powerful enough to have rearranged the stars, it’s powerful enough to stop our many genocides, and yet it doesn’t. One might claim that such a being is therefore obviously not good, and so not God.

The methods of science do not discover facts of that order. . . .
 What is required is a certain faculty of recognition.⁹

And what is that faculty of recognition? It seems clear from the context (and from comparison with the parallel discussion in *Mere Christianity*) that Lewis either means conscience or something closely tied to conscience. Pursuing that line of thought further would in turn lead us toward Lewis's second main argument relevant to divine hiddenness, the idea that God is accessible to all (in a way) via the moral law. That is the topic of our next section; but before moving on to it, we should complete our survey of what Lewis has to say regarding the inherent obstacles to unambiguous divine revelation.

And he does have more to say on this, for he is cognizant of an objection one might make to his argument so far: even if God cannot reveal himself to us unambiguously *as God* (as infinite in power and goodness and so on) via external signs (whether the intelligent design of the universe or through new miracles), he could reveal himself to us in that way via internal religious/mystical experience. Is it not the case that mystics and others report direct experiential contact with God, mind-to-mind contact, as it were, without the intervening medium of outward signs and whatnot? And if they do, surely that is a superior means of revelation, and one which should be granted to all (or at least all nonresistant nonbelievers) in order to prompt belief and hence allow for the beginning of a positive relationship.

In fact something along those lines is precisely Schellenberg's preferred model of divine self-disclosure. He claims that if God existed he would make his presence known to each of us via a direct and continuous religious experience beginning from early in life:

This experience, let us say, is non-sensory—an intense apparent awareness of a reality at once ultimate and loving which (1) produces the belief that God is lovingly present (and ipso facto, that God exists), (2) continues indefinitely in stronger or weaker forms and minimally as a 'background awareness' in those who do not resist it, and (3) takes more particular forms in the lives of those who respond to the beliefs to which it gives rise in religiously appropriate ways. . . . Since the experience is had as soon as a capacity for personal relationship with God exists, we may suppose that it occurs quite early on in the life of each individual, in particular,

⁹ Lewis, "The Seeing Eye," 218.

before any investigations as to the existence of God have been undertaken. We may further suppose that any investigations *subsequently* undertaken . . . fail to undermine . . . the beliefs formed by this experience.¹⁰

Lewis could respond to such demands for universal mystical awareness by noting that this mode of revelation has inherent weaknesses—it is not the right vehicle for producing the rationally indubitable belief Schellenberg desires. This is not to say that such experiences are without value or import—Lewis himself had profound religious experiences (recounted in his autobiography)¹¹ and would be the last to downplay their significance to the religious life. But he would not, I think, place as much evidential weight on them as Schellenberg does, and certainly not as compared with the knowledge we get via our prior awareness of the moral law—prior awareness which will be required for evaluating the content of any supposedly divinely-induced religious experience anyway (more on this in the next section). More specifically, Lewis could respond by stressing an inherent difficulty having to do with God's immateriality. This is a topic that comes up in the course of his considering why God might have made us as physical beings, in *The Problem of Pain*:

People often talk as if nothing were easier than for two naked minds to 'meet' or become aware of each other. But I see no possibility of their doing so except in a common medium which forms their 'external world' or environment. . . . If your thoughts and passions were directly present to me, like my own, without any mark of externality or otherness, how should I distinguish them from mine? And what thoughts or passions could we begin to have without objects to think and feel about? Nay, could I even begin to have the conception of 'external' and 'other' unless I had experience of an 'external world'? You may reply, as a Christian, that God (and Satan) do, in fact, affect my consciousness in this direct way without signs of 'externality'. Yes: and the result is that most people remain ignorant of the existence of both.¹²

The relevance of this to our present discussion is that Lewis is here identifying a possible ground of doubt involved in any instance of

¹⁰ Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 49.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955).

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), 24–25.

direct contact between the divine and human mind: namely, he is identifying the risk that such contact will either (a) not be experienced as coming from an obviously external source, or (b) perhaps will be experienced as such initially, but *dubitably*, such that the agent can, afterwards, attribute the contact to an internal source (subconscious wishes, nascent mental illness, and so on). That the religious experience has a genuinely external source will at least be capable of rational doubt. And even if one becomes convinced that this source is external, can one be confident, rationally, that it is *God*? Is such experience really an adequate vehicle for revealing God?

