

## **Abstract**

The problem of divine hiddenness is one of the most pervasive and lively issues in the contemporary analytic discussion of the philosophy of religion. It posits that the lack of evidence for justified belief in the God of standard theism is *ipso facto* evidence for the nonexistence of such a God. Many philosophers have attempted to offer robust rebuttals to this argument and hold a theistic position by rejecting certain of its core premises. All such efforts have wrought unsatisfactory results. In an effort to rectify this issue, I attempt to offer a new solution to the problem through a phenomenological exploration of the transcendence of humanity. In particular, this new solution rejects the current movements within the conversation of the philosophy of religion, which all too often try to offer abstract and certain claims that ignore our perspectival situation. Instead of making such a claim, I offer another solution in which we are the ground upon which the divine may be justified. I argue that insofar as we exist, we radically transcend ourselves and our spatio-temporal experience. And insofar as we transcend in this manner, we bespeak of the divine and give a plausible account of the divine's personal and intimate connection to humanity, thereby negating the notion of divine hiddenness as currently conceived.

**Keywords:** problem of evil, divine hiddenness, phenomenology, transcendence, theodicy, standard theism, divinity

The problem of evil, one of the most infamous objections to standard theism, posits the incredulity of the occurrence of evils and the supposed existence of a wholly good God, such that there arises good reason to think that a wholly good God could never exist. The evils highlighted in the problem can take many forms, and as such, there are quite a few subspecies of the problem of evil that stem from the central problem. According to the philosopher Keith DeRose, there are three primary variants of the problem of evil: hell, horrors, and, most importantly for this project, hiddenness.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of divine hiddenness has traditionally been understood in Western theistic circles to include two distinct theological concepts.<sup>2</sup> The first conception of divine hiddenness views it as a dark night of the soul, in which a religious devotee would lose their lived spiritual experience with the divine during a sort of purification process. Regarding her purported experience of this process, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a saint in the Catholic Church, said: “I want God with all the powers of my soul – and yet there between us – there is a terrible separation.”<sup>3</sup> The other classical conception of divine hiddenness draws more toward skeptical theism, in which “God’s hiddenness means that the nature of God is not completely” or not at all “comprehensible to human beings.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the onset of modernity, the conception of divine hiddenness has shifted quite dramatically and has now been utilized as an effective objection to standard theism. In essence, the problem of divine hiddenness is a twofold problem. Firstly, that God’s hiddenness nonliterally refers to the state of affairs in which some human beings who do not resist belief in

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<sup>1</sup> Keith DeRose, “Horridic Suffering, Divine Hiddenness, and Hell: The Place of Freedom in a World Governed by God” (unpublished manuscript, January 17 2018), typescript.

<sup>2</sup> Veronika Weidner, *Divine Hiddenness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Teresa of Calcutta, *Come be my Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 193.

<sup>4</sup> Veronika Weidner, *Divine Hiddenness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

God still do lack belief in such a being's existence, and secondly, that this nonresistant lack of belief constitutes credible evidence that God does indeed not exist. Famously formalized by John Schellenberg, the problem of divine hiddenness can be stated as follows:

1. If God exists, he is necessarily perfectly loving.
2. If God is necessarily perfectly loving, then nonresistant unbelief does not occur.
3. Yet, nonresistant unbelief does occur.
4. Then, God is not necessarily perfectly loving.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.<sup>5</sup>

Schellenberg's objection primarily takes issue with the seeming incompatibility of a necessarily omnibenevolent and omnipotent God and the existence of nonresistant unbelief. If God is truly omnibenevolent, then He ought to be perfectly loving as He is supremely good. If God is perfectly loving, then He desires a personal relationship with each one of us, as this would be the perfectly loving thing to do. A personal relationship, however, has an obvious prerequisite: knowledge of one another's existence. This poses a problem as it seems that many individuals lack knowledge of God's existence (and, as such, have unbelief in His existence), ostensibly precluding the possibility of a personal relationship with God. If God is truly omnipotent, then He ought to be powerful enough to do whatever He wills. So, how could He fail to have people believe He exists if He truly wills to be in personal relationship with each one of us?

