

Divine Hiddenness as Higher Order Evidence

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Divine hiddenness has historically been conceived of as a logical problem, in rough terms the logical problem of the (in)consistency of apparently non-culpable non-belief in the existence of God with the existence of a good God who desires to be in mutual relationship with human beings. Recently, Charity Anderson (n.d.) has argued that we should conceive of the problem of divine hiddenness as an evidential problem instead of a logical problem. In other words, we should consider how recognizing the existence of apparent non-culpable non-belief might change the justificatory profile of the evidence we have about the existence of God, instead of arguing about whether God's existence is logically consistent with the fact of hiddenness. In this paper, I'm going to argue that if we consider the problem of divine hiddenness as an evidential problem, we should understand the existence of apparent non-culpable non-belief in God as providing us with a very specific type of evidence, higher order evidence.

In the first section, I'll provide some basic terminology, including a working definition of higher order evidence, and will show how I'm adopting Anderson's evidential formulation of the problem of divine hiddenness. In the second section, I'll provide two reasons for thinking that divine hiddenness provides us with specifically *higher order* evidence. In the third section, I'll show how understanding divine hiddenness as higher order evidence impacts what the argument can successfully show or fail to show, given one's prior commitments concerning the nature of epistemic rationality. I conclude in the fourth section.

1. Higher order Evidence and the Evidential Problem of Hiddenness

Higher order evidence, essentially, is evidence about our assessment of our evidence (Kelly 2005, 24; Christensen 2010, 186). Usually, higher order evidence provides us evidence that suggests that our evidence does not point in the direction we originally thought it did. And it can come in many different forms.

Disagreement, whether in the form of disagreement from epistemic peers, inferiors, or superiors, is commonly understood as providing us with specifically higher order evidence (Christensen 2013; Feldman 2009; Kelly 2010). Learning that a person of some level of epistemic competence assesses a matter differently than I do suggests that there

exists some chance (however negligible) that I have misunderstood where the evidence I have about the matter leads. Prior to receiving higher order evidence in the form of learning of a disagreement, I may have been rationally confident that I had assessed some body of evidence as well as anyone could, but after learning of disagreement I must engage in deliberation about whether my assessment or my partner in disagreement's assessment of the evidence is superior or whether I lack some evidence that my partner in disagreement has. Disagreement is usually evidence that I may have mis-assessed some body of evidence.

While disagreement is perhaps the most commonly discussed provider of higher order evidence, there exist numerous other forms of higher order evidence. This includes evidence that I am currently under the influence of some environmental or temporary hallucinogenic influence, such as altitude sickness or a cognition-impairing drug, that could prevent me from reasoning carefully (Christensen 2010, 187; Laasonen-Aarnio 2014, 315). Moral epistemologists have considered information that one's moral beliefs may have arisen due to factors irrelevant to their truth as a form of higher order evidence (Klenk 2020, 9). Epistemologists have also been concerned with the higher order evidence we get when we learn that certain epistemically central beliefs concerning matters like politics and religion may arise in part due to social factors that are irrelevant to the truth of those beliefs (Levy 2020; Schoenfield 2014). So we can get higher order evidence in a wide variety of epistemic contexts and forms.

For present purposes, I'll be focusing on the particular higher order evidence that comes from divine hiddenness. And I'll understand that higher order evidence in the gloss I gave above, as evidence about our evidence which should lead us to consider whether we have misassessed the evidence relevant to belief in theism.

As Anderson has recognized, the evidence provided by hiddenness could be cashed in numerous distinct facts, depending on how one understands the scope and aim of the hiddenness argument. For the purposes of clarity, I will follow her focus on

H: Some (but not most) people doubt that God exists (Anderson n.d., 14).

So I will be arguing that to receive H is to receive higher order evidence.

Anderson also points out that when we ask how incorporating H into our evidence will impact the rationality of theistic belief, we must remember that the impact of H on an agent's beliefs will be in part determined by the character of the agent's original evidence,

as well as the specific theistic proposition held by the agent (n.d., 16-19). And these features will differ widely among agents, making it difficult to determine the impact of H in universal tones. What I have to say in Section III will complicate the determination of what it looks like to respond in an epistemically rational way to H even further. For now, I'll endeavor to remain neutral about, for example, how H threatens the existence of a caring God more than it threatens a more minimal theism as well as the character of the agent's original evidence.

With these features clarified, I'll now go on to address the questions motivating the paper: why should we think of H as providing us higher order evidence and what does that mean for the problem of divine hiddenness and its threat to the rationality of theism?