Here Lewis is obviously on controversial ground, even from a Christian perspective; many theologians would maintain that not only can God reveal himself unambiguously via certain sorts of religious/mystical experience, but that in fact he has done so, and that the records of such revelation are common in Christian mystical literature. And indeed, many have claimed that part of the content of such experience is a feeling of absolute certainty that one is in the divine presence.

Still, one might reassert on Lewis's behalf that such experiences remain rationally dubitable, perhaps on the grounds that a limited, finite mind simply cannot apprehend God *as God*, that is, as infinite in all perfections. One might even point to cases where people had what initially seemed such experiences, and later fell into atheism (perhaps due to reflections on the always powerful problem of evil, which mystical experience may not of itself render mute). Rolfe King certainly devotes a good deal of time to discussing the limits on what God can communicate via such experience, and to what extent it can be communicated with rationally indubitable certainty. This is one area in which Lewis's work anticipates an important development in the later literature; and, given space constraints, rather than attempt to summarize that development in detail I will simply encourage the reader to explore King's nuanced explication and defense of this idea in the context of the hiddenness debate.¹³

At this point one might, as a counter-reply, accuse Lewis of inconsistency. After all, don't Christians think that after death, and at the eschaton, we will have a direct encounter with God, one the nature of which cannot be doubted? In the Beatific Vision and the Apocalypse,

¹³ See Rolfe King, *Obstacles to Divine Revelation: God and the Reorientation of Human Reason* (London: Continuum, 2008).

don't we find non-negotiable counter-examples to the point being made by Lewis?

I am not actually sure that this is a dogma; and if it is a dogma, it is not clear that it is a dogma obtaining of *all* people after death / at the eschaton. Perhaps in hell some still retain their atheism, on grounds that no true God would have cast them out.¹⁴ And King argues that even in the Beatific Vision an act of faith is required.¹⁵

Lewis himself seems inclined to think, however, that at least at the eschaton God will be revealed in such a way as to make his reality indubitable to all (though not welcome to all); God will be revealed in a qualitatively different way than is available to us now, whether via conscience or natural theology or miracles or mystical experience. But if such a revelation is possible, why doesn't God grant it to us now, eliminating all doubt in his reality? Lewis attempts to answer this:

But we can guess why He is delaying. He wants to give us the chance of joining His side freely. I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany and then announced he was on our side. God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realise what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks onto the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered into your head to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left?¹⁶

Unfortunately Lewis does not expand further on this notion; he leaves us with only a vague idea about what exactly it is about the eschaton that makes its occurrence revelatory of God in a rationally indubitable way. It is also unclear why, if the eschaton can communicate God's reality in such a way, that reality cannot be communicated in a rationally indubitable fashion via religious/mystical experience. So here

¹⁴ My thanks to Gary Colwell for raising this possibility in discussion. Lewis himself discusses something like this in *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

¹⁵ King, *Obstacles to Divine Revelation*.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 62–63.

the charge of inconsistency carries some weight; still, Lewis does at least provide a good reason why God (temporarily) delays such a revelation: namely, when it occurs, history is done, and with it our sphere of moral choice.

Piecing together an initial reply to the hiddenness problem from Lewis's writings, we see the possible strategy of acquitting God of the charge that he has unjustifiably permitted widespread (or any?) nonresistant nonbelief, on the ground that an impossible demand is thereby being made of God. Given the vast difference between Infinite Spiritual Creator and finite material creation, one is demanding more than even an omnipotent being can give. And if God can reveal himself definitively, it seems that the eschaton will be the vehicle for such revelation, which God is plausibly justified (for obvious reasons) in delaying.

The second Lewisian strategy for responding to the hiddenness problem is quite different. Rather than emphasizing the intrinsic limitations on God's revelatory abilities, the focus is instead on the weight of what has already been universally revealed, via conscience.

(3) *Lewis on the Universal Revelation through Conscience*

Lewis maintains that God does reveal himself to all of us, in a (limited) way, by granting us an awareness of the moral law and a corresponding experience of its motivating force. In our awareness of the law, we directly encounter a reality that transcends the material realm, and that transcends ourselves—since, as he argues there, some moral commandments are eternally and necessarily true, clearly irreducible to merely physical or natural states of affairs, and are experienced as external regulations that we do not make up and cannot change. The moral law itself transcends the natural order; moreover, through the law we have a clear indicator that there is yet something else behind the physical world, something much more like a mind than like anything physical, as only something mind-like could be the ultimate repository and issuer of instructions.¹⁷ Further, the content