Digressing from the logical structure of the argument, the true power of the problem of divine hiddenness can be felt in one's subjective lived experience. When a person goes through a tumultuous time, often they feel the desire to, or even the need to, be comforted through personal affection. Their loved ones, if they are genuinely loving, will cover the troubled person with a

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Lovering, "Divine Hiddenness and Inculpable Ignorance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2004): 89.

warm embrace to let them know they are loved. Now, imagine if, at the time of crisis, the one who ought to love them most never embraced the troubled person, never reached out in any way, and never even let them know they were even there. That would seem cold, cruel, and unloving, so much so that one would begin to doubt that the other person *really* did love them; indeed, were there no evidence to the contrary, the absence of this person during a time of crisis would lead one to doubt whether they existed in any relevant sense. This is how many people feel regarding God. If God was really loving and existent, why would He allow His existence to be clouded such that, even in some of the worst of times, He would feel unreal? And even if God did exist and allowed Himself to be hidden, is He even a God worth following? Schellenberg's answer to this conundrum is simple: it feels as though God does not exist because He truly does not exist.

Though Schellenberg makes a compelling case, I ultimately reject the conclusion of his argument. I also, however, reject many of the other primary answers afforded by current research on the subject, as they fail to adequately handle some serious objections. As will become evident by the end of the upcoming section of this essay, if there is a solution to be found to Schellenberg's challenge, it is not found in the current literature. In this paper, after a critical review of the relevant research regarding the problem of divine hiddenness, I will argue against Schellenberg's conclusion and suggest a possible new solution for this pervasive problem through a phenomenological analysis of our shared human experience of the transcendent.

### **Contemporary Literature**

Many philosophers think that Schellenberg's challenge can be met, and the position that God is existent can be salvaged despite Schellenberg's challenge. Of the contemporary solutions on offer, three main categories comprise the current landscape: theodicies or "better-outcome"

replies, non-hiddenness objections, and skeptical solutions.<sup>6</sup> Each of these responses takes issue with different premises of Schellenberg's formulation of the problem of divine hiddenness. Theodicies or better-outcome replies take a stand against premise two of Schellenberg's hiddenness argument and hold that a perfectly loving God can indeed remain hidden for good reasons and yet be perfectly loving. Non-hiddenness objections take issue with premise three of the argument and generally take the form of no-real-atheist replies, which posit that nonresistant unbelief does, in fact, *not* occur. Skeptical theism takes issue with premise two of the argument, claiming that there is good reason to withhold concrete beliefs about "whether or not God would create a world in which reasonable non-belief occurs."<sup>7</sup>

### Theodicies

#### *The Soul-Making Defense*

Of the theodicies or better-outcome replies, the most popular is entitled the soul-making defense, which is posited by the likes of Richard Swinburne and, most famously, Michael Murray. The soul-making defense posits that God must remain hidden so as to allow for the formation of good or virtuous character in people. Under this view, if God were not hidden, then we would not be free to grow a virtuous character since knowledge of God's existence is sufficient for coercion. In order for us to freely grow a virtuous character, God must remain hidden – at least in the sense that "God doesn't provide the necessary evidence" for His existence

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that there are other replies to this problem, though, they are not nearly as popular nor convincing as the three offered here in this essay. At any rate, I do not find solutions, such as the molonist approach, to be a promising route in this discussion (especially since these replies haven't been at the forefront of the conversation), and I will therefore not be treating them in-depth. For further readings of these replies, check out: Justin McBrayer, "On 'A Molinist-Style Response to Schellenberg' by Michael Thune," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 22, no. 2 (2006): 71-76; and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* [2<sup>nd</sup> Ed] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 271-272.

<sup>7</sup> Justin McBrayer and Philip Swensen, "Scepticism about the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 48, no. 2 (2012): 142.

– as such evidence “would cause belief in His existence and that such belief would then somehow serve to coerce (or be the means of coercion of) the believer.”<sup>8</sup>

Though interesting, the soul-making defense seems to fall victim to a few serious objections.<sup>9</sup> My objection to it is simply this: It seems evident that there are cases of divine hiddenness in which no significant character growth occurs. Indeed, it seems evident that there are cases in which God’s hiddenness led to a sort of character decline. Consider the hypothetical case of John. John has believed in God his whole life and, due to this, he has acted “morally well.”<sup>10</sup> However, one day, a tragedy befalls him. He turns to prayer and yet feels nothing. No matter how much he implores God to comfort him in his time of need, he feels nothing but cold emptiness. After many days of the same occurrence, John ultimately leaves his faith and turns to a life of selfish, hedonistic pleasure and never changes until the day he dies.

