

**Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds. *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. x+295 pp. \$99.99 (hbk).**

Travis Dumsday  
Concordia University of Edmonton

This is the first anthology on divine hiddenness to appear since 2002.<sup>1</sup> A great deal has happened in the debate since then, and it is safe to say that among arguments for atheism the problem of divine hiddenness is today second only to the problem of evil in the attention it receives from theologians and philosophers of religion. Contributors to this collection of fifteen original essays approach hiddenness from a variety of perspectives, though most are written by theists.

In a helpful opening chapter (1-10) Green and Stump give an overview of the hiddenness debate and then a concise introduction to each of the individual essays. The first such contribution is J.L. Schellenberg's "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy" (13-32). For more than twenty years Schellenberg has been the leading figure in the hiddenness debate, and while he spends most of this essay laying out a careful formulation of the argument and clearing up some misinterpretations, he also makes some important points about the way it is sometimes framed within philosophy of religion. He rightly notes that the focus of the discipline has been skewed by our current cultural moment in western academia, according to which the two live options are theism on the one hand and metaphysical naturalism on the other. But while the hiddenness argument is certainly an argument for atheism, it is not *ipso facto* an argument for metaphysical naturalism. One can reject the existence of the Judeo-Christian God without thereby thinking that reality is exhausted by the physical. There are various atheistic but *non*-naturalist options, options which tend to receive little attention in contemporary philosophy of religion. As Schellenberg puts it, "acceptance of atheism does not in any way imply (as those suppose who erroneously accept the 'theism or naturalism' disjunction) that we are ruling out the truth of religious claims. Indeed, we are opening the door to religion more widely than has ever been done before!" (31). This insight, which he develops at greater length elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> is profoundly significant. In my opinion Christian philosophers of religion ought to be particularly worried about the sort of tunnel vision he is pointing to. We are slowly winning the battle against metaphysical naturalism, though our gains here will take a long time to percolate through academia (let alone the broader

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See his *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

culture). But whenever the full weight of the case against naturalism finally sinks in, this will hardly constitute an automatic victory for theism. Rather it will spark a renaissance of interest in non-theistic non-naturalisms: everything from Jainism and Taoism to neo-Platonism and western esotericism<sup>3</sup> to assorted theories arising from within parapsychology and paranormal research – basically any and every form of non-theistic non-naturalism that we’ve been ignoring for decades.<sup>4</sup> Much of this neglect is of course not our fault, or not *solely* our fault; Christian philosophers of religion certainly cannot be blamed for the marginalization of eastern philosophy in the contemporary philosophy scene. We don’t have that much professional clout.<sup>5</sup> Still, the day is approaching when our main competition will no longer come from metaphysical naturalism but from an array of non-naturalisms with which we are mostly unprepared to engage in any serious way. The work of ‘New Atheist’ author Sam Harris is something of a harbinger here. While a committed atheist, Harris is (arguably) not a committed naturalist, and expresses sympathetic interest both in parapsychology and Buddhism. These expressions have so far mostly confounded his audiences (both religious opponents and secular fans), but that is because these audiences are stuck in the myopic ‘atheism or naturalism or bust’ disjunction Schellenberg convincingly critiques.

The second essay is Meghan Sullivan’s “The Semantic Problem of Hiddenness” (35-52). Her concern is not with hiddenness as an argument for atheism, but instead with the problem of how the term ‘God’ could possibly succeed in referring to the actual divine being. Two of the standard theories of reference in the philosophy of language seem not to work here. ‘Direct baptism’, wherein you pick out an item in your perceptual field and name it, may not work as a method for referring to God because God is seemingly not an item of perception, at least not for everyone. Definite description is problematic for multiple reasons (e.g., young children in a Sunday school class can refer successfully to God without understanding much about the divine attributes). The best option seems to be a Kripkean causal-historical account, according to which “a name word ‘n’ refers to an object o in the mouth of speaker S because (i) S intends to defer to whatever the referent of the word is for some other speaker (or speakers) and (ii) S stands in a causal chain of reference by deference that terminates with either a direct baptism of o or a successful definite description of o” (42). But that account also faces serious criticisms when employed in a religious setting. Grant for the sake of argument that some prophets and sages had perceptions of God (on some adequate understanding of ‘perception’ in this context) and that the

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<sup>3</sup> Many versions of neo-Platonism are themselves theistic, as are some schools of thought within the western esoteric tradition. But some aren’t.