¹⁷ Lewis seems not to take as a live option outright Platonism, according to which the moral law could exist without having some sort of ontological grounding in a mind that thinks it (more precisely, a necessarily existent, necessarily good Mind that necessarily thinks it). Of course, this raises questions concerning the precise relationship between God and the moral law; Lewis provides some further discussion of this in the context of addressing the Euthyphro dilemma in his "The Poison of Subjectivism" (1943), in Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 91–103 (see esp. 100–102).

of the law reveals a good deal about the character of the one who has given it to us: “You find out more about God from the Moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he has built.”¹⁸ Consequently, outward signs and wonders, and presumably even religious/mystical experience, can at best be addenda to that more basic and universal revelation. Indeed it is by that more basic revelation that we can recognize other forms of outward manifestation as coming from a trustworthy source. It is in large part by way of conscience that we evaluate purported divine revelations, either revelations received directly or revelations received indirectly by the testimony of our fellows.

That is in fact a central underlying assumption behind Lewis’s “Lord, Liar, Lunatic” trilemma.¹⁹ We confront the claims of Jesus in part by examining the historical evidence for his miracles, and especially the resurrection, but most directly and importantly we confront those claims in light of his character and his moral teachings. If these were off, then no matter how good the evidence for the resurrection—indeed, no matter if one saw it oneself—his claims to divinity would have to be rejected. Correspondingly, his unimpeachable character and the universally recognized sublimity of his teachings make his identity claims unworthy of quick and easy dismissal.

Granted, all this puts a heavy weight on the trustworthiness of one’s conscience, but Lewis thinks it can bear that weight. He argues against the idea (propounded today by some Christian opponents of natural law theory)²⁰ that our consciences after the Fall are subject to

¹⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 36.

¹⁹ It is not uncommon for the trilemma to be summarily dismissed on the grounds that it fails to take into account a fourth major alternative, namely that the gospel accounts of Christ are badly historically inaccurate and full of legendary accretions. But Lewis was well aware of this charge and took himself to have good reasons for rejecting it, reasons laid out in more detail in other works. For concise treatments see his essay “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” (1950) in C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1971), 88–94; and also his “Fern-Seed and Elephants” (1959) in Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 193–211. For a recent in-depth examination of the trilemma, see P. H. Brazier, “‘God . . . or a Bad, or Mad, Man’: C. S. Lewis’s Argument for Christ—A Systematic Theological, Historical and Philosophical Analysis of *Aut Deus Aut Malus Homo*,” *Heythrop Journal* 55 (2014): 1–30.

²⁰ I think for instance of H. Tristram Engelhardt’s critique of natural law theory (specifically with respect to its moral epistemology); see *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Exton: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2000), and his “Moral Knowledge: Some

considerable doubt and that their dictates are untrustworthy unless buttressed by positive divine commands:

As regards the Fall, I submit that the general tenor of scripture does not encourage us to believe that our knowledge of the Law has been depraved in the same degree as our power to fulfill it. He would be a brave man who claimed to realize the fallen condition of man more clearly than St. Paul. In that very chapter (Romans 7) where he asserts most strongly our inability to keep the moral law he also asserts most confidently that we perceive the Law's goodness and rejoice in it according to the inward man. Our righteousness may be filthy and ragged; but Christianity gives us no ground for holding that our perceptions of right are in the same condition. They may, no doubt, be impaired; but there is a difference between imperfect sight and blindness.²¹

This is not to say that we can *always* expect our personal moral judgments to line up with those displayed in purported divine revelation. This may seem to put us in a difficult bind. Lewis writes:

On the one hand, if God is wiser than we His judgement must differ from ours on many things, and not least on good and evil. What seems to us good may therefore not be good in His eyes, and what seems to us evil may not be evil. On the other hand, if God's moral judgement differs from ours so that our 'black' may be His 'white', we can mean nothing by calling Him good.²²

The way around this dilemma is to note carefully what happens in parallel instances of moral progress in human society. When a morally weaker person is brought into the society of those with higher moral standards (a situation Lewis claims to have experienced himself), and is thus exposed to those higher standards, the new standards will not (upon thorough exposure) strike the weaker person as completely overturning his previously held standard. Rather, to the extent that

Reflections on Moral Controversies, Incompatible Moral Epistemologies, and the Culture Wars," *Christian Bioethics* 10, no. 1 (2004): 79–103. Proponents of the Radical Orthodoxy movement also come to mind here, whose position on natural law theory is clearly expounded in James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004).

