ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Divine hiddenness: An evidential argument

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Abstract

This paper presents and examines the argument from divine hiddenness as an evidential argument. It argues that a key thought that motivates the argument, namely, that *it's surprising that God's existence is not more obvious*, does not alone secure the conclusion that divine hiddenness is evidence against God. The evidential problem of divine hiddenness is illustrated using Bayesian models.

1 | INTRODUCTION

God's existence is not obvious to many people. Some people claim that the evidence they have is not enough to support belief that God exists. Their epistemic position for God is weak, as far as they can tell. God, if he exists, appears hidden from them. The question under exploration in this paper is: *does divine hiddenness provide evidence against theism?* That is, do certain facts about our epistemic situation with respect to theism give us some reason to think that God does not exist? Some have argued 'yes': a God that cares whether we know that he exists would have put us in a different epistemic situation—a stronger epistemic situation. God's existence would be more obvious.

As it is commonly presented in the literature, the argument from divine hiddenness claims that the existence of a loving God is *inconsistent* with the epistemic situation in which we find ourselves. By this reasoning, divine hiddenness is *conclusive* evidence that God does not exist. Here I will offer a different formulation of the argument. I suggest that we formulate the argument from divine hiddenness as an evidential argument. The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I diagnose a general mistake in reasoning about expectations. Section 3 motivates the problem of divine hiddenness—defending it from the charge of being merely a subcase of the problem of evil with no evidential contribution to make. Section 4 illustrates the kind of contribution I think divine hiddenness can make when viewed as an evidential argument and draws on Bayesian models to demonstrate a range of options involved in the set-up of the argument. Section 5 explores some further complications.

One clarificatory note before we begin. An important issue that arises in discussions of divine hiddenness concerns what kind of God is under investigation. In the first few sections, I limit my discussion to a conception of a divine being who, in addition to being omnipotent, omniscient,

and perfectly good, also cares about human beings: specifically, I'll have in mind a God who cares whether we believe that God exists.[12] I'll furthermore make the simplifying assumption that the only not-God alternative is one where there are no divine beings (atheism is true rather than some variant of theism). In a later section, I modify the former simplification and consider whether divine hiddenness speaks in favor of a non-caring God in contrast to a caring God.

2 | HIDDENNESS AND EXPECTATIONS

The argument from divine hiddenness can be advanced in a variety of ways. Currently, most versions argue that the existence of God is inconsistent with some fact (or facts) of divine hiddenness. In this respect, the argument resembles early versions of the problem of evil, which were advanced as logical arguments. That is, proponents of the logical problem of evil argue that a God with certain attributes is *inconsistent* with facts about evil. The most discussed version of the argument from divine hiddenness, advanced by J.L. Schellenberg, argues for an inconsistency between the existence of God and certain alleged facts of divine hiddenness.[3] Rather than viewing divine hiddenness as merely one argument with competing formulations, I will here think of divine hiddenness as a family of arguments, to include logical and evidential arguments. My aim is to investigate whether various hiddenness facts are evidence against the existence of God. We will see that much depends on the type of epistemic situation for theism it is likely we would be in, conditional on God's existence, as well as on which hiddenness facts we discover obtain.

Note, to start, that although Schellenberg argues for an inconsistency between God and certain facts of hiddenness, at least some (though clearly not all) of what he says would seem to fit better as an evidential argument than a logical argument. Here are several such claims:

> All I seek to show is that we might expect God's *existence* to be more obvious.[4]

> The weakness of evidence for theism is itself evidence against it.

> Individuals who find the evidence inconclusive […] must ipso facto become atheists: the weakness of theistic evidence […] must in their case be viewed as itself a consideration that tips the balance in favor of atheism.

Though I do not endorse all the ideas in these claims, there is a central hiddenness thought behind these statements that I am sympathetic with, which is this: if God exists, *we would expect God's existence to be more obvious*. It is surprising to me that we are in the epistemic position we are in with respect to God's existence. It is not what I would have expected. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think that this fact alone is enough to secure an argument against God: it is possible to agree with this claim without it constituting evidence against theism. I'll begin with some preliminary points and then walk more carefully through the details.

First, suppose we strongly expected that God would make his existence obvious to everyone, but in fact his existence is not obvious to everyone; though it is obvious to many people. It does not follow merely from the fact that this situation is not what we expected, given God, that it is evidence that God does not exist. Consider the following example:

> *Back Door*: Suppose my sister is on her way to my house and I expect that if she comes, she will come in the front door. But when she arrives, she enters through the back door.

Despite my strong expectation that if she comes, she will enter through the front door, when she walks in the back door I have fantastic evidence that she has arrived at my house. It is not the evidence I expected to get, but it is nevertheless very strong evidence that she has arrived. My expectation of what the evidence *would be like* is in this way irrelevant to what I ought to believe—what is relevant is the evidence I actually have and what that evidence supports. When the evidence I have supports *p*, the fact that I expected different evidence does not mitigate this support.[5]

It's worth emphasizing an important limitation of this example. It is not intended to be a direct analogy to divine hiddenness; rather, it is intended merely to demonstrate that it is a mistake to reason as follows: 'I expected evidence E if *p* is true, and I learned not-E, therefore, not-*p*.' The fact that not-E is surprising given *p* does not in itself suffice to make not-E conclusive evidence for not-*p*.

Of course, if there is only *one* way the evidence might be, given *p*, things are different. When there is only one way the evidence could turn out, conditional on *p*, and we find out things are not that way, it is reasonable for us to infer not-*p*. But notice that in the back door case, this would require that there be only one way my sister could arrive at my house—through the front door. Many of our expectations aren't like this—even strong ones.[6] Instead, they are consistent with the evidence unfolding in other ways.

Consider another example.

> *Roses*: Suppose for her 50th birthday a woman is expecting a dozen roses from her spouse. Instead, she receives a single rose.

Here again the evidence received is not what was expected, and in this case, a single rose is *less* than what she expected. But on natural assumptions, including that people typically do not give roses to people they don't care for, the gift of a rose for her birthday is evidence that her spouse cares for her. Note that she could expect roses and instead receive diamonds—in which case her evidence would not be what she expected, but would nevertheless be fantastic evidence that her spouse cares for her. In that case, what she receives is arguably *better* than what she expected.