<sup>4</sup> That is of course a generalization admitting of exceptions. See e.g. Keith Yandell’s treatment of certain eastern religious concepts in *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998). Christian theologians have of course done much valuable work on eastern religions; however, most such work is oriented more towards mutual understanding and ecumenical engagement than rigorous and critical evaluation of doctrine.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Marginalization’ is not too strong a term; good luck getting a job if your dissertation was on Jaina substance ontology or Tibetan Buddhist epistemology or Georgian neo-Platonism etc. Good luck even finding a dissertation supervisor or relevant language instruction.

chain of reference finds an origin point there; nevertheless the span of time between us and (for instance) Moses is substantial and seems to leave a good deal of room for the chain of reference to be broken or corrupted in various ways. Sullivan explores and critiques several possible defences of the causal-historical account of theological language before presenting her own *semantic inspiration* response: “But the Christian solution to this threat is a supposition that even though fallible human agents are involved at every step in transmitting the revelation, the Holy Spirit works in faith communities to prevent the distortion” (49). I suspect this will be a particularly appealing solution to those of us with robust conceptions of ecclesiastical authority.

Helen De Cruz, in “Divine Hiddenness and the Cognitive Science of Religion” (53-68), argues that recent developments in the cognitive science of religion (CSR) shed light on hiddenness. After a review of some relevant empirical findings, she concludes that there is a natural human tendency to believe in supernatural entities, though no innate tendency to believe specifically in God. She then turns the tables and looks at CSR findings about the origins of atheism, arguing that both culture and individual psychology can influence a person’s non-belief (e.g., there is a positive correlation between atheism and autistic spectrum disorders). These findings undercut certain replies to the hiddenness argument that focus on the alleged culpability of all unbelief, insofar as innate cognitive features for some seem to lead, blamelessly, to a greater tendency toward unbelief. On the other hand, she argues that CSR lends support to other replies, including the idea that the open presence of a just and potentially punitive deity would impede human free choice. This is in line with cross-cultural empirical research indicating that widespread belief in hell is correlated with lower crime rates, whereas widespread belief in heaven (but not hell) is correlated with higher crime rates. As such, unless God could reveal His existence unambiguously without at the same time revealing anything about the prospects for postmortem punishment, it would seem to follow that our ability freely to choose to do evil could be inhibited.

She also examines findings concerning the psychology of parent / child attachment, and argues that cross-cultural differences in parenting practices (esp. the nature and degree of parent / infant interaction) may undercut some of the parental analogies that Schellenberg employs in support of certain premises of the hiddenness argument. (E.g., Schellenberg has argued that just as a loving parent would want an open relationship with her child – ‘open’ in the minimalist sense that both parties are consciously aware of one another’s presence – and certainly would not leave the child in ignorance of her existence, neither would God leave the nonresistant nonbeliever in ignorance of the divine reality.) De Cruz writes:

It is important to realize that this ideal of parenthood described in terms of duties toward one’s child is a relatively recent, Western concept. For instance, the Beng, a West African rain forest culture where alloparenting is the norm, find a strong loving attachment between mother and infant rather regrettable, as the mother cannot rely on allocare and is thus prevented from doing her other work....These considerations...cast doubt on some assumptions about divine love that underlie Schellenberg’s argument from divine

hiddenness: the attachment literature reveals that there is cross-cultural variability in the way infant-parent attachments are evaluated. The Western ideal of the responsive and sensitive parent, on which Schellenberg relies, predicts that God would always want a two-way responsive relationship with creatures who are capable of such a relationship. However, even if parental analogies hold, the theist may argue that there is no reason to expect God to conform to a recent Western model of attachment, and God might desire a different kind of relationship with some of his creatures (63-5).