²¹ C. S. Lewis, "The Poison of Subjectivism" (1943), in Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 99–100.

²² Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 30.

the old standard had any worth to it at all, it will be experienced as having foreshadowed the new. Most importantly, as a criterion of recognition, when that new, higher standard is recognized the person experiences guilt at his previous breaking of it, and a sense of unworthiness at now being in the company of the morally superior. "It is in the light of such experiences that we must consider the goodness of God. . . . When the relevant difference between the Divine ethics and your own appears to you, you will not, in fact, be in any doubt that the change demanded of you is in the direction you already call 'better.'"²³

We might seem to have strayed a bit from our central concern with divine hiddenness, but this is not so. For Lewis, we encounter transcendence first and foremost in the transcendent moral law, accessed via conscience, and it is from that starting point, from that internal anchor that itself is tied to transcendent reality, that we are then able to evaluate other claims to transcendent status. In a sense then, while God is not immediately and in all his fullness directly accessible via the conscience (such that this second strategy of reply does not strictly contradict the first), our awareness of the moral law does provide us immediate epistemic contact with eternal transcendent reality: the law itself. That law in turn points to the Mind in which the law resides. And this is as immediate a contact with God as we can have, at least in this life and before the eschaton.²⁴ One might think that the burning bush or some other dramatic miracle would provide more immediate, compelling contact with God, but in a sense that is not so—the transition from direct awareness of eternal righteous laws to an awareness of an eternal and righteous law-giver is potentially quite quick and easy; the transition from a direct awareness of a burning bush and a voice issuing from it to an awareness of an eternal and righteous law-giver behind the voice would require more steps.

Lewis further thinks that this a priori fact that the most direct encounter we could possibly have with the transcendent (in this life) is via the moral law is itself evidentially noteworthy: the one place that a priori reasoning would lead us to look for an apprehension of transcendence (namely in the only clearly rational animals we are aware of, ourselves) is a place where we do in fact find it. If conscience

²³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 31.

²⁴ Actually, given Lewis's understanding of the ontology of the relationship between the moral law and God (see again "The Poison of Subjectivism," 100–102), he could argue that there is a sense in which our immediate awareness of the reality of the law *is* an immediate (if partial) awareness of the reality of God.

does point inherently to a transcendent Mind-like being, this would mitigate the problem of divine hiddenness. Clearly it is not enough to dispel it entirely, since (as Lewis readily admits) the knowledge gained through conscience is not unambiguously and indubitably a knowledge of God. However, his point here does blunt the problem (especially when taken in combination with the reply explored in the previous section), for it shows that it is reasonable to think that God has made some knowledge of himself universally (if not directly and indubitably) accessible to all.

And of course Lewis maintains that God has provided us with further, powerful sources of revelation over and above what conscience supplies: besides the resources of natural theology, God has also revealed himself in subtle ways through the myths of many of the ancient pagan religions,²⁵ and more clearly by selecting a particular people, the Jews, to be the locus of his ultimate revelation and eventually of our redemption via the incarnation. The latter were apparently accompanied by many visible signs and miracles, though the Old and New Testaments alike make it abundantly clear that these were often insufficient to prompt belief (let alone loving faith) on the part of those who witnessed them (perhaps lending some scriptural support to the points explored in the previous section). Still, they were provided, and the Bible and church tradition offer testimony to their provision (to say nothing of innumerable contemporary miracle reports).²⁶ God has, on Lewis's view, provided a great deal.

An objector might reply: it is not so obvious that the universal accessibility of the moral really mitigates the problem of divine hiddenness. For even if God himself is not *wholly* hidden from us, in that his reality is indirectly evidenced by the universally accessible transcendent law, in another way he remains hidden to many—namely, to anyone who has failed to reflect on the nature of his or her conscience such that he or she explicitly recognizes the moral law it reveals *as transcendent*. Surely this takes some philosophical work—work which many otherwise willing people have not undertaken, and perhaps cannot undertake. While the transcendent law may be universally accessible, it is not universally accessed, at least not *qua* transcendent. In

²⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 51.

²⁶ For an impressive recent treatment of these, see Craig Keener's *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011).

other words, we seem to have shifted the problem from one of divine hiddenness to the hiddenness of the supernatural or transcendent in general. How has *that* ignorance come about, and why would God allow it?