Such a case demonstrates the plausibility of the potential for divine hiddenness to lead to a regression of character. If this is indeed possible, then the soul-making defense starts to seem implausible. If even one person can have a regression of character because of God’s hiddenness, then God’s plan to grow our character through such hiddenness has failed and thus, either God is not all-powerful, God is not all-loving, or – perhaps most plausibly in this depicted state of affairs – God is not real.

### *Meaningful Self-Sacrifice*

Another theodicy which is closely related to the soul-making defense has been posited by Andrew Cullison, who, in his paper entitled “Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>9</sup> The most notable of which being Lovering’s objection. See Robert Lovering, “Divine Hiddenness and Inculpable Ignorance,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Whatever the phrase “morally well” is supposed to mean is up for debate in *many* areas of ethics. For the sake of the argument, I mean “morally well” in this context to mean he is flourishing and doing actions that promote the well-being of all.

Hiddenness,” argued that divine hiddenness is a good that God bestows on humankind in order to allow us to engage in “real, genuine sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup> According to Cullison, there is something particularly admirable and noble about a person who does not believe in God and therefore seeks no eternal reward, and yet does something self-sacrificial courageously. If God were not hidden, then people would never be able to do this type of self-sacrifice as they would always have in mind the eternal reward given to those who do such self-sacrificial action. This would then diminish the admirableness and nobleness of such an action since there would be no need for faith or courage.

In many ways, this reply is quite appealing and attempts to give significance to the action of self-sacrifice. Despite this, there seems to be a fatal flaw in Cullison’s argument. The problem lies in the difference between self-sacrificial action conducted in the state of affairs in which God’s existence is known and the state of affairs in which God’s existence is not known. It appears to me that in distinguishing the two states, Cullison conflates the sense of God’s *experiential presence* with *mere belief* in God. Suppose the presence of God was universally and unalterably experienced, such that there arises a sense of motivation to sacrifice oneself in pursuit of eternal reward. In that case, self-sacrifice may be less noble or meaningful since there would be a lack of courage associated with the self-sacrificial action due to hope of eternal rewards that supersedes any fear of temporal suffering.

Belief, though, is a different sort of thing, for mere belief does not have the power to be able to prevent courageous self-sacrifice as one can believe something and not have their fears dispelled by that belief. For example, one can believe that they are safe in their house and yet still fear that something could be lurking in the dark. Having an extra intellectual item such as

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Cullison, “Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2010): 131.

knowledge of God's existence does not seem to be the sort of thing that can put one in such a cognitive state that fear is exempt, as is the case of *experiencing* divine presence.

Schellenberg's challenge, however, concerns belief, not experience. Divine hiddenness is an epistemological problem of people's *belief* in God that is indicative of the non-existence of God. Cullison is trying to argue that the problem fails because if God was directly *experienced*, it would lead to a lack of potential for meaningful self-sacrifice. As such, it has no bearing on Schellenberg's argument, and so Cullison's argument does not appear to hold.

While I do not believe that his reply holds, Cullison's argument about meaningful sacrifice does reveal something particularly relevant to my project. In his response, Cullison exclusively focuses on the experiential aspect of divine hiddenness and misses the focus of Schellenberg's argument, which concentrates on belief in God rather than the experience of God. In so doing, the two talk past each other in a way that is ultimately unhelpful. Despite this issue, there might be a way to successfully integrate the two disparate conversations together. In fact, I would argue that these two must be brought into conversation together for the sake of advancing this conversation, for belief and experience ought to be unified.

#### *Divine Mercy Reply*

A less widely known better-outcome reply is one raised by Travis Dumsday in his paper entitled "Divine Hiddenness as Divine Mercy." This divine mercy reply holds that God is hidden so as to limit our moral culpability. For if God's existence was not subject to doubt, morally blameworthy conduct "would be even more immoral and hence justly subject to a greater punishment than it is in a state of affairs in which God's existence *is* subject to doubt. As such, God mercifully remains 'hidden' in order to limit our moral culpability."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Travis Dumsday, "Divine Hiddenness as Divine Mercy," *Religious Studies* 48, no. 2 (2012): 183.



In order for Dumsday's solution to hold, it must be established that greater knowledge of God leads to greater moral punishment and that a lack of knowledge of the existence of God is less morally blameworthy. To establish this, Dumsday highlights some biblical passages that indicate such a notion (such as Acts 5:1-11 and Luke 12:48). Dumsday claims that within these various passages, there exists the consistent idea that "increased knowledge carries high expectations."<sup>13</sup> Thus, there is credible evidence for Western theism to hold on to divine mercy as an explanation for God's hiddenness.