This is an original and interesting reply, but ultimately unconvincing. Parents are obligated to love their children and seek where possible to have open reciprocal relationships with them. Every culture has been morally corrupted in important but highly variable ways, and no doubt certain cultures have been corrupted in such a way that this particular obligation is not recognized by them. That should not undercut our belief in the obligation, and if the theist must resort to questioning it when replying to the hiddenness argument, then score one for the atheist.

Paul Moser's "Divine Hiddenness and Self-Sacrifice" (71-88) makes the case that God's nature as self-sacrificial love implies that He will reveal Himself to us only in ways congruent with that nature, which further implies that this revelation will not occur through impersonal philosophical argument nor flashy worldwide miracles; it also implies that the individual receiving this revelation may need a certain level of moral preparedness as a precondition. Additionally, when one acts in a self-sacrificial manner one thereby joins in God's redemptive activity and so engages with Him in cooperative relationship, even if one is not consciously aware of doing so. These points are worth making, but they are of limited utility in undermining the argument from hiddenness; at any rate Schellenberg has replied to them in detail in multiple past publications (in my opinion effectively), and it would have been interesting to see some explicit engagement with those replies. As it stands, I'm not sure this chapter advances the discussion beyond Moser's past work on the topic.

Evan Fales' chapter, "Journeying in Perplexity" (89-105), is split between a critique of that past work on hiddenness by Moser, and a critique of Eleonore Stump's recent theodicy.<sup>6</sup> In the former section Fales focuses in particular on the notions of *authoritative evidence* and of *self-authentication* employed by Moser, arguing that both suffer from crucial ambiguities. In the latter he takes up Stump's detailed exegesis of the book of Job and argues that there are plausible alternate readings of the story that fail to cohere with the theodicy Stump finds embedded in the text. To convey properly the details of their conflicting readings would require a proper summary both of Stump's work and of Fales' reply, which I lack the space for here. Suffice it to say that Stump's is the most important book written on the problem of evil in the past decade, and that Fales' critical engagement with it here is among the better published responses.

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<sup>6</sup> *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

In “No-Fault Atheism” (109-25) John Greco employs some tools of recent analytic epistemology, specifically the epistemology of personal knowledge, to reply to the hiddenness argument. The core idea is that just as people can properly choose whether and how to disclose themselves to others in ordinary personal relationships, so can God, and He properly opts not to disclose Himself to some people at some times: “It is consistent with God’s nature that, as other persons typically do, God has good reasons for selective self-disclosure” (115). As such, God’s reality is consistent with the reality of atheism among nonresistant nonbelievers. The obvious reply is that God is relevantly different from us, and His self-disclosure relevantly different, insofar as God is supposedly perfectly loving and insofar as a good relationship with God is supposedly necessary for our ultimate well-being. (Normally I might think myself morally at liberty to give a friendly wave to the clerk at my deli or not. But if I knew that the ultimate happiness of the clerk was somehow dependent upon my being friendly to him, and if I knew that being friendly to him would cost me basically nothing, surely the friendly wave would become obligatory – or, even if not obligatory, surely this state of affairs would imply that I *would* give the friendly wave if I were not a total jerk.) Greco is aware of this criticism:

But now we are back in a familiar dialectic – one that we know well from the Problem of Suffering. Thus we can a) posit possible greater goods to explain God’s selective disclosure, or b) plead skepticism about God’s intentions, what God would choose etc....And of course, the usual responses to these responses are also available. Plausibly, this will play out, for better or worse, just as it does in the Problem of Suffering. I like the chances here. That is, it seems to me that the usual responses to the Problem of Suffering are good ones, and that they work equally well in the present context (115-6).