Finally, consider a third case, which is more similar to the way many seem to think about divine hiddenness:

> *Lawn Mower*: Suppose a woman is expecting dinner and flowers for her birthday and her spouse instead takes her to dinner and gives her a lawn mower. Suppose further that she doesn't mow the lawn, didn't request a lawn mower, and is allergic to grass.

Once again what is received differs from what was expected. But a gift of dinner and a lawn mower for her birthday would be quite puzzling. On the one hand, it is not obvious that the gift of dinner and a lawn mower is evidence that the spouse doesn't care for her—after all, he remembered her birthday. He took her to dinner. But, on the other hand, a lawn mower is not something she remotely wanted or will enjoy. She might reasonably wonder if it is a passive aggressive signal that he is unhappy with his share of household duties and wants her to pick up the slack. Or perhaps he wanted a new lawn mower for himself. She's unsure what to think as a result of receiving the gift.

But even in a situation like this where one is unsure what to think, the mere fact that *she didn't get dinner and roses as she expected* is not what is doing the work. We need to look at the comparative likelihoods. That is, we need to look at whether a gift of dinner and lawn mower is more likely conditional on *her spouse cares for her* than it is conditional on *her spouse does not care for her.*

There are many ways one can fail to receive what one expected. What matters for determining evidential significance is what evidence we have, not what evidence we expected. The evidence we receive might not be what we most expected conditional on a hypothesis, and yet it may nevertheless be evidence for the hypothesis. This is the sense in which theists can agree with the core hiddenness thought without it constituting evidence against God: theists can agree that we would've expected that God's existence would be more obvious than it is. But this alone does not settle the question of whether hiddenness is evidence against God. We need to look at the evidence we in fact have and what it points to, not merely at what we expected.

3 | DIVINE HIDDENNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Another issue concerns whether the argument from divine hiddenness makes an epistemic contribution above and beyond the contribution made by the problem of evil. Some have thought that it does not. Kvanvig (2002), for example, claims that once we take into account all the evidence—in particular the evidence of evil—there is no work left for the hiddenness argument to do. He thinks it is obvious that divine hiddenness is an instance of the problem of evil and that hiddenness "does no work regarding the overall status of belief in God" (2002, 160–162). After all, if God exists, hiddenness is a 'bad thing'. And, according to this line of thought, once the problem of evil has been added to our evidence: "all [hiddenness] does is add further examples of a problem already weighed in the scales" (2002, 162).

I disagree. I think that hiddenness has an epistemic contribution to make. This can be seen most vividly when we consider cases where hiddenness facts are learned separately from facts of evil. I'll start with several general points regarding the subsuming of one argument into the other and then offer some illustrative cases.

3.1 | General Points

My discussion in this section will be limited to several points intended to move discussion forward. We should underscore from the start a point on which all sides can agree: namely, that divine hiddenness will not have an impact on the probability of God's existence for those who are already certain that God exists. That is, if God's existence is certain on one's total evidence, then nothing—evil, hiddenness, etc.—will lower the probability that God exists.[7] (The same is true for those who are certain that God does not exist—nothing will raise the probability of God's existence.) The question of the evidential import of hiddenness is only relevant when we are considering agents for whom God's existence is a live question—that is, whose total evidence leaves open the possibility that God does not exist and the possibility that God exists. I will have such agents in mind throughout the remainder of the paper, unless otherwise indicated.

Next, it is worth drawing attention to the general point that talking about *kinds* of problems is not a very Bayesian way to think about evidential contributions. The questions 'is *X* evidence for *Y*?' and 'is *X* a distinct *kind* of problem?' do not map onto each other in a straightforward way.

What makes one argument distinct from another is a substantive matter. I won't attempt to settle that issue here. With respect to the question of evidential impact, the question of enumeration of arguments is a distraction. What matters is the strength of the evidential support, not how many arguments there are.

Relatedly, enumerating arguments and kinds of problems focuses our attention on the task of enumerating solutions and explanations to correspond to the problems. If we think there is only one problem of evil, and think that the problem involves merely the observation that evil exists, we might expect that the problem of evil will have one solution. But this way of thinking may lead us to misrepresent the force of the evidence of evil. As both Adams (1990) and Tooley (1991) suggest, a much more plausible argument (or rather a family of arguments) from evil can be formulated by relying on the distinct kinds and amounts of evil in the world—not merely on the sheer existence of evil. Once we introduce the idea that to adequately address the problem of evil we need to address the specific types and amounts of evil that we find in the world, there is room for hiddenness to play a role (even on the assumption that hiddenness is 'just' another type of evil). In this way, for those who expect there to be different explanations for different types of evil, it makes perfect sense to think hiddenness presents a unique challenge for theists.[8] We can't prejudge the impact of hiddenness by simply noting that it is a type of evil. Even if we grant that hiddenness is a 'bad thing', it can nevertheless make an evidential contribution.

The final point I wish to make concerns a lack of parity in discussions of arguments for the existence of God and arguments against the existence of God. Philosophers of religion tend not to talk about arguments *for* the existence of God in the way outlined above. It is claimed that there are in the ballpark of two dozen arguments for the existence of God.[9] The implication is that the number of arguments is significant. But no one suggests that each of these arguments is just another instance of a 'good thing' and thus part of one overarching argument for God—'the argument from good things.' Instead, beauty, morality, design, etc are all taken to be distinct arguments *for* God and presented as important in their own right, rather than as having no contribution to make. (For example, theists typically don't say, 'well, since we have the design argument, the moral argument has no work to do.') This is an overlooked dissimilarity in how the various arguments for and against God are sometimes counted. Minimally, theists should be consistent. In any case, the sheer number of arguments is not important—what matters is what our evidence is and what that evidence supports. For the remainder of the paper, I'll set aside the issue of counting problems or arguments and proceed to lay out the argument from hiddenness.[10]

