

The Hiddenness of God

We've been looking at epistemological objections to belief in God. Last time we examined the so-called presumption of atheism: that atheism is the default position unless and until there is adequate evidence to prove God's existence.

I argued that this mistakenly equates the absence of evidence with evidence of absence, and that you can't always do that. Indeed there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for the absence of evidence to count as evidence of the absence of something. Namely, the first condition we saw is that we have fully canvassed the area where the evidence ought to be found. Secondly, if the entity did exist then we should expect to find more evidence of its existence than the evidence that we do have. In order for the atheist to justify his belief that God does not exist, he would need to prove to us that both of these conditions are fulfilled. That puts a whole new face on the so-called presumption of atheism. We see now it is not a default position at all. Indeed, it would involve the atheist in some pretty heavy burden of proof. He would have to show that both of these conditions are fulfilled which I, at least, would argue he can not.

So the debate over the lack of evidence for God has morphed in recent years among contemporary philosophers into a discussion of the so-called hiddenness of God. This is in effect a discussion of the probability or the expectation that God, if he existed, would have given us more evidence of his existence than that which we have. It is an attempt to show that second condition is fulfilled.

Certainly God could have made his existence much more evident than he has. But the question here, I think, is going to depend

largely on your perspective on natural theology. If you are convinced that God has left adequate evidence of his existence – evidence which is pretty convincing to an open-minded and informed person –, then I think you are apt to be skeptical that we should expect to see much more evidence of his existence than the evidence that we do have. Indeed, when you read the people who push this objection based on the hiddenness of God, you will find inevitably that they just assume that there are no good arguments for God's existence. So it is no wonder that they think that God is hidden. They don't believe that any of the arguments of natural theology are any good. But if, as I've argued, we have good arguments for the existence of God, then God isn't so hidden after all, and it is not so evident that if God did exist, he would give more evidence of his existence than that which he has given.

Some atheists, unsatisfied with the amount of evidence that we have, have argued that if God existed, then he would have prevented the unbelief of the world by making his existence just starkly obvious. For example, he could have inscribed on every atom in the universe “Made by God.” Or he could have placed a neon cross in the heavens saying “Jesus Saves.” In that case God's existence would be starkly apparent to everyone and thereby he would have prevented the unbelief in the world.

But in response to this objection I think we need to ask ourselves why God should want to do such a thing as that? Paul Moser is a contemporary Christian philosopher who has rightly emphasized that on the Christian perspective God really isn't all that interested in simply getting people to believe that he exists. Rather, as Moser says, what God is interested in is building a love relationship with

us, not simply getting people to add one more item to their inventory of what exists. The Bible says in James 2:9 that even the demons believe that God exists -- and tremble because they don't have a saving relationship with God. It is that saving, personal relationship with him that God is interested in building – not simply getting people to believe that he exists, as the demons do.

Of course, in order to believe *in* God (that is, to trust in him, to know him) you've got to first believe *that* God exists. But if you reflect on it, there is really no reason at all to think that if God were to make his existence starkly obvious, then more people would freely come to know him and his salvation than actually do. Mere showmanship will not bring about a change of heart. That is the lesson of Jesus' parable in Luke 16:30-31 where, you will remember, the Rich Man in Hades asks Abraham to send someone back from the dead to his family members so that they will believe and not come to that place, and Abraham says, “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.” Just seeing a miraculous event isn't going to bring about heart change if people are closed to God and his Word.

It is interesting, as you read the Bible, that it describes the history of God's interaction with humanity in terms of a sort of progressive interiorization (if I can coin a word) of God's interaction with people with an increasing emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit in our inner person. In the Old Testament, God is described as revealing himself to his people in manifest wonders – the plagues upon Egypt, the pillar of fire and smoke that followed Israel, the parting of the Red Sea. But did these wonders produce lasting heart-change in the people? No! Israel fell into apostasy again and again with tiresome repetitiveness.

By contrast, today Paul says in Romans 8:16-17, “When we cry 'Abba, Father!' it is the Spirit himself who bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” Apart from the Spirit of God, the arguments of natural theology would fall like water on a stone because the natural man doesn't receive the things of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God needs to move in the hearts of unregenerate people to get them to look at the evidence and to use the evidence as a means of persuading them. God can use arguments and evidence as a means of drawing people to himself in the same way he can use preaching to draw people.

But since people are free, there is no guarantee that just because people come to believe that God exists, they will come to love and worship him.

So if God were to inscribe his name on every atom in the universe, or place a neon cross in the sky, people might well believe *that* he exists, but how can we be confident that this would lead to a greater love of God and knowledge of God? Perhaps over time people would begin to chafe under these brazen advertisements of the Creator and even come to resent him for such in-your-face effrontery. In fact, we don't really have any way of knowing that in a world of free people in which God's existence is as plain as the nose on your face that the number or the percentage of people who come to love him and to know him and experience his salvation is any greater than that in the actual world where, remember, the actual world includes not simply the past and the present but also the future. But then it seems to me the claim that if God existed he would make his existence more evident or starkly obvious just has

little or no warrant. That undermines the claim, I think, that the absence of such evidence is itself positive evidence that God does not exist.

Next time we shall turn to the question of the problem of suffering and evil, which is the most important argument against the existence of God.