Schellenberg has argued repeatedly (and in my opinion effectively) that there are unique aspects to the hiddenness problem such that these sorts of reply, whatever their success or failure in the context of theodicy, cannot effectively be carried over to the hiddenness debate (at least not without significant reworking). To his credit, Greco is aware of Schellenberg’s view on this matter; partway through the passage just cited, Greco footnotes the following: “It is important to note that Schellenberg argues otherwise. See Schellenberg (2010). Clearly, it is beyond the scope of this paper (not to mention my abilities) to resolve all the relevant issues here” (116). This is admirably modest, but as a reader I found it frustrating. One is not obligated to resolve *all* the relevant issues, but where the author under critique has argued repeatedly and explicitly that the points one is making are demonstrably inapplicable to the argument under discussion, something more needs to be said if the dialogue is to progress.

One of the earliest (and still among the most interesting) published exchanges between Schellenberg and a critic occurred between him and Daniel Howard-

Snyder.<sup>7</sup> The latter's contribution to the present anthology is titled "Divine Openness and Creaturely Nonresistant Nonbelief" (126-38), and it is basically an extension of that prior discussion. I won't attempt to summarize the details, but Howard-Snyder makes some solid additional moves here in support of his central claim that there are cases in which nonresistant nonbelief can be justifiably permitted by God (temporarily) for the sake of the moral progress of the nonbeliever and for the improved moral status of the relationship itself.

In "Hiddenness and the Epistemology of Attachment" (139-54) Adam Green employs the psychology of attachment (also touched on by De Cruz) to distinguish between two levels of 'shared attention'. This is a label applied "when one is engaged in an act of attending to something and in doing so one is coordinating with another on what both are attending to. In dyadic shared attention, the 'something' to which the parties attend is each other, as when lovers stare into each other's eyes. In triadic shared attention, the center of attention is something other than each other but the feel of the experience includes its jointness, such as when two people watch a sunset together" (143). Infants begin engaging with the world in dyadic fashion (e.g., looking at the mother who looks back), and gradually shift into triadic shared attention (e.g. playing with a toy, a third object to which both the infant and the mother are directed). Religious experiences can be viewed using the same model, and understood as coming in corresponding degree of profundity:

A first-level religious experience would correspond to identifying the divine as a something much like the newborn might pick out persons as a special kind of object in the environment. A second-level religious experience would involve gaining some sense of how to think about what this thing one experiences is doing....Once shallow dyadic interaction is secured, progress in understanding God will track a history of interaction....A fifth level would involve moving beyond a focus on only objects tied to the narrow interests of the human person to encompass shared attention to items of wider concern to oneself and God and to common projects that involve both kinds of objects (145).

The idea then is that genuine religious experience needn't involve something dramatic like religious ecstasy or a vision of Saint Michael, which might in fact be viewed as a lower form of religious experience (the dyadic sort between infant and parent). A higher experience might be subtler and focused more on items in the world, for instance shared objects of mutual love like widows and orphans. Consequently, we might learn to see the divine in ordinary experience, and see more dramatic religious experiences as on a continuum with ordinary experience rather than as members of a separate category of experience. In fact, patterns of religious experience may begin in the subtler mode, and progress to the more explicit only if the individual is rightly attuned, able and willing to pick up on the subtle divine cues.

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), 433-53; J.L. Schellenberg, "Response to Howard-Snyder," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), 455-62.

This is an interesting way of framing religious experience, and warrants further discussion and development in its own right. I am less sure of its utility as part of a response to the hiddenness problem. The atheist who is wholly unaware of God's reality or even of the live possibility of a God (e.g., an atheist teenager raised in the Soviet system) is unlikely to know how to make herself open to the kinds of subtle divine attunement discussed by Green. And the phenomenology remains somewhat unclear to me – is there any way for the person reflexively to analyze when she is in a state of triadic shared attention with God? By contrast, a dramatic religious experience (mystic ecstasy / near-death experience / vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary etc.), is hardly something that can be *missed* by the experiencer at the time. Arguably such an experience makes up in vividness what it (allegedly) lacks in profundity. Moreover, the normative worry stands: even assuming the typical superiority of subtle triadic shared attention, wouldn't a truly loving God set aside the usual subtleties and let this benighted Soviet teen know that He is there and loves her?