3.2 | Some illustrative cases

In order to motivate the idea that hiddenness has an evidential contribution to make, it will be helpful to think about what things would need to be like for hiddenness to make no evidential difference at all. For the sake of illustration, imagine a world which, hiddenness aside, contains roughly the same amount and kinds of evil as our own. Suppose that neither God's existence nor hiddenness are part of your background knowledge, but your evidence includes information about other (non-hiddenness) kinds and amounts of evil. With this background, let's compare two things you might learn about the degree of divine hiddenness in the world. First, imagine learning that everyone else reports having frequent religious experience as of God. Second, imagine learning that no one reports having any religious experience. For hiddenness to make no evidential difference to theism at all, it needs to be the case that whichever fact you learn, the likelihood that God exists would be the same across the two worlds. But this seems implausible. It's

implausible that conditional on God, a world where no one reports having religious experience as of God is just as likely as a world where everyone reports having such an experience. Surely learning either one of these facts would have an evidential impact on the probability of theism.[11] And this will be true even if hiddenness is a bad thing. This suggests that divine hiddenness has an epistemic contribution to make.[12] (Note that the point doesn't depend on the hiddenness facts being about religious experience; we could substitute different hiddenness facts.)

Next, recall the simple, yet significant, Bayesian point that if x is evidence for y, then not-x is evidence against y. From this requirement of Bayesian reasoning it follows that if learning *everyone believes that God exists* is evidence in favor of God, then learning *it's not the case that everyone believes that God exists* is evidence against God.

The idea that learning *everyone believes that God exists* makes God's existence more likely is extremely plausible. We can again make the point vivid by way of a simplified example: Suppose a child grows up isolated from society; in particular, the child is ignorant of any information about religious beliefs, religious experiences, or religious practices in the world at large. Suppose when the child is 18 years of age, the child's isolation ends and he learns that every adult on earth believes that God exists. It seems natural to think that this discovery will have positive evidential weight for the child—it will be evidence for the child that God exists. But if finding out that all adults believe that God exists raises the probability that God exists, then finding out the denial of this fact lowers the probability. Were the child to find out instead that it is not the case that all adults believe that God exists, this information will be evidence for the child that God does not exist. (And this will be true whether or not the child has already learned that the world contains suffering and pain.)

Of course, the child could learn more than simply *not all adults believe that God exists*—the child's total evidence might be richer than this. For example, the child might simultaneously learn both that *not all adults believe that God exists* and also that *almost all adults believe that God exists*. Given some plausible assumptions, the enriched evidence would not be evidence against God. The point here is simply that hiddenness facts can have an impact apart from the impact made by discovering that the world contains evil.[13]

4 | DIVINE HIDDENNESS AS AN EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT

4.1 | An analogy

As I've indicated above, I think there is epistemic work for the argument from divine hiddenness to do. I suggest that the following example can help us see the contribution it can make:

> *Horse Race*: Suppose a race takes place between two horses, Horse A and Horse B, and I want to know who won the race. I think both horses have a roughly equal chance of winning. I don't see the race myself, but afterwards I ask several people leaving the race to tell me who won. Three people tell me that Horse A won, and three tell me that Horse B won.[14]

If this were all I knew, after learning this new information, my evidence would support that it is roughly 50-50 that each won. But let us suppose that in this case I know more; namely, that if the rider of Horse A won, it is unlikely anyone would think that Horse B won, since the rider of Horse A is a show-off and would make a display of winning (perhaps he typically performs an unforgettable victory dance). Suppose I also know that, unlike the rider of Horse A, the rider of Horse B would not have celebrated or acted in a way that would have been particularly memorable.

With this additional information, the evidential situation of half the people reporting that A won and half reporting that B won is evidence that B won. It is unlikely I would have received *this* evidence if Horse A won. In light of my knowledge that Horse A's rider is a show off, it is rational for me to be more confident that Horse B won. Since, in this case, the fact that *half said that A won and half said that B won* is more likely given the hypothesis that B won, the split testimony is itself evidence that B won.

Likewise, I suggest, if we observe a hiddenness fact (for example, that God's existence is not obvious to everyone—refinement on which hiddenness fact we'll have in mind in a moment), and the hiddenness fact is more likely to be true conditional on not-God than on God, the fact can be evidence against God. This is one example of the type of epistemic work I suggest the argument from Divine Hiddenness can do, and the contribution it has the potential to make as an evidential argument.

4.2 | Hiddenness Facts

That's the first pass. I'll now move more slowly and look at several variations of the argument using simplified Bayesian models. In what follows, I'll use 'probability' to refer to epistemic probabilities and will work within a framework where the probability of *p* is a function of objective priors and an agent's evidence.[15] I'll take as a starting point a probability space that gives an equal probability to *God exists* and *God does not exist*. (Some may object to this starting point; the schema can be modified to accommodate other starting points, though I don't have space to go through the various alternatives here. Note, though, that while the starting point affects the probability one ends up with, whether hiddenness is evidence for or against God does not depend on the prior probability of God and not-God. As I will be here concerned with the question of whether hiddenness is evidence for or against God, the starting points won't make a substantive difference to what I have to say.) Finally, to isolate the evidential impact of a particular hiddenness fact, I'll look at its impact relative to a set of background evidence (B). The background evidence will include things like that there are people, that there is evil and suffering in the world, etc.

In general, the evidential argument from divine hiddenness takes the following shape: we make a hiddenness observation and ask whether that observation is more likely on God or not-God. There are numerous options for what can constitute a hiddenness fact, and thus numerous ways to run the argument. Some hiddenness facts are widely accepted, some are highly controversial. For example, it is uncontroversial that God's existence is not obvious to everyone; but it is extremely controversial (and difficult to judge) whether our collective evidence for God's existence makes it likely that God exists. Complications arise in how we characterize hiddenness facts, several of which are worth discussing.

One decision point concerns whether to use tendentious or non-tendentious hiddenness facts. Several of the most straightforward renderings of 'God is hidden' are tendentious with respect to the aim of investigating whether God exists. Suppose, for example, that 'God is hidden' is taken to mean that

(H1) Some people know God exists and some people don't know that God exists.