There seems to be a serious flaw with such an account, however. If God hides himself as an act of mercy, He ought to hide himself *far more* than He does. Or, at least He should hide Himself more than theists tend to believe He does. If God were real and were seeking a personal relationship with each of us, then He is at least somewhat revealed to everyone. Or, at any rate, it is claimed that He is revealed to us enough that belief in Him would be possible. This includes immoral atheists. The problem with this, however, is that if God wanted to be more merciful to the immoral atheist, He should not reveal Himself *at all* to them, lest they be subject to greater punishment for their wrongdoing. This, as stated, makes God seem either incompetent or uncaring. If He were really worried about us, He'd stop revealing anything about Himself. If He just couldn't help but reveal Himself, He is incompetent. The only other option than these is to say that God doesn't exist. Thus, this appears to be a weak defense and fails to adequately respond to Schellenberg's challenge.

### Non-Hiddenness Objections

#### *The No-Real-Atheist Reply*

The second group of major solutions to the problem of divine hiddenness can be referred to as the non-hiddenness objections. Non-hiddenness objections are quite rare, especially in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 187.

recent years. This is probably in part due to the failure of the only major version of the objection known as the no-real-atheist or hidden resistance reply. The no-real-atheist reply, as opposed to the other two solutions, takes issue with the third premise of Schellenberg's formulation and argues that divine hiddenness does not occur. Rather, God is directly known by everyone, and if one lacks belief in God, then they do so resistantly, even if unbeknownst to the subject experiencing a lack of belief in God. If one claims to be an atheist, they are either lying to everyone or deceiving themselves.

This reply suffers from a variety of objections. In order for this reply to even be attempted, there must be a dismissal of the subjective experience of and anecdotal evidence for the hiddenness of God. Not surprisingly, in part because of this, the no-real-atheist objection has fallen out of the recent conversation surrounding divine hiddenness.

Another reason that the no-real-atheist objection has been forgone in favor of other solutions is because of the lack of evidence for the claim. In order to dismiss a person's testimony of their experience, there must be an incredible amount of evidence against that testimony. Yet, there seems to be none. The thinker who holds the no-real-atheist objection must provide evidence to dismiss another's subjective, lived experience, and yet, there is very little evidence that one can procure regarding one's internal epistemic state regarding belief.

The last major objection to the no-real-atheist reply rests on people's natural moral systems. In particular, I argue that the existence of such systems in every society demonstrates the inadequacy of the no-real-atheist reply. In the no-real-atheist reply, it is taken to be the case that an atheist is either lying to others or deceiving themselves. Why would they do this? Generally, it is taken that the atheist would do this in order to participate in some immoral (or sinful) activity. But regardless of religious affiliation or belief, people always subscribe to some

sort of governing moral system, even in more atheistic societies.<sup>14</sup> Often, to govern these moral systems, legal systems are erected to enforce the culture's moral code. If an atheist really wanted to lie about knowledge of God's existence in order to participate in immoral activity, why would they willingly enter into and/or create societies with structured moral systems, some of which are quite similar to theistic moral systems? Not only this, but why would there be so many seemingly moral atheists? It becomes increasingly evident that the more one looks at this sort of reply, the more absurd such a claim becomes.

### Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theism is one of the most interesting replies on offer today to the problem of divine hiddenness. In essence, skeptical theism is the idea that some amount of God's nature is unknowable to humankind. Because of this, we cannot rightly determine a correct belief to hold about certain aspects of God. We cannot even know "whether or not God would create a world in which reasonable non-belief occurs."<sup>15</sup> If we cannot know whether or not God would choose to remain hidden or not, then we should think Schellenberg's objection is too strong. This, then, gives enough leverage to dismiss the objection.

Of the major solutions on offer, the skeptical reply seems to be one of the most plausible, for God is generally taken to be infinite and whereas we are finite. Unfortunately, there are some unsettling consequences for standard theism if such a solution holds. The main one being that the skeptical solution is just not a satisfying solution. What a traditional theist would hope for in a solution to the problem of divine hiddenness (if there indeed is one) is not just a rejection of the

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<sup>14</sup> For more on humans as inherently moral creatures, see Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Justin McBrayer and Philip Swensen, "Scepticism about the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 48, no. 2 (2012): 132.

problem of divine hiddenness but also a demonstration of reasonable assurance that God exists. Otherwise, the position of standard theism would seem to be quite untenable.