II. *Higher order Evidence and the Evidence from Hiddenness*

Why should we consider H as higher order evidence? I think there are two main reasons for thinking H is higher order, as opposed to first order, evidence. The first comes from consideration of the effects H is commonly intended to have on a theist's evidence.

While first order evidence bears directly on the truth or falsity of a proposition, higher order evidence bears on an agent's assessment of that first order evidence. Kevin Dorst (forthcoming) argues that higher order evidence can provide two sorts of evidence, "(1) evidence about whether various responses to your evidence are *reliable*" and "(2) evidence about whether various responses to your evidence are *rational*" (1).¹ In common formulations of the problem of divine hiddenness, I think it plausible to assert that H is viewed implicitly as evidence for the theist that her response to her evidence is not reliable.

To demonstrate this reliability-threatening feature of higher order evidence, Dorst offers an illustrative example: "you pick up a textbook and start believing its claims—yet unbeknownst to you, it's full of fabrications. Then your resulting opinions are (1) systematically *unreliable* but (2) perfectly rational" (forthcoming, 1). Dorst wants us to appreciate that to believe the claims set out in the textbook would be the epistemically rational thing to do, even though it turns out that to do so results in our holding systematically unreliable beliefs. If you get evidence that you're in an epistemic

¹ By "reliable," I mean to indicate the property of a response to evidence being likely to lead one to a true or accurate belief.

environment like the textbook case, says Dorst, you're getting higher order evidence that your response to your evidence is unreliable, even if it may be rational.

I think that common articulations of the Problem of Divine Hiddenness (hereafter, "the Problem") rely on H providing us this kind of reliability-doubting evidence. Since the Problem has only recently been cashed in evidential terms by Anderson, what I have to say in support of this view of H will be less directly aimed at current defenders of the Problem and more aimed at excavating some of the evidential intuitions underlying the Problem.

Proponents of the Problem typically take the Problem to show that it is logically inconsistent to believe that God exists for some H. And so in the evidential terms we are now understanding the Problem, I take it that its proponents will now want to say that the Problem makes it less likely that God exists given the evidence H. Now, I have yet to hear vocal proponents of the Problem (taken all on its own in isolation from other philosophical issues) say that theists do not begin with some apparently legitimate evidence in support of their theism prior to responding to H. While there are some who take all religious believers to be comprehensively epistemically irrational, I take these proponents of the Problem to be in the minority. After all, if one holds this "totally irrational" view of religious evidence to begin with, the Problem seems rather superfluous.

So proponents of the Problem, at least those for whom the Problem provides a substantial, independent reason for rejecting theism, seem to recognize that the theist's belief in God is based on some evidence, evidence which she may be responding rationally to prior to recognizing H. But H, according to proponents of the Problem, poses a difficulty to the theist *not* in virtue of suggesting that her prior responses to her original evidence were irrational. The Problem involves no premise stating that the evidence of God's character, presence, or action in the world is being poorly responded to by the theist.

Rather, the Problem includes premises like H, a report of the epistemic statuses of numerous other apparently rational agents who fail to be able to rationally believe theism. The fact of H, imply proponents of the Problem, indicates that the theist shouldn't trust her responses to all the evidence available to her. H is evidence that the evidence she has which supports her belief in theism might be skewed towards the truth of theism inappropriately. Or it is evidence that her response to the evidence may be internally, but not externally rational, in Plantinga's terms. Put yet another way, the

Problem seems to aim at showing the theist that her response to the evidence concerning theism is unreliable, if rational. Just as receiving evidence that the textbook in Dorst's case was actually full of falsities might suggest to the textbook reader that their original responses to their evidence were rational but unreliable, so receiving H might suggest to a theist that her original responses to her evidence was rational, but unreliable.

To take an entirely different tack, a second reason we should consider H as higher order evidence comes from the form of H. I've already noted that learning of disagreement is commonly considered a form of higher order evidence since learning of disagreement can indicate that our evidence is incomplete or that we have failed to respond to it rationally.

H, taken all on its own even in isolation from the Problem, can be cashed merely as a recognition of widespread disagreement with the theist. Again, H states that "Some (but not most) people doubt that God exists" (Anderson n.d., 14). In the terms of disagreement, H can be restated as H*: Some people believe that God does not exist. H* merely includes the very plausible assumption that some of the agents in H are agents for whom their doubts move them to disbelief in theism. Or we could even moderate H to H**: Some people lack belief that God exists. H** would be enough to count as asserting the existence of disagreement with the theist who hold belief that God exists.