That some people know that God exists implies that God exists. So if we learned (H1), we would also learn that God exists. This brings the result that hiddenness would be conclusive evidence *for* God's existence. Characterizing hiddenness in this way is dialectically unhelpful. (It also makes

our exercise of drawing on Bayesian tools to model hiddenness pointless since they are unnecessary to see what's going on.) The same problem arises for all hiddenness facts that entail that God exists. So, for instance, we need to avoid characterizing the data concerning religious experience in a way that prejudges or encodes whether the experience was genuine. That is, we shouldn't take as hiddenness-data that some people have experienced God and some haven't. Rather, we need to characterize the data in a non-tendentious way: that some people report having had a religious experience and others report that they have not.

Further problems emerge if our candidate hiddenness fact has built into it some statement about the overall strength of the evidence. For example:

(H2) The evidence for and against God's existence is counterbalanced.

This hiddenness fact makes a claim about what the evidence supports. But whether hiddenness is evidence against God is precisely what is under investigation; (H2) prejudges the evidence by building an evaluative description of the strength of the evidence into the hiddenness fact. We've seen in the modified horse race case above that even when the testimony is split we cannot assume that the evidence makes the likelihood that each won 50-50. In the modified case, the split testimony was evidence that Horse B won the race. After receiving the split testimony, it would be incorrect to describe one's epistemic position as one of 'counterbalanced evidence' or 'weak evidence' for *Horse B won*. Rather, one's total evidence is evidence that *Horse B won*.

As with (H1), statements such as 'our evidence is counterbalanced' are also highly contentious. If we use as our central data point a claim that only agnostics or atheists would be likely to affirm, the argument will have limited appeal and impact. The same would occur if the theist claimed, 'our evidence for God's existence is strong,' and then argued that this fact is evidence *for* God.

There are hiddenness facts in the vicinity that do not prejudge the evaluation of our evidence. Here is one example. A hiddenness fact might describe our evidence as 'a mixed bag'. Suppose we make a natural division of our evidence into pieces (where a piece is either a proposition or a conjunction of propositions). We rely on context to make judgments about which pieces are relevant to our topic. Call our evidence 'mixed' when the following is true: there is some relevant piece such that if that piece were our total evidence, God's existence would be likely relative to that piece; and there is some relevant piece such that were that piece our total evidence, God's existence would be unlikely relative to it. One might advance a hiddenness argument on the basis of the observation that our evidence is mixed, in this way. Perhaps one could argue that it is unlikely that God would allow our evidence to be a mixed bag. While the observation that one's evidence is a mixed bag is not tendentious, using this hiddenness fact to develop the argument involves complications that are at odds with our aim of offering a simple illustration of the argument; for this reason, I will set it to one side.

The above considerations suggest that we ought to focus on hiddenness facts that are non-tendentious. That is, we ought to focus on facts which do not entail that God exists (or that God does not exist) and facts which do not prematurely settle the question of the strength of the overall evidence. Consider the following list of candidate hiddenness facts:

1. It does not seem obvious to everyone that God exists.
2. Many people report that they have not had a religious experience.
3. Some people don't believe that God exists.
4. Some people are confused about whether God exists.
5. Some people doubt that God exists.

These candidate facts avoid the problems mentioned above and are thus better suited to our inquiry. That is not to say that the differences between them do not matter. But each captures some plausible hiddenness fact that will not bias our investigation one way or the other.[16]

Now, in fact, 1-5 do not exhaust what we know about divine hiddenness. We know more than merely that 'it does not seem obvious to everyone that God exists'. And so theists and non-theists alike may have reason to consider a fact that better represents the totality of our evidence. Still, consideration of barebone facts is useful to make vivid some structural insights. Hiddenness Fact (1) does not bias our investigation, but since our actual evidence is richer than (1), we'll naturally be interested in the impact of a fact that more closely represents our total evidence with respect to hiddenness. (To take a similar situation, in discussions of the evidential impact of evil on theism, the fact that *someone had a headache on one occasion* would not be the most choice-worthy fact to make the central point of focus. Our knowledge of much graver evils, such as the Holocaust, is a better candidate. It is more representative of the evil we know of in the world, even though it does not include the totality of what we know about evil.)

Moving forward, I'll select one non-tendentious hiddenness fact and use it to model a hiddenness argument and demonstrate some structural insights. The general pattern of argument and the structural points could be advanced by selecting a different non-tendentious hiddenness fact. (I will leave it to readers to see whether nuances between candidate facts make a substantive difference.)

One might be dissatisfied with characterizations of hiddenness facts that take as central data about the prevalence of theistic belief or disbelief rather than facts about the amount of evidence that seems to be available for God. It may seem as though we've changed the subject and are no longer talking about the problem of divine hiddenness but instead the argument from common consent. But as we've seen, if we focus our discussion of hiddenness on claims such as, 'our evidence for theism is counterbalanced', we prejudge the answer to our initial question. Thus, while one might think that rather than focus on facts concerning theistic doxastic attitudes, we ought to limit discussion to facts about the evidence itself, for the reasons mentioned above the latter are not well-suited to our evaluation.

4.3 | Theistic Hiddenness Packages

Convinced theists, at this point, might wonder why theists should care if other people doubt that God exists (or if God is hidden from others). God is not hidden from them, so why should they worry about hiddenness? Of course, if we knew *why* people doubt that God exists, things may be different. Our hiddenenss facts do not say anything about why some people doubt that God exists. There are many possibilities, and these are additional things we might learn. For example, it is possible that everyone who doubts that God exists is neglecting an important subset of the evidence—that the evidence is so overwhelmingly obvious that the only way to doubt that God exists is to be extraordinarily lazy. Call this proposition LAZY.[17] If our total evidence included LAZY, this would make a difference to what our total evidence supports.[18]

There are facts other than LAZY which we might learn and which may be embedded in a larger story that attempts to explain why God would be hidden. Various candidates have been put forward. We might add, for example, that those who doubt that God exists also do not *want* God to exist. (Alternatively, there are facts we might learn which are less favorable to theism, such as that those who doubt that God exists are openminded and even hope that God exists.) Some of these claims are such that if we added one of them to our total evidence it would attenuate the

evidential impact of the hiddenness fact. Some would make our investigation tendentious. It's a further question exactly how things would proceed for each additional proposal.