The skeptical reply goes too far in saying too little about having positive knowledge of God and does not sufficiently explain why belief in God is still reasonable in spite of theistic skepticism. This being said, the position holds an insight that many other accounts lack. This insight is the notion that we ought to be careful of attempting to provide an absolute and foundational account of the divine.

### **Looking Forward**

All in all, it is apparent that many of these replies have left something to be desired. A more promising route of reply is needed if standard theism is to have any semblance of plausibility. Ideally, a new account would have two seemingly conflicting components: 1) a state of affairs in which God is not hidden and 2) a non-dismissal of the lived experience of divine hiddenness. The reason that a state of affairs in which God is not hidden would be desired is based on an Anselmian notion of God. According to the medieval theologian St. Anselm, God is that-than-which-no-greater-can-be-thought.<sup>16</sup> In other words, God is the best of everything. He is perfect. If God is perfect and if He was going to create a world, then it would be the best possible world.<sup>17</sup> I would propose that the best possible world is one in which God is not hidden since this is the most loving. So, the most intuitive sort of stance to hold is that God's existence ought to be knowable to us (not hidden).

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<sup>16</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 3.

<sup>17</sup> This conclusion can also be drawn from Leibnizian thought, as Leibniz held to the doctrine of optimism, which is the view that God had to create the best world possible. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 193.

It is also desirable not to dismiss people's lived experiences of divine hiddenness. When looking at the overwhelming amount of anecdotal evidence, it is likely that many people experience a nonresistant lack of belief in God. God feels hidden from them. Based on this and an effort to uphold intellectual charity, it is important that this experience is upheld as it seems to be descriptive of many people's encounters with the divine.

To maintain both of these two components, one would need to provide two things: a robust account of how God is not hidden and an error theory to explain why people experience divine hiddenness. In this paper, I will posit a potential new way forward in answering the problem of divine hiddenness that holds to the idea that God is not fully hidden as he is readily accessible to us via our humanity. In order to accomplish this, I will be utilizing a phenomenological framework to outline an account of the transcendent aspect of our humanity, developing epistemological conclusions from this framework, and proposing an appropriate error theory by which people can have a real nonresistant lack of belief in God.

### **A New Solution**

#### *The Essence of Transcendent Experience*

Imagine looking upon a painting of a beautiful evening sunset by a gentle creek. The canvas is a mix of golden hour hues that highlight the reflective stillness of the surrounding landscape of luscious green grass and shimmering waters of the creek. When gazing upon the artistic work, one cannot help but feel transported into the depicted environment.

Or imagine watching a gripping film in a movie theater. Though the film is viewed within a theater environment and the events of the story occur on a large screen, the walls of the theater fade away, and the screen ceases to be a screen. The sensation of being seated in a worn-out faux leather seat is gone. Instead, we are transported into the ebbs and flows of the narrative,

experiencing the joys, fears, and hopes of the characters. Along with the characters, we are thrust into the unfolding of a grand story in which we hope to find a resolution.

In each of these cases, we experience something that draws us out of our immediate experience. We experience transcendence. The human condition is such that we cannot help but experience transcendence in our everyday lived experiences. From the art we create to the words we speak, we experience transcendence – we experience something that goes beyond us. Transcendent experience is something that occurs within us and yet seems to draw us toward something greater than us.

Now, consider one more case of transcendent experience: the experience of love. The experience of loving someone is deeper than other experiences previously discussed. The other examples drew us out of our immediate experience. When we love someone, however, we are not just pulled out of our immediate experience. We are drawn out of our mere individuality. Take for example a couple in love on their wedding day. When they are face to face with each other – say, professing their vows to each other – they cease to experience themselves as *solely* individuals but rather they experience themselves as a unity. No longer do they solely experience the world as a place where “*I* do what *I* want,” but as a landscape of possibility in which “*we* will go forth and make the life *we* want.” In being drawn out of our mere individuality, the pre-reflective experience of love is a paradigmatic case of transcendent experience that reveals the potential depths of such experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Based upon these examples of transcendent experiences (the two artistic ones and the example of love), it seems that there are at least two types of transcendence. Let us call them

