

The Concealment Argument for Why No Proof for God's Existence Will Be Found

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Abstract

Logic and Biblical evidence suggest that God wishes some but not all humans to become convinced of His existence and desires. If so, attempts to either prove or disprove God's existence, past miracles, or present supernatural intervention are doomed to failure, because God could and would take care to evade any such efforts. This "concealment argument" implies that whether God exists or not, empirical studies of prayer will find no effect, that Christians will have suffering in their lives, that apparent archaeological discoveries validating Christianity will turn out to be fakes, and that non-theistic theories of sociobiological and physical evolution and of cosmology will not be definitively disproved. Also, failure of any of these things to happen is a necessary implication of Christianity, not evidence against it.

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1. Introduction

In everyday life we must answer questions such as whether a pair of shoes will last for a year, whether it will rain later today, or whether our friends are upset with us. Whether God is active in the world is no different an issue. While we may not be able to comprehend God, at least we should be able to detect His impact on the world and thereby test for His existence. It should be even more straightforward to test for miraculous healings or answered prayers— phenomena that are non-transcendent because their effects are material even if their cause is supernatural. As Quine said in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,”

As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries— not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. Let me interject that for my part I do, *qua* lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer’s gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.

The idea of God as an active agent in the past or present world is no less suitable for scientific analysis than the idea of quantum packets of energy. It may be harder to prove or disprove God’s existence to the satisfaction of intelligent minds, but there is nothing sacrilegious, impious, or unreasonable in an empirical approach, even if one thinks that certainty comes only with divine inspiration. Nonetheless, the empirical approach has failed. I will argue that it will continue to fail. I will argue that while God’s non-existence might be demonstrable, His existence is not.

In economics, my home field, our modelling paradigm is that a person making a decision takes the world as given and tries to figure out how to maximize his payoff by using the actions under his control. Someone trying to decide whether to sell his computer on eBay looks at the prices decide whether he will be happier with the computer or with the money from sale. An important part of economics, however, is game theory. If Dell decides to sell an additional ten thousand computers this year, it cannot take the market environment as a given. When it tries to sell the extra computers, its rivals will react by reducing their prices and what looked like it would be a profitable move may be disaster. Game theory tells us that when someone changes his behavior to try to gain an advantage over a rival, he must take into account that his rival can change too. He is shooting at a moving target.

Similarly, God is a moving target. Suppose He doesn't want us to succeed in proving or disproving His existence. He would leave us tantalized, providing enough evidence that we could not rule Him out, but not enough to convince completely. Neither theological nor physical science can detect God if He deliberately evades the scientist. The discovery process is not like trying to find out the laws of nature because the laws of nature do not try to hide. I will call this "the concealment argument". It can be stated like this:

Premise 1a. God exists.

Premise 2. God is powerful.

Premise 3. God wishes not to be provable.

Thus:

Conclusion A. Any effort to prove God exists will fail.

We can add another piece to the argument by replacing Premise 1a with its opposite:

Premise 1b. God does not exist.

Premise 4. Conclusions that are false cannot be proved.

Thus:

Conclusion B. Any effort to prove God exists will fail.

Combining the two arguments, we get Argument C:

Argument C. Either Premise 1a or Premise 1b is true. Therefore, any effort to prove God exists will fail.

"God", "exists", "powerful", and "prove" are all big ideas, to be sure, and I use the words in specific ways. By "God" I mean the traditional Christian God, a supernatural person who created the world, inspired the Bible, performed miracles, and continues to answer prayer. I will be positivist in limiting the idea of "God" to a being understandable by the human mind on the basis of evidence from thinking, experience, and observation, and ignoring any transcendental, undetectable, ultimate realities. In this I join Thomas Aquinas, who said,

From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence.

(*Summa*, Part I, Q.2, A.2 "Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?")