Although things may look different if we add more to our total evidence, it is important to recognize that even if for all we know these extra claims *might* be true, as things stand, they are merely possibilities. (At least, that is the perspective I am adopting here.) We can hypothetically consider what impact they would have as a 'package'—and this may be a useful undertaking—but that is a different project than the one we are engaged in here, namely, of considering the evidential impact of hiddenness facts taken alone and against a background where it is unknown whether God exists.

It might be tempting to think that by simply introducing the possibility that LAZY is true, the argument from hiddenness can be blocked. That is, to think that if we can tell a story on which God exists and is hidden which *might* be true, this makes it such that hiddenness is not evidence against God. But while such a story is sufficient to block a 'logical' argument, it does not impede an evidential argument.[19] Hiddenness Facts can be evidence against God even once we have possible explanations for unbelief. (Just as, given natural assumptions, when you smile it is evidence that you are happy even though it is possible that you smile for some other reason which we can't rule out. The sheer possibility that *you are forcing a smile because you don't want us to realize that you are sad* doesn't prevent your smile from constituting evidence that you are happy.)

The same is true in a setting where LAZY is not merely possible, but probable conditional on God and hiddenness. Let's consider how things would proceed if we found out that LAZY is not only epistemically possible, but also the most plausible explanation. For the sake of illustration, let's imagine that we learn that LAZY is the *only* possible explanation of God and hiddenness. (That is, we learn that the probability of LAZY on a hidden God is 1.). Learning this alone will not change the evidential impact of hiddenness. If hiddenness is evidence against God before we learned that LAZY is the only possibility, hiddenness will be evidence against God after we learn this. Once again an analogy will help. Consider a situation where I observe you smile. Suppose that before I see you I know the following: you always smile when you are happy, when you are sad you force a smile 1/5th of the time, and you otherwise frown when sad. With this background, imagine that I then learn that when you are sad and smiling, it is always the case that you are forcing a smile because you don't want to talk about why you are sad. Even if I know that this is always the explanation for your smiling when sad, when I see you smile, it is nevertheless evidence for me that you are happy. If I already knew that you smile when sad 1/5th of the time, learning *why* you do so (if this is all I learn) doesn't change the evidential impact of seeing you smile.[20] Hereafter, I will consider the epistemic impact of learning a hiddenness fact in the absence of learning LAZY or any other story.

4.4 | Modeling the Argument

Let's now consider the evidential import of learning a hiddenness fact. To illustrate using a Bayesian model, I'll draw on the following broad categories which delineate ways we could discover the world to be with respect to doubt about God's existence. There's room for more fine-grained categories, and also for further argumentation concerning how to draw the lines between categories, but these rough divisions will suffice for our purposes here.

Few Doubt: Few people (less than 10%) doubt that God exists.
Many Doubt: More than a few, but not most, people (between 10–90%) doubt that God exists.
Most Doubt: Most people (more than 90%) doubt that God exists.

The hiddenness fact we'll focus on in the remainder of the paper is *Many Doubt*. For our purposes here, doubt that God exists entails that one does not believe that God exists, not merely that one is uncertain that God exists. The kind of doubt under consideration is not merely a momentary doubt but a relatively stable doubt. That is, it is doubt the subject isn't easily moved out of. Hiddenness would be much less interesting if doubt were a temporary thing one could easily shake.

(Additionally, although I'm using numbers for the purpose of illustration, I'm not making judgments about fine-grained options within each category. The claims in this paper are neutral about whether, for example, conditional on God's existence, it's more likely that 1% doubt or 8% doubt. My aim in selecting these categories is to use numbers that are illustrative and non-tendentious.[21])

Suppose that we learn *Many Doubt*. The question we need to ask is: *what is this evidence for?* The short answer is: it depends. There are various options for how one's evidential situation might look before learning *Many Doubt*. We'll consider a few. Note that as long as the various comparative claims are plausible—of the form *x is a lot more likely on p than on not*-p—the insights do not depend on knowing exact probabilities. (This is a general feature of Bayesian models. Often we use numbers to illustrate but the specific values generally don't matter; what we're typically interested in are comparative claims.)

Let's start with the intuitive idea that if God exists, it would be extremely surprising to discover that most people doubt that God exists. It is highly unlikely conditional on *God exists*, that *Most Doubt* would be true. (Recall that the kind of God we have in mind is one that cares that we believe that God exists.) It would also be somewhat surprising to discover that *Many Doubt* is true, conditional on God. I suspect that many people share this thought, as evidenced by how often people grapple with questions such as, 'why isn't God more obvious?' and 'why doesn't God show himself plainly?' It strikes me as at least *prima facie* reasonable to think that *Many Doubt* is not likely given God. What is most likely is that everyone or nearly everyone believes that God exists—few doubt that God exists. These judgments about the likelihoods are depicted on the left side of the figure below.

Of course, as the backdoor example demonstrated, the fact that *Many Doubt* is unexpected or surprising conditional on *God exists* is not enough for learning *Many Doubt* to secure a successful hiddenness argument. That is, it isn't enough to make the discovery of *Many Doubt* evidence against *God exists*. It must also be the case that *Many Doubt* is *more* surprising on God than it is on not-God.

In order to conclude that *Many Doubt* is evidence against *God exists*, we need to consider the probability of *Many Doubt* given *God does not exist*. Let's look now at the following figure (Figure 1):
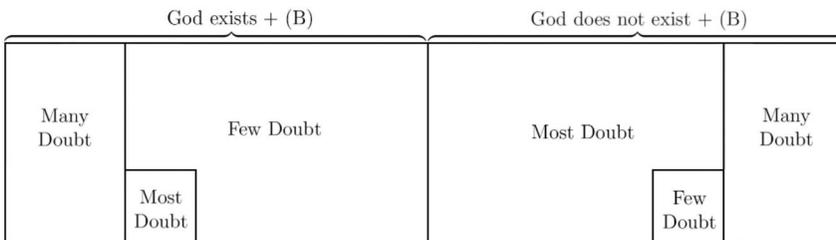

FIGURE 1   Probability space before learning *Many Doubt*. (Not to scale.)