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to say every transcendent experience is as in-depth as the experience of being in love. To say such a thing seems implausible. However, I am arguing that even the shallowest of transcendent experiences has within them a fundamental reaching quality that draws us to something more than us or, at the very least, more than our immediate surroundings. The most paradigmatic of such experiences even pull us out of our own individuality.

immediate transcendence and self-transcendence, the latter of which being – in some sense – deeper than the former. Immediate transcendence seems to be an experience of going beyond one’s direct spatio-temporal situation and reaching to another. Self-transcendence, on the other hand, is something more. It seems to be an experience of going so far beyond one’s very own self and direct experience that one is drawn out of their mere individuality. More will be made of these transcendent experiences later on in this paper. For now, it is sufficient to note that while self-transcendence is more striking in its effect than immediate transcendence, both experiences are deeply rich in meaning and seem to compel their subject to reach for something more than their immediate circumstances. To illustrate the rich, straining sensation of transcendence, Gabriel Marcel writes, “There is an order where the subject finds himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp. I would add that if the word ‘transcendent’ has any meaning it is here – it designates the absolute, unbridgeable chasm yawning between the subject and being, insofar as being evades every attempt to pin it down.”<sup>19</sup> The very meaning ascribed to the word transcendence is to meaningfully reach for something beyond us.

Putting transcendence in this way, a fundamental question arises about transcendent experiences: Is there really a transcendent reality that we reach for in these experiences that is beyond us and outside of our reach or are such experiences mere illusions of something more in a world that is all too material? To truly unpack this question, we will first need to look at the relationship between the human and transcendence.

### *The Human Person as Uniquely Transcendent*

Humans are odd sorts of creatures. While surely mechanistic and animalistic (for we are made up of and given persistence by an organic body that works by the proper functioning of the

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<sup>19</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 193.

parts of an internal organic system), we also have the seemingly unique and strange capacity to reflect, which is the ability to think about our own place in the world. We can think about our own beliefs and desires, roles and traditions, identities and possibilities. It is this reflective capacity that affords many possibilities for the human being; the most relevant of which is the possibility to transcend the immediacy of our direct experience and engage with the deeper questions of existence. We do not just encounter the phenomena of experience. We mentally engage with it, wrestle with it. We think about it, and from having thought about it, we choose different sorts of action based on this thinking. Take for example the role of reflection in a particular case of fraternal correction.<sup>20</sup> If one is constructively criticized by their friend, one may initially be tempted to act impulsively to their friend's criticism and enter a combative mental state without considering the underlying issue that their friend is trying to address. If the criticized person reflects upon the (in this particular case, valid) criticism of their friend, they may see the criticism's merit and adjust their reaction – and subsequently, their future actions – accordingly.

An even more illuminating example of human reflection can be found in their inward self-reflection. A free and reflective agent can choose to reflect upon the current state of their character and, through that reflection, recognize deficiencies within their state and desire to be something more. Indeed, such an agent can even reflect on their very self-identity and desire to be something other than what they are in the present moment.

This is the power the capacity of reflection affords: the ability for an agent to transcend their current state. In having this capacity, humans are always capable of choosing to be other

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<sup>20</sup> Fraternal correction is a particularly Thomistic concept. It essentially involves the private confronting of an individual by someone close to them due to wrongdoing. Rooted in the principle of charity, this practice aims to help individuals reform themselves and ultimately seeks their flourishing.



than what they have already been. For this reason, by having the capacity to reflect, they are *intrinsically* immediately transcendent. They are always capable of reaching past their current states to new ones. In this, we can strive for – and indeed, even attain – new identities, values, and aspirations. In other words, to understand what a human being is *is* to understand it as something always on the verge of becoming otherwise. Thus, to understand humanity is to understand it as intrinsically transcendent, at least in an immediate sense.

Stranger still, it seems that not only are we to be understood as intrinsically transcendent in an immediate sense, but we see ourselves as intrinsically transcendent in a self-transcendent sense. I argue that our very nature can be said to be self-transcendent, which is to say that we cannot help but see ourselves as not solely bound by a world all our own. Instead, we see a world in which we are drawn out of our own individuality – a world marked by the infinitely irreducible presence of the Other.