By “exists” I mean that God actually does the things ascribed to Him rather than being imaginary, just as the Moon exists and causes tides. By “powerful” I mean He is able to manipulate Nature far beyond the ability of man. . By “prove” I mean to persuade, if perhaps only after considerable effort, the vast majority of open-minded men of average intelligence. As Peter Harrison (1995, p. 542) puts it, this is only a “moral proof”, “a proof which possessed less than mathematical certainty, but to which unprejudiced men of reason would assent.”¹ Using the word in this sense, we can prove that the Earth goes around the Sun, but not that John Kerry would have reduced unemployment had he been elected President in 2004. Many things are unprovable in this sense; indeed, most of modern science was unprovable two hundred years ago because the necessary ideas and evidence weren’t available. This is not the same thing as logical proof. It is weaker because it allows persuasion by evidence as well as by theory and it allows a proof to be false. I will use “validly prove” to refer to arguments that are both persuasive and correct.

I could have folded Premise 2, that God is powerful, into the meaning of “God”, but this divine attribute is crucial to the argument and thus worth stating separately. A pantheistic god or a deistic god might not be powerful in this way, because they might be able to create or maintain the world but not to change it. Omnipotence is not necessary, though it is sufficient. We just need God to be enough more powerful than man that He can evade man’s attempts to detect Him like Eli or Josh in the stories. The Gary Larson cartoon in Figure 1 captures the premise nicely.

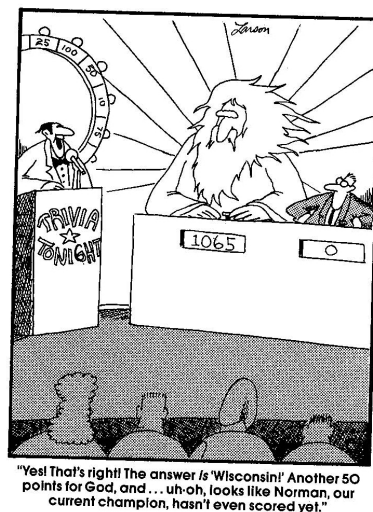


Figure 1: Premise 2 (Larson [1985], p. 52)

¹ Peter Harrison (1995) “Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56: 531-553 (October 1995).

Premise 3, that God does not wish to be provable, is a particular feature of the Christian God. Very few purported gods indicate any intention to be unprovable. Indeed, more typically a god would desire to be provable, in order to receive more worship, influence, and sacrifices. Pascal made much of Premise 3 in his *Pensees*, and even uses something like the concealment argument as a first cut in determining which religion is true:

566. We understand nothing of the works of God, if we do not take as a principle that He has willed to blind some and enlighten others.

578. There is sufficient clearness to enlighten the elect, and sufficient obscurity to humble them. There is sufficient obscurity to blind the reprobate, and sufficient clearness to condemn them and make them inexcusable. Saint Augustine, Montaigne, Sebond...

585. ... God being thus hidden, every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true; and every religion which does not give the reason of it is not instructive. Our religion does all this: *Vere tu es Deus absconditus*.*

* Is. 45. 15.

There is much biblical evidence that the Christian (and Jewish) God does not wish to be provable.² In the Old Testament, we see

Thou shalt hide them in the secret of thy presence from the pride of man: thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues.

—Psalms 31: 20

Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.

—Isaiah 45: 15

And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord God.

—Ezekiel 39: 29

In the New Testament, we see

But though he had done so many signs before them, yet they believed not on him: that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? For this cause they could not believe, for that Isaiah said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and he hardened their heart; Lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, And should turn, And I should heal them. These things said Isaiah, because he saw his glory; and he spake of him.