The right side of the probability space represents the idea that conditional on *God does not exist* what is most expected is that most people doubt that God exists. *Many Doubt* and *Few Doubt* are unexpected. I think this is plausible. It seems likely given *God does not exist* that most people would be confident that God does not exist. This point is especially vivid when we recall that the background evidence we are considering includes that there is evil. Given the vast amount and kinds of evil in the world, one would expect more atheists if atheism is true. It seems very plausible that a world where God does not exist and with the kinds and amounts of suffering that occur would be a world where there is widespread doubt about the existence of God. (Note also that the background also includes that there are people, so I am not exploiting fine-tuning when I say that the probability of *Many Doubt and Few Doubt* is low on not-God.)

If we had expectations like the ones depicted above, and then learned *Many Doubt*, the likelihood of God and not-God would remain the same. Conditional on *God does not exist*, we would expect more doubt and conditional on *God exists*, we would expect less doubt. *Many Doubt* is neither evidence for nor against theism if *Many Doubt* is equally unexpected on each. In that case, we would not have a successful argument from divine hiddenness.

Of course, things could be different. If instead our expectations were such that the Pr (*Many Doubt* | not-God) is greater than the Pr (*Many Doubt* | God), then learning *Many Doubt* would be evidence against theism. Therefore, if *Many Doubt* is fairly surprising given God (which I'm granting) what we crucially need to know to complete the argument is how surprising *Many Doubt* is on not-God. (As a reminder, even if some hiddenness fact is evidence for not-God that alone does not tell us where we end up—to determine this we need to take into account the prior probabilities.)

Similarly, if *Many Doubt* is less surprising given God than given not-God, then learning *Many Doubt* is evidence *for* God. It's worth noting that this thought is far from crazy. As long as awareness of horrendous evil makes it extremely unlikely that more than 10% of people would believe *God exists*, conditional on not-God, then one can construct an argument that *Many Doubt* is evidence for God. In this way, there's the possibility of an argument *for* God that is based on God's non-hiddenness.

The point I want to emphasize is this: in order to make progress formulating an argument from divine hiddenness we cannot neglect the division of the probability space on the right side of the bar. Of course, determining the probability of *Many Doubt* (or some other hiddenness fact) on not-God is a complicated matter. I don't have space to adequately address the topic here.[22] But discussion of this likelihood and the comparative likelihood has been overwhelmingly neglected. Too often a jump is made from 'we wouldn't expect God to be hidden' to 'hiddenness is evidence against God.' This inference cannot be made without further argumentation.[23] Given how little discussion there is in the literature of the missing premise—the likelihood of the relevant hiddenness fact on not-god—it would be premature to conclude that the hiddenness argument is successful.

5 | FURTHER COMPLICATIONS

5.1 | Variations

Thus far I have advanced a hiddenness argument which depends not only on the comparative likelihoods of some hiddenness fact conditional on God and on not-God, but also on some sociological observations about the prevalence of doubt. Of course, *Many Doubt* is consistent with particular people having more evidence such that their total evidence puts them in a position to know (or reasonably believe) that *God exists*. Up to this point in the paper, my aim has been to

describe what needs to be in place to formulate an evidential version of a hiddenness argument. In the next section, I'll consider how the argument would look if we drop the simplifying assumption of God or not-God. But first, it is instructive to see how the version of the argument advanced here compares with a consistency version of the argument, like the one that dominates discussions in current literature.

It is useful to see how a consistency version would look using a Bayesian model. The following is a depiction of one version of a consistency argument (Figure 2):
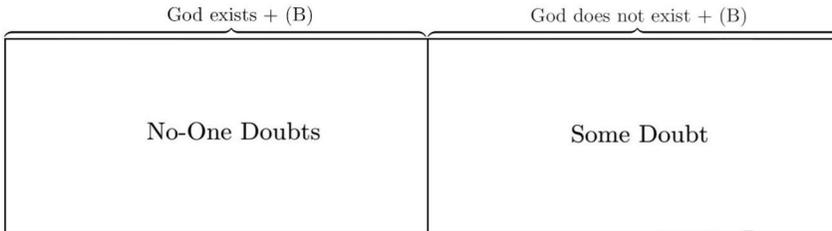
FIGURE 2   Model of a Consistency Argument

On this way of thinking, conditional on *God exists* there is only one way things can be: no one doubts that God exists. And if there is no likelihood that even some people doubt, given God, then learning some people doubt is *conclusive* evidence that God does not exist.

It's worth emphasizing just how powerful a consistency argument can be and what's required initially for the success of such an argument. Imagine someone who starts off with a very strong epistemic position for God—such that her evidence makes it highly likely that God exists. If it is certain on her evidence that God's existence is incompatible with anyone doubting that God exists, then when she learns that a single person doubts that God exists, that fact will be conclusive evidence for her that God does not exist. For this line of reasoning to work it must be impossible (there must be zero epistemic chance) given God that *any* story that involves someone doubting is true. To see what's going on it will help to consider a variation of the horse race case. Suppose it is certain that if Horse A wins, *everyone* will say that Horse A won. And suppose that when you ask people exiting the race to tell you who won, 19 people report that Horse A won and 1 person reports that Horse B won. If your evidence makes it certain that everyone will say that Horse A won, conditional on Horse A winning, then one person saying Horse B won is conclusive evidence that Horse B won, despite that 19 out of 20 said that Horse A won.