Lewis takes up this broader issue in *Miracles*, framing the problem as follows:

To some people the great trouble about any argument for the Supernatural is simply the fact that argument should be needed at all. If so stupendous a thing exists, ought it not to be as obvious as the sun in the sky? Is it not intolerable, and indeed incredible, that knowledge of the most basic of all Facts should be accessible only by wire-drawn reasonings . . . ? I have great sympathy for this point of view. But we must notice two things. When you are looking at a garden from a room upstairs it is obvious (when you think about it) that you are looking through a window. But if it is the garden that interests you, you may look at it for a long time without thinking of the window. . . . The fact which is in one respect the most obvious and primary fact, and through which you have access to all the other facts, may be precisely the one that is most easily forgotten—forgotten not because it is so remote or abstruse but because it is so near and so obvious. And that is exactly how the Supernatural has been forgotten.²⁷

The chief example he is considering here is that of *thought itself*—reasoning in general (the focus of chapter three of *Miracles*) and moral thinking in particular (the focus of chapter five). Because we are constantly using thought to focus on other things, we tend not to focus on the nature of thought itself, but when we do we can come to the realization that thought is clearly a non-material phenomenon. So Lewis takes it that our moral thinking is clearly a direct awareness of transcendent, nonnatural reality, but that because our moral thinking is itself typically focused on specific *applications* of the moral law (that is, whether some particular action is permissible or not) it is not surprising that some of us fail to reflect on the nature of the moral law itself. But that is not because the law is hidden, or because its transcendent nature or absolute authority is obscure. Rather, those things are presupposed in its very application. That is precisely why some of us fail to

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 44–45.

realize its transcendent status—even the philosophers among us. And yet, in a way, God couldn't have made it any more obvious.

That is Lewis's first response to this problem. Obviously there is a massive literature in philosophy of the mind disputing any claim to the non-material nature of human thought (whether moral or non-moral). But Lewis's broader argument for this in chapter three of *Miracles* (an argument that has become fairly well-known in the philosophical literature) retains a good deal of force, and to the extent that it does, his observations above concerning why that force is nevertheless not obvious to all do help to undercut any "problem of supernatural hiddenness" of the sort presented by the present objection.

He goes on to supplement this idea by pointing out that, historically, most people felt no need to figure these things out (the truth or falsity of a supernatural worldview) via philosophical reasoning, since they could rely on authoritative religious tradition. But today that is changing; the widespread influence of metaphysical naturalism is such that the average individual is liable to remain unaffected by a formerly dominant religious tradition. Where formerly the philosophical and even mystical insights of that tradition would have been spread throughout society, carrying the weight of authority and tradition, today such influence is much more circumscribed. As he puts it, "in the conditions produced by a century or so of Naturalism, plain men are being forced to bear burdens which plain men were never expected to bear before. We must get the truth for ourselves or go without it."²⁸ How do we account for this new state of affairs? Lewis goes on:

There may be two explanations for this. It might be that humanity, in rebelling against tradition and authority, have made a ghastly mistake. . . . On the other hand, it may be that the Power which rules our species is at this moment carrying out a daring experiment. Could it be intended that the whole mass of the people should now move forward and occupy for themselves those heights which were once reserved for the sages? . . . If so, our present blunderings would be but growing pains. But let us make no mistake about our necessities. If we are content to go back and become humble plain men obeying a tradition, well. If we are ready to climb and struggle on till we become sages ourselves, better still. But the man who will neither obey wisdom in others nor adventure for himself is fatal.²⁹

²⁸ Lewis, *Miracles*, 46.

²⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 46–47.

So the modern citizen who has not been born into a tradition, or who has been but finds the tradition under assault from naturalistic tendencies in the broader culture, is faced with a greater responsibility than was, for instance, a medieval churchgoer. The modern citizen can (a) undertake a process of rational reflection and acknowledge the truth of supernaturalism (the reality of the transcendent) via the nature of the moral law (or via other phenomena), and then perhaps recognize the reality of the divine, or (b) accept the reality of the divine by way of good authority. For those who fail to do one or the other, there is presumably a kind of blameworthiness, a dereliction of duty. Though Lewis makes it clear that for many people, much of the blame also accrues to those who have served to undermine the traditional sources of authority, most especially the corrupt representatives of those traditions.³⁰

To sum up this section: although Lewis thinks that God cannot reveal himself to us in this life (at least before the eschaton) in a way that would guarantee rationally indubitable belief in theism for all, he does think that God can and does make himself (and his will) known to us, to a limited degree, via our awareness of the transcendent moral law. This in turn further blunts the force of the problem of divine hiddenness. In response to the objection that it is not clear that the moral law really is transcendent, Lewis argues that the supernatural aspect of all human thought (moral or non-moral) is in fact obvious—so obvious that its very transparency makes it difficult for some to apprehend. But those who fail to apprehend the supernatural nature of thought, and fail also to take the supernatural on good authority, are either blameworthy themselves or the victims of others' dereliction of duty (specifically, religious leaders).