—John 12: 37–41

² An appendix at <http://www.rasmusen.org/papers/conceal-rasmusen-appendix.pdf> contains more passages along these lines.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

—I Corinthians 1: 18–25

Premise 3 does not mean that God wishes to be concealed from everybody, however. To the contrary, the Christian God does wish to convince certain people—the elect— of His existence. Thus, an individual might receive private information—a personal revelation, perhaps, or the sight of a miracle—that would convince any reasonable man. What Premise 3 says is that God wishes for that information to remain private, so the convert cannot credibly communicate it to the public. Premise 3 also has a temporal limitation. When Jesus Christ returns for the Last Judgement, His existence will be abundantly provable. By then, however, the question will be moot.

Premise 4, that conclusions which are false cannot be proved, is open to question. Since I am using “proof” as the ability to persuade almost all open-minded men, I have not excluded the possibility of fallacious arguments or good arguments based on faulty evidence. If one does not accept Premise 4, however, another version of the concealment argument is available. This version is a bit harder to understand because it must distinguish between a demonstration which is a proof only because everyone is fooled and a demonstration which leads to a true conclusion—a “proof” and a “valid proof” in my terminology. It does lead to a delicious paradox, however, a paradox with practical implications.

Premise 1a. God exists.

Premise 2. God is powerful.

Premise 3. God wishes not to be provable.

Thus:

Conclusion A. Any effort to prove God exists will fail.

Premise 5. If God exists, then since He would be powerful and wishes not to be provable, any effort to prove God exists will fail.

Premise 6. Someone has proved God's existence.

Thus:

Conclusion 1b. God not exist. The proof is flawed somehow, and its persuasiveness only shows that God does not exist and cannot prevent people from being fooled by it.

If Premise 1a is true, any proof of God's existence should lead us to conclude that God does not exist, and therefore that the proof is not valid. If Premise 1a is false, then God does not exist either. Either way, no valid proof of God's existence will be found.

I will refer to this idea that proof of God's existence would validly prove His nonexistence as "the disproving proof paradox".

What the Concealment Argument Does and Does Not Say

This concealment argument is about whether we can prove that God exists, not about whether He exists. Available evidence is insufficient to prove He does, as demonstrated by the fact that intelligent people take both sides of the issue. The concealment argument says that Christians will not be able to validly persuade everyone of God's existence, and if they do persuade everyone, we are left with the disproving proof paradox, that the fact of persuading everyone is itself a valid proof that God does not exist.

As the disproving proof paradox makes clear, the concealment argument does not deny that we can *disprove* God's existence, validly or otherwise, despite no disproof having yet appeared. Evidence could arise that would conclusively disprove the existence of the Christian God. Space aliens might land and show us that they were responsible for the miracles in the Bible and can turn a machine on and off to produce the impression that we are communing with God in prayer or worship. Or I might wake up and find that my past life, including the existence of the Bible, was a dream and I am actually an intelligent squid living on a planet of Regulus. These are fanciful, of course. I do not think even if the Christian God did not exist conclusive evidence could be found, given how long ago the events at issue took place.

We have so far discussed (1) proving God's existence if He exists, (2) proving it if He does not, and (3) proving His nonexistence if He does not. One combination is

left. Could we prove God's nonexistence if He does exist? This is a hard question. Since God is powerful, He could fool us with the very evidence I just offered just: he could create fake space aliens, or make us think we are squids from Regulus. To rule this out, we need another premise: that if God exists He would not deliberately mislead us with false evidence strong enough to persuade all open-minded people. He might, that is, choose to convince some and not others, but He would not extinguish the living Church entirely. The Bible has some support for the idea that while God may conceal His tracks, He does not manufacture false evidence. Arguing in favor of proofs of God's existence, Thomas Aquinas cites *Romans* 1:20, which says "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (*Summa*, Part I, Q2, A2, "Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?"). I will not pursue the idea further.

Although Karl Popper's use of falsifiability as a criterion for a theory being meaningful is no longer so popular among philosophers, among scientists it is still common. Suppose a good theory must be falsifiable: it must have observable implications which can be clearly contradicted. The concealment argument says that Premise 1b, God's nonexistence, is unfalsifiable. If the God we are speaking of exists