This places significant pressure on it being certain that there is only one way the testimony would look if A won. Ordinarily, it would seem implausible that, conditional on A winning, the probability is 1 that *everyone* says that A won. Typically, there are all sorts of live possibilities that involve one person misreporting. Even when the possibility that someone is mistaken is excluded, there is the possibility of people lying or trying to deceive. Of course, it is *possible* that the likelihood of the evidence being a particular way is 1, it is just often implausible. And with respect to God, it seems especially implausible that we would be in a position to be certain of exactly how things would look.[24]

It is relatively easy for the probability of some story where God exists and is hidden to be non-zero. The story doesn't have to be plausible for it to frustrate a consistency argument, it merely needs to be *epistemically possible*. With respect to God and hiddenness, there are many such stories in the literature. It's one thing to argue that these stories aren't compelling; it's another to claim they all have probability zero. But all that's needed to avoid the success of a consistency argument is that one of the stories has non-zero probability. It seems overwhelmingly reasonable to concede

that one of these stories is epistemically possible. What's more, we are considering the impact of hiddenness against a set of background that includes much of what we have learned about evil. It seems especially implausible to maintain that evil is not conclusive evidence against God, but that hiddenness is conclusive evidence against God. Surely it's implausible to hold that there is a non-zero probability of evil on God, but zero probability that some people don't believe God exists. But this is what the advocate of a consistency version of a hiddenness argument that proceeds along these lines must maintain.

5.2 | Caring or Not-caring God

Let's now explore how the argument from hiddenness might be formulated if we drop the simplifying assumption we set earlier of God or not-God and instead introduce distinctions between different ways God could be.[25] I'll continue to focus discussion on a God that has a characteristic central to these debates—that is, a God that wants us to believe that God exists.[26] I'll refer to a God with this trait as a Caring God. By contrast, a not-Caring God is any God for whom Caring is false. We'll hold fixed the other divine characteristics (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) that we assumed earlier, [27] and 'not-God' will continue to indicate that no divine being of any kind exists.

Let's first look at whether hiddenness facts, continuing to use *Many Doubt* as our paradigmatic fact, are evidence for or against a Caring God. Using the figure from section 4.4, we'll modify it by dividing the God space equally between a Caring God and not-Caring God (again as a simplification—clearly arguments can be made for different starting points). Since a Caring God wants us to believe that *God exists*, we most strongly expect *Few Doubt* to be true conditional on Caring God, and *Many Doubt* is somewhat surprising. By contrast, *Many Doubt* is not as surprising on not-Caring God. Since *Many Doubt* is more likely on not-Caring God than on Caring God, learning *Many Doubt* will be evidence against Caring God and *for* not-Caring God.

Of course, *Many Doubt* might be good news for God, even while it's bad news for Caring God. Again, it will depend on how likely *Many Doubt* is given not-God. Though in this case, even if *Many Doubt* were just as likely on not-God as it is on God, *Many Doubt* would still be evidence against Caring God. (Without adding to our total evidence, it's hard to see how to avoid this result given the idea that a caring God has an interest in theistic belief.)

Once again, the result does not follow if one's evidence makes it certain that a Caring God exists. *Many Doubt* will not be evidence against Caring God for a person in this evidential situation. Nevertheless, one whose evidence makes it certain that a Caring God exists could find it surprising that *Many Doubt* is true. A natural response to discovering *Many Doubt* for someone in this position is to look for an explanation. It is important to emphasize the difference in the two projects here. One project starts from a position of ignorance and investigates the evidential significance of divine hiddenness for the probability that a Caring God exists. The second begins from a perspective of certainty that a Caring God exists and upon learning a hiddenness fact, looks for an explanation for why God is hidden. I've here been considering the former perspective in order to shed light on the evidential question.

6 | CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I want to emphasize that what I have argued here does not imply that the following are not important questions: *Why isn't God's existence more obvious? Why isn't religious experience more prevalent?* These are good questions and questions that drive at the heart of the

hiddenness problem. Consider that when my sister comes in the back door rather than the front door, I will likely want to ask her why she didn't come in the front door as I expected. I will naturally be puzzled to see her come in the back door, and look for an explanation. But *why* she came in the back is a separate issue from the question of whether her coming in the back door is evidence for or against the thesis that she came. Even in the absence of an explanation for why she came in the back door, I may have awesome evidence that she came. I suggest we need to keep the '*why*' question and the evidential question distinct in this respect.[28]

What is the cost for theists, if what I've said here is correct? I do not think it is devastating. Just as evil can be evidence against theism, hiddenness facts can be evidence against certain versions of theism; and theists should be willing to accept this result. Remember that the fact that some facts are evidence against theism does not imply that one's total evidence favors not-God. We have been considering the evidential impact of hiddenness facts alone against a set of background evidence on which God's existence is uncertain. If one's total evidence strongly favors theism, then despite hiddenness, one is reasonable to be a theist. If a theist is uncertain that God exists, then adding hiddenness facts to one's evidence can move the probability of God down a bit. Since determining what our total evidence supports is often a complicated matter, it is useful to isolate bits of evidence and investigate the import of particular pieces. One result for theists may be that we learn how things would look if we had different or less evidence than we in fact have.

It is difficult to measure the strength of an argument in the abstract. I have laid out a blueprint for an argument from divine hiddenness; the strength of the argument will depend on how the details are filled in. Formulating a hiddenness argument requires investigation of the hiddenness facts and also requires judgments concerning the relevant likelihoods. While it is surprising that God, if God exists, would be hidden, to determine the strength of the evidence we need to take into account the conditional probability of hiddenness on not-God. Given some natural assumptions, the hiddenness facts I've been exploring are evidence against a version of theism that postulates a Caring God. The bearing on theism itself is more difficult to determine, though I have here suggested that is possible the hiddenness facts we've considered have no bearing on theism itself or even could be evidence for theism.

ENDNOTES

[1] Moreover, I have in mind a God that cares that we rationally believe he exists. I will bracket, thus, options that would result in irrational or non-rational belief, such as God zapping us with theistic belief.

[2] A related question concerns the time-indexing of the target belief. Does God care that we have the target belief at all times or just at some point? (And, if we consider the possibility that there is an afterlife, does God care that we believe at some point before we die or would belief after death suffice?) How we think about the time-indexing makes a significant difference to the argument. If God simply cares that humans *at some point* in their lives are confident that he exists, then what we can reasonably expect is that at some point we'll be in a position to know, rationally believe, etc. Though important, I'm going to bracket this choice point for this paper.