To better elucidate this notion, we can look to Emmanuel Levinas – who offers a compelling account of the self-transcendence found in the experience of the face. To truly understand this experience, we must first look to our everyday, ordinary experience with ordinary objects. When one encounters an ordinary material object, it seems that perception acts as a sort of ownership granter. Whenever an ordinary object enters our perceptual vision and we intend to use it, we experience a sort of ownership over it such that it becomes a part of us. When we use an object, it seems to be completely enveloped by ourselves in our experience. It becomes an object that belongs to us, at least for as long as it remains in use and in our perceptual experience.<sup>21</sup> Take, for example, a public computer in a public library. Though the computer is not owned by any particular person, when it is used by a particular individual, it seems to be

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<sup>21</sup> This notion I have drawn from Levinas. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and the Face,” in *The Phenomenology Reader*, edited by Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002).

completely enveloped by that individual in their experience. It becomes an object that belongs to them, at least for as long as it remains in use and in their perceptual experience.

According to Levinas, the human person, particularly the presence of the face, seems to be something quite different, however. The presence of the face appears to be something that is *infinitely uncontainable*. It has an irreducibility about it such that it cannot be enveloped into my own experience as a mere object could be. It cannot be encompassed by my own individual experience. Rather, to experience the face is to encounter, as Dermot Moran says, an “irreducible alterity who is face to face and whose eyes look into mine.”<sup>22</sup> The face, being a unique locus of expressivity and Otherness, is *totally* beyond and resistant to my grasp. The Otherness found in the face goes completely beyond my mere individuality and thereby irreducibly *transcends* my own individual experience of the world.

This experience of irreducible Otherness evoked by the encounter of the face sets forth on us obligation – an obligation to treat Others as “ends in themselves.” Once we encounter the face of the Other, we cannot help but see them as members of the “Kingdom of Ends,” those beings who, like us, are free agents who are capable of moral reflection and thus deserve to be treated as “ends in themselves” and never as a “means.”<sup>23</sup> The encounter of the face of the Other implores us to treat each other with respect and value, the same to which we feel we are owed. Notice in this, however, that this obligation thrust upon us by our encounter with the face of the Other forces us to be drawn out of a world which is just for me. No longer is the world here for me to do as I want with no regard to anything else. Rather, the world is a place marked by the irreducible presence of and ethical obligation to the infinite Other. Through our very encounter with humanity, we encounter a world that is a meaningful landscape of that which is beyond us

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<sup>22</sup> Dermot Moran, “Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas,” ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), 512.

<sup>23</sup> This notion is markedly Kantian. See Kant’s *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

to which we reach out to fulfill our obligation to treat each other as an end, not as a means. We are thus intrinsically self-transcendent in this way: We, by encountering each other, are drawn out of our individual selves and immediate experiences such that we are drawn into a transcendent world of obligation which is not all our own and beyond our individual reach.

So, humans cannot help but see themselves as intrinsically transcendent in both an immediate and self-transcendent sense, as demonstrated by our capacity to be other than we are in the present moment (showing immediate transcendence), and our sense of moral obligation to the Other via encounter with the face of the Other (showing self-transcendence). While this is how humans see themselves, what bearing does it have on whether there is a transcendent reality or not? I argue that it does not have any direct bearing, at least not in a deeply ontological sense. What it does offer, however, is the ground on which the word “transcendence” has any meaning at all – for what it means to be human is to see a world that, though still connected with it, we cannot but see ourselves as more than. So, is transcendence merely an illusion? We cannot help but think not. To transcend the world of mere immediate sense experience is to be human.

### *The Human as Intimately Connected with the Divine*

Humans cannot but see themselves as radically self-transcendent beings. But what does this have to do with the problem of divine hiddenness? The problem of divine hiddenness is fundamentally concerned with whether God is truly on our side or not. Is God an entity that cares about us and our well-being? If not, then He might as well not exist else we live in a regrettable state of affairs. Indeed, if God is not on our side, He deserves only our defiance. If God is in fact on our side, then why would it seem that He is hidden from us?

I argue that we cannot help but see the divine as on our side, for it is in ourselves that we see the divine. In other words, what we mean by “divinity” is something radically transcendent,

and what we experience in our humanity is intrinsic radical transcendence: self-transcendence. If the divine has any meaning at all, it is found in the self-transcendence we find in humanity. For what else can we see the divine as other than that which is *infinitely* Other, that which is *completely irreducible* to my immediate and individualistic experience, that which is an *end in itself*?