Chapters 9-13 of the anthology (authored by Jon McGinnis, Jerome Gellman, Nick Trakakis, Michael Rea, and Sarah Coakley respectively), all explore a roughly similar point, though they approach it very differently: the hiddenness argument fails because in its talk of 'reciprocal relationship' and 'personal love' it erroneously presumes an anthropomorphized view of the deity. God is not really like your parent or neighbour, He is rather the Wholly Transcendent Other with whom there is no possibility of literal direct personal engagement. Coakley for instance writes: "In other words, the primary reason for 'darkness' is the intrinsic ontological 'otherness' and ineffability of the divine...the One of whom we can only, strictly speaking, say what he is not" (238). The hiddenness argument fails because it demands something of God that God cannot provide. For Coakley, there may be ways of (eventually) apprehending God, in a way, via ascetic and mystical practices of the sort developed by John of the Cross, but the mode and manner of divine engagement presupposed in the hiddenness argument are theologically problematic.

Rea's development of the point is a bit different insofar as he does not rule out the *possibility* of God having a literal reciprocal loving relationship with us; however, Rea still argues that for God to engage in such relationship is not demanded by His nature, and that He may properly choose to engage with us in different ways suitable to His transcendence. Moreover, God may love us in a way appropriate to Himself, a way that is not equivalent to human love (parental love for instance), and we cannot presume to have a fully adequate understanding of the nature of divine love on the basis of mere human analogies – certainly not sufficiently adequate to conclude on their basis that God mustn't exist.

Though very much worth reading, these five essays suffer from a lack of engagement with prior published work on the topic by theologian Rolfe King.<sup>8</sup> King has considered in exhaustive detail, and with great theological and philosophical sophistication, the various ways in which the nature of God might place unavoidable

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<sup>8</sup> Rolfe King, *Obstacles to Revelation: God and the Reorientation of Human Reason* (London: Continuum, 2008); "Divine Self-Testimony and the Knowledge of God," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013), 279-95.

limits on His ability to reveal Himself in a rationally indubitable fashion to us. He has also considered how the notion of such limits coheres with orthodox conceptions of both divine omnipotence and divine personality. King's work is valuable for anyone thinking through the problem of divine hiddenness, but it is positively indispensable for anyone wishing to explore the present strategy of reply.

The fourteenth essay is Yujin Nagasawa's "Silence, Evil, and Shusaku Endo" (246-59). His concern is with what he terms the 'problem of divine absence.' This is the problem of why God refrains from revealing Himself to devout believers when those devout believers are experiencing horrendous suffering. He develops the problem vividly by reference to Endo's novel *Silence*, which is about the brutal persecution of Christian converts in seventeenth-century Japan. Nagasawa argues convincingly that this problem is importantly distinct from the problem of divine hiddenness formulated by Schellenberg, and in need of separate treatment. While not seeking here a thoroughgoing intellectual solution, Nagasawa presents some interesting ideas regarding the role of *hope* in understanding how believers might rationally reconcile themselves to continued faith in the midst of divine absence. While his proposed response is worthwhile, the chief importance of this essay is its framing of a neglected but significant problem, and it should serve as a launching pad to a new area of discussion. The piece is also a model of how a well-chosen novel can productively inform philosophical reflection.

The final essay is Ian DeWeese-Boyd's "Lyric Theodicy: Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Problem of Existential Hiddenness" (260-77). There he explores the theme of hiddenness in Hopkins' poetry, and the biblical roots inspiring that poetry. He argues that deep engagement with such poetry can enable the reader to enter into the experience of the poet in his or her act of lamentation, and thus also into the hope for divine redress implied in that lamentation.

On the whole, this anthology constitutes a quality contribution to the hiddenness literature, and certainly deserves to be read by anyone working on the problem, whether theist or atheist.