[3] In his early work, Schellenberg focused on facts concerning the existence of non-resistant nonbelief. In more recent work, Schellenberg shifts to language of 'openness to relationship'. As all of these versions of the argument

involve an inconsistency between a loving God and some purported hiddenness fact, the differences between the older and newer versions will not matter for our purposes here.

[4] These quotations are from Schellenberg (1993) pp. 4, 2, and 212, respectively.

[5] Of course, typically the total evidence you receive will be fine-grained and thus your total evidence will be unexpected. While I expect my sister to come in the front door, I don't expect that she'll come in the front door wearing a yellow and blue striped shirt and jeans with her hair in a ponytail. The evidence of arriving through the front door *in that particular way* is unexpected.

[6] Note that colloquial uses of 'expect' and 'expected' are ambiguous between various uses and often require context to interpret.

[7] Here I am making a few simplifying assumptions. I'm setting aside issues of defeat and forgetting; since on standard models once an agent has p as evidence, p is always part of her evidence. I am also assuming that each consistent proposition has non-zero probability.

[8] This is in line with a point made by M. Adams (1990) when she suggests that we distinguish types of evil; her work draws considerable attention to one particular type, horrendous evil. Tooley (1991) suggests that a more plausible evidential argument is advanced using concrete facts about the kinds and amounts of evil in the world, rather than the sheer fact that evil exists.

[9] Plantinga. (2006) 'Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments.'

[10] A further suggestive, though far from definitive, consideration is that hiddenness causes distress to some and induces doubt in others. Those who think divine hiddenness makes no evidential contribution are committed to the view that those who, having already learned about all sorts of evil, come to doubt that God exists on account of hiddenness are being irrational. But it's not at all bizarre to think that having observed evil in the world, finding out that God is hidden would have an evidential impact. Even supposing that when one learns about evil the likelihood that God exists is lowered, after learning about hiddenness, the likelihood is arguably even lower. This strikes me as a very natural thought and one which explains why hiddenness induces doubt for some people.

[11] Of course, if one became certain that God doesn't exist after learning there is evil in the world, then hiddenness facts won't do further work; I am here assuming that the evidence of evil is not definitive evidence against God but rather leaves God's existence an open question.

[12] See also Van Inwagen (2002), who argues that the problems are distinct by offering a thought experiment where one imagines a world lacking evil, but where God is nevertheless hidden.

[13] Thanks to John Hawthorne for suggesting I consider this line of thought.

[14] We can suppose the officials have a dead heat protocol to ensure there is a winner.

[15] I am adopting a particular Bayesian framework, for the sake of illustration; the general points I advance do not crucially depend on these foundational details.

[16] Other options for relevant hiddenness facts include data about the geographical distribution of evidence for God. See Maitzen (2006) and Baker-Hytch (2016) for discussion.

[17] Discussions of divine hiddenness generally put forward only two broad types of options for responding to the problem of non-belief: either it's God's fault for not providing evidence or it's the fault of the person who does not believe in God (because they ignore evidence). Presenting the options as a dichotomy in this way places significant pressure on the theist to affirm some package that adds LAZY or some other explanation that places the blame on the doubters. In a previous paper (2017), I suggest that theists need not rush to save God from blame by affirming LAZY (or something in the near vicinity). Instead, we might draw attention to further options than the proposed dichotomy. For example, the possibility that a third party may be responsible for the introduction of defeating evidence.

[18] Though having a compelling explanation for divine hiddenness doesn't guarantee that hiddenness is not evidence against God. Consider the following situation where theists have a ready explanation for hiddenness at hand. Suppose the evidence for God (call this the pre-evidence)is such that only 1% of people with the right education and brute intellect understand it. In this case it would be easy for the enlightened 1% to explain why everyone else fails to believe in God—the evidence for God is unintelligible to everyone but the enlightened. Though the pre-evidence in fact makes it likely that God exists, it would still be pretty surprising to the 1% to discover that this is how God arranged matters. Once they learn that only 1% understand the pre-evidence, this fact would surely be an indication to the 1% that God doesn't really care whether all human beings believe that God exists. On the assumption that the 1% are confident, but not certain, that God exists, discovering that only

they understand the pre-evidence would make it less likely that there exists a God that cares that humans believe that God exists.

[19] For further discussion of this idea, see Anderson & Russell (*forthcoming*).

[20] What is needed for your smiling to fail to be evidence that you are happy is for your smiling to be just as likely when you are sad as when you are happy (or for it to be *more* likely when you are sad). If I learned that you smile all the time—whether happy or sad—this would prevent your smile from constituting evidence that you are happy.

[21] Sociologists face various challenges in trying to collect data concerning the prevalence of theistic belief and doubt worldwide (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013). For recent data, however incomplete, see Smith (2012).

[22] This paper does not consider the import of hiddenness facts on a background that includes the deliverances of the cognitive science of religion (CSR). That's not because CSR is irrelevant: against a background that includes CSR (call this B+) it may be that ˆMany Doubt is less surprising on not-God than it is considered against B. Discussion of the claims of CSR lead us into contentious territory that can't be thoroughly addressed in this paper. See Baker & Zimmerman (2019), Goldman (2019), and Schloss & Murray (2009) for further discussion.

[23] Again, an exception to this is if one thought, as it seems Schellenberg does, that the concept of a loving God *entails* that God would ensure theistic belief (for some set of people—those open to belief, for instance). I don't find a consistency version of the argument promising, but will not discuss it here.

[24] This thought is in line with Mike Rea's suggestion that in light of reasons to think that God is transcendent, we ought not be fully confident in our expectations regarding hiddenness or the lack thereof.

[25] We are considering epistemic possibilities, not metaphysical.

[26] To clarify, we are considering a God that wants us to believe simply that God exists, not specifically that a Caring God exists.

[27] Naturally there may be concerns about divine simplicity and how the characteristic of 'caring' relates to other attributes. I am simplifying in order to demonstrate the structure of the reasoning, and so will set these concerns aside.

[28] In these very simple cases, we can easily see that the questions are distinct and why it is important to separate them. I don't intend to suggest, though, that the questions never have any bearing on one another.

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