In this, we finally see how this account answers the problem of divine hiddenness. Does God exist and exist in a way which is favorable to human beings? Upon a thorough examination of our humanity, we find that this is indeed so – at least insofar as we exist, and we are the sorts of creatures that cannot help but see each other as divine creatures.<sup>24</sup> Insofar as we exist, we fundamentally see ourselves as transcendent. And we do not just see ourselves as transcendent in a trivial sense. We see ourselves as self-transcendent. Insofar as we fundamentally see ourselves as self-transcendent, we see in ourselves divinity; for what can be said of the divine other than it is that which is irreducibly and infinitely Other? If this is the case, then the concept of the divine is intimately connected with our humanity such that we cannot but see it upon reflection of ourselves. And insofar as the divine is so intimately connected with us such that I cannot fully separate myself from it, the divine is personal; it is in persons that we find the divine. If this is truly the case, then God is not perceived as non-existent to us – indeed, if we reflect upon our nature, we will see Him in our midst – nor is God fundamentally perceived as an impersonal dictator – for He cannot but be on our side, at least in as much as we are, since He is deeply connected with our humanity. Insofar as we exist, we see that God exists and exists in a way not

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<sup>24</sup> In this, one may worry that I am arguing for a stance that takes God's existence to mean no more than that humans exist. While I do not have time explicate this notion in this paper, I do think it unnecessary to reduce divinity to merely humanity. Just because we see each other as divine does not mean that the divine goes no further than ourselves.

disconnected and hidden from humanity but intimately connected with it – thereby negating the problem of divine hiddenness as has been generally conceived.

### *Towards a Robust Error Theory*

One could object to such an account by bringing up a lingering question: Why do so many people still experience God as hidden? Why do people still lack belief in the divine if they cannot help but see in their very humanity the divine? What went so wrong?

Though there is probably a multitude of threads to pull here, I find the central one to be what Martin Heidegger refers to as “inauthenticity.” Heidegger contends that we are thrown into a world without full comprehension of its meaning. Though we initially lack full comprehension of its meaning, we are open to exploring the meaning of the world as we are the sorts of beings open to Being. In this exploration or reflection, we regain a sense of wonder for the mystery of the world.

Unfortunately, humans tend to live in a state of “inauthenticity,” which essentially is the state in which humans distract themselves with superficial concerns and fail to truly confront the ultimate questions of existence, leading us to lose sight of the mystery of it all. Those in the state of inauthenticity conform to societal norms, becoming absorbed in everyday activities and concerns without truly reflecting on their own being.<sup>25</sup>

It is this state of inauthenticity that may well be responsible for the experience of divine hiddenness. The divine may be perceived as hidden due to one’s own lack of receptivity and honest engagement with reality. If the transcendence of humanity remains unexamined, then the divine will feel removed and distant, thereby seemingly not present. If we get absorbed into the

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<sup>25</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

activities and concerns of everyday life and, as such, fail to engage with the divinity seen within us, we will lack the lived experience of God's presence and instead perceive hiddenness.

Authentic encounters with ourselves require a radical shift in our way of being. It involves a profound transformation – characterized by openness, receptivity, and a willingness to encounter the mystery of existence through reflection. It is through such authentic encounters that we can begin to glimpse the divine.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Far too often, philosophers forget the perspectival nature of the human context. If we make hard and fast claims that God is universally and always hidden or that God is universally and always not hidden, I worry that we border on incredulity and implausibility; for if this was indeed the case, why is it so hard for some to see? Should this not be more obvious and compelling? Instead, we must dive headfirst into the currents of the deeply perspectival human context and draw out from the depths the rich insight that hiddenness itself is perspectival; For what is hidden to one may not be hidden to another. With this insight, we can better understand the varied experience of divine hiddenness and work to understand the underlying reasons behind such experiences. I argue that it is ultimately in the reflection of who we really are that we can begin to dispel the hiddenness that so often shrouds the divine. And I hold to the hope that if we truly reflect, we universally detect divinity about us. Insofar as this is the case, we – in and of ourselves – bespeak of the divine and the divine's personal nature, for it is in persons that the divine is seen.

Does our universal perspective establish a metaphysical truth? Perhaps or perhaps not. But even if it does, it does not do so with complete certainty, and it certainly does not demand that everyone ascent to the belief. To accomplish such a feat seems to be the work of faith, not

reason. What our rationality can tell us, however, is that to be human is to see within ourselves divinity not altogether unlike us. In reflecting upon our humanity and its transcendency, we encounter not just any nature or essence that could be attributed to any deity. Rather, we encounter something all too familiar: the essence of humanity.