Lewis's reflections here on the obviously (in a sense) supernatural nature of thought raise the prospect of a new sort of response to the problem of divine hiddenness. I would like to develop this briefly in the next section.

(4) *Divine Hiddenness and Non-Theistic Supernaturalism*

Let's assume that Lewis is correct: the falsity of metaphysical naturalism is obvious, so obvious that many of us are liable to miss it. In fact it's implied in every one of our thought processes (though even more obviously in our moral reflections). I submit that if all this is

³⁰ See again Lewis, *Miracles*, 46.

granted, then for many (if not most) atheists in the modern West, atheism itself becomes untenable, and the problem of divine hiddenness loses its force.

Consider that for many metaphysical naturalists today, the only live options for belief (in the Jamesian sense) are metaphysical naturalism or theistic supernaturalism. Many would just not take seriously the idea that there could be a whole swathe of supernatural realities and yet no God in the picture. Greek-style polytheism (for instance) would be regarded as not merely false but as not constituting a serious contender. The same attitude would likely be taken with respect to a worldview in which immortal human souls exist but where there is no divinity (as in some spiritualist schools of thought). For most modern Western materialists, the serious contenders are strict metaphysical naturalism and something akin to Judeo-Christian theism. As such, if it could be shown that a supernatural worldview is obviously correct (as Lewis thinks), this will imply that something akin to Judeo-Christian theism is likewise correct, since the two are seen (rightly or wrongly) as part of a single package.

This gives rise to the following reply to the problem of divine hiddenness, which for the sake of clarity I'll formalize briefly:

Premise 1: If for many (most?) metaphysical naturalists in the modern West the only relevant live options for belief are metaphysical naturalism and theistic supernaturalism, then the obvious falsity of metaphysical naturalism must drive them to theistic supernaturalism.

Premise 2: For many (most?) metaphysical naturalists in the modern West the only relevant live options for belief are metaphysical naturalism and theistic supernaturalism.

Conclusion 1 / Premise 3: Therefore, the obvious falsity of metaphysical naturalism must drive them to theistic supernaturalism.

Premise 4: If the obvious falsity of metaphysical naturalism must drive them to theistic supernaturalism, then the problem of divine hiddenness can have no purchase for them (since God will no longer be thought hidden).

Conclusion 2: Therefore, the problem of divine hiddenness can have no purchase for them (since God will no longer be thought hidden).

This argument is vulnerable to multiple objections. First, perhaps I'm wrong in thinking that for many or most metaphysical naturalists, the only two relevant live options for belief are metaphysical naturalism or theistic supernaturalism. Perhaps there is more open-mindedness to non-theistic forms of supernaturalism. Pending in-depth social science research as to the belief sets of metaphysical naturalists, this point is difficult to assess. Second, one might of course deny the opening assumption, namely that Lewis is correct in thinking the falsity of metaphysical naturalism is really so apparent, given the nature of thought. (Though in fact I believe he's right about this.) Third, one could point out that the argument, even if sound as presently stated, could easily be overturned by reframing it, not as a reply to the problem of divine hiddenness, but as a new argument for why metaphysical naturalists should take non-theistic supernaturalisms more seriously as possible live options for belief. Still, I take it to be an interesting line of thought, one perhaps worthy of further consideration (at a later date), and one directly inspired by Lewis's treatment of the issue.

(5) *Conclusion*

Obviously more could be said by way of attacking or defending Lewis's approaches to hiddenness. But I hope to have shown at least that he does have a coherent and defensible set of strategies for thinking through the problem, even if it has to be culled from disparate sources. Is it a fully satisfactory set of strategies? I doubt it. In general I am inclined to think that the best way to tackle the hiddenness problem is (as with the problem of evil) a cumulative case argument employing multiple compatible lines of response. Lewis's approach may or may not by itself suffice to solve the problem, but I do think that parts of it at least can find a valuable place in such a broader response, the contours of which must, however, be left as a topic for future reflection.