Setting these technical details aside, learning H*: Some people believe that God does not exist, should sound very much like a proclamation of widespread disagreement to the theist. We've already noted that disagreement is widely understood as higher order evidence. So considering the Problem as an evidential one primes us to consider how we might use the familiar tools of the epistemology of disagreement to incorporate H (via H*) into our total evidence.

Some might object that the Problem does not merely collapse into the problem of disagreement, just as many have argued that the Problem does not collapse into the problem of evil. And I am sympathetic to these concerns. For one thing, the epistemology of disagreement is not readily equipped to deal with disagreement wherein the object of disagreement (God) is, according to one side of the disagreement, equipped with the ability to resolve the disagreement for all parties by making his existence obvious to all agents. For another, it's hard to know exactly how we might model the groups involved in the disagreement. How would we determine whether all (or even some) theists and atheists share roughly the same evidence such that the considerations brought forward by the epistemology of peer disagreement would apply? How wide should a particular theist take the group of atheists who disagree with her about theism to be? Should the

entire historical record of alleged divine interaction be considered part of every theist's relevant evidence, whether they are aware of reports of those interactions or not?

These are weighty worries. But I don't think they excuse us from recognizing the angle on the Problem which highlights the role disagreement plays in its structure. I eagerly assent that the Problem involves more than disagreement, in part due to the questions I've laid out above. The Problem involves more than simple disagreement, but it seems to me to *at least include disagreement*. And in including disagreement, I propose, H (via H*) provides us with higher order evidence. I'll now turn to consider how understanding H as higher order evidence impacts what the argument can show.

III. The View from Higher order Evidence

If we understand H as higher order evidence as I've suggested we should, what does this mean for both proponents and respondents to the Problem? The literature on higher order evidence is vast, and to put it bluntly, incorporating higher order evidence is a bit more complicated than incorporating first order evidence into one's total evidence. This is because we must deal not just with the import of the content of H on the truth or falsity of T, a task we face with incorporating any piece of evidence, be it first or higher order, into our total evidence, but we must consider how H as higher order evidence relates to our first order evidence. Epistemologists have commitments concerning the relationship between one's higher order evidence and first order evidence which extend beyond considerations of the Problem. In introducing the Problem as an evidential problem, Anderson has identified numerous variables in determining how H will impact the rationality of belief in theism for particular agents. The picture of H as higher order evidence will add even more variables to that picture, making it even more difficult to determine whether a theist can or cannot believe theism rationally after adding H to their total evidence. In tandem with the previous section, I'll consider first how understanding H as broadly higher order evidence will impact the Problem and then will consider how understanding H as disagreement-provided higher order evidence changes the consequences of the Problem.

How might we incorporate H into our total evidence if we view it generally as providing us with higher order evidence? What would the Problem look like if we understood H as evidence which suggests that theist's original response to her evidence is unreliable, if rational? As I've already hinted at, some broader epistemological commitments will come into play here. On some views of higher order evidence, so called anti-akratic views, we are required to let the justificatory profile of our first order evidence be

swamped by our higher order evidence.² So when we receive higher order evidence that suggests our original responses to our evidence are suspect, we must either suspend judgment about where the evidence points or even adopt a credence closer towards the opposing side (Horowitz 2014).

To put it in the context of the problem, imagine a theist whose evidence, E, for the existence of God is fairly significant and strong, and suppose further that she has responded in an epistemically admirable fashion to this evidence. She believes, at minimum, T: God exists. But then she reads of the Problem on a pop philosophy blog and stares H in the face. According to the story I've been telling so far, H gives her reason to think that her response to E was rational, but that her belief-forming process was unreliable in its leading her to the truth about whether T.

Now if our theist holds a strictly anti-akratic view of the relationship between higher order evidence and first order evidence, then receiving H should cause her to reduce her confidence in T significantly, all else being equal. So if you are a proponent of the Problem, if you think that the Problem casts significant doubt on the epistemic rationality of belief in theism, then you'll want to invoke an anti-akratic view of the relationship between one's higher order evidence and one's first order evidence.

But if our theist holds to a view which permits certain kinds of epistemic akrasia, perhaps those advocated for by Coates (2012) or Turnbull & Sampson (2020), there is space for the theist to hold onto even confident belief in T after receiving H, if certain conditions are met. If she holds a view on which her response to her first order evidence is not dictated solely by her higher order evidence, she could hold a belief such as "T, but my higher order evidence leaves me somewhat uncertain about whether my belief that T is reliably formed." So construing H as broadly higher order evidence does not necessarily mean that theists are irrational in continuing to believe T after receiving H, if one holds a view of rationality which permits even weak forms of epistemic akrasia.

Now I recognize that this so-called akratic belief might feel tremendously odd to many epistemologists and I don't have space here to defend the rationality of such a belief. But I think it crucial to our evaluation of the Problem that we recognize that: (1) the debate between anti-akratic and akratic views of higher order evidence is live in epistemology and (2) whether one holds an anti-akratic or akratic view of higher order evidence influences what impact the Problem has on the rationality of theism.

² And this is precisely Kelly's (2010) worry with these anti-akratic views.

Having recognized this aspect of the Problem, what will understanding H as specifically disagreement-provided higher order evidence do for the problem? To cut to the chase, the number of variables that determine the impact H has on the justificatory profile of one's total evidence multiply when we consider H as disagreement-provided higher order evidence. I'll explicate this by considering what sort of epistemological commitments are required in order for the Problem to move agents away from belief in theism, as proponents of the Problem take it to.

First, if H is disagreement-provided higher order evidence received by our theist, our theist will need to hold a view on which she shares enough relevant evidence with the non-theists which H informs her she disagrees with. Now this will be rather tricky, as I have argued elsewhere (Turnbull, Forthcoming) since a significant portion of the theist's evidence may come from incommunicable religious experiences which her non-theist partners in disagreement in no way share. Even robust conciliatory views of disagreement between peers (and superiors and inferiors for that matter) require agents to share some evidence in common before they recommend one or more agents adjusting their beliefs in response to disagreement. So a necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition of our theist relinquishing rational belief in theism will be that there exists some substantial level of evidence sharing between herself and non-theists.

Second, and perhaps obviously, the proponent of the Problem will need us to be convinced of a conciliatory view of disagreement which would require our theist to adjust her belief in the existence of God as part of her incorporating H into her total evidence. There are countless, vocal proponents of non-conciliatory views according to which it is sometimes rational to hold onto one's original beliefs after learning of disagreement, including those defended by Kelly (2010), Jennifer Lackey (2010), Andrew Moon (2018), and Ruth Weintraub (2013). For the Problem to get the theist from H to substantially reducing her confidence in theism, she must accept a view of disagreement on which she is rationally required to reduce her confidence in her beliefs under disagreement. And this is a substantive, and somewhat controversial requirement on rationality.

Finally, we will also need a conciliatory theory of group disagreement which makes sense of how theists, according to the Problem, ought to adjust their beliefs in response to H. As J. Adam Carter (2016) has pointed out, there are substantive issues to be worked out in order for us to apply the insights of the epistemology of disagreement to group disagreement. Of import to the Problem, we must have a way for the *group* of theists incorporating H to adjust their beliefs towards theism (2016, 6). Applied to the context of the Problem, Carter's work shows that it's non-obvious whether this requires every

individual theist to relinquish belief in theism. On some conciliatory theories, the appropriate response to group disagreement is only achieved if “at least one member of [the group] performs some act that causally contributes to the group’s collectively revising its belief” (2016, 6). How theists responding to the Problem should go about accomplishing this aim is unclear.

Regardless of how we understand H as higher order evidence, it’s obvious that one’s prior epistemological commitments concerning the relationship between higher order evidence and first order evidence as well as one’s understanding of the rational response to disagreement will play a significant role in determining the impact of the Problem on the rationality of belief in theism.

IV. Conclusion

I’m afraid that considering divine hiddenness as higher order evidence in some ways muddies, rather than clears, the waters surrounding the Problem. But I take it, as I’ve argued here, that there is a persuasive case to be made that when we consider divine hiddenness as an evidential problem, it makes most sense given both the structure and content of H, to consider the evidence it provides us as higher order evidence. And if the Problem provides us with higher order evidence, then we can’t run or even jump to the conclusion that the rationality of theistic belief is threatened by hiddenness. Substantive commitments about the nature of epistemic rationality will need to hold in order for H to even appear as a threat to steadfast theistic belief. And, as Anderson points out, this threat, even once it appears, will have the potential to be mitigated or even defeated by other individualities, including the character of an agent’s original evidence. What the Problem of Divine Hiddenness shows the theist about the character of theistic belief is far from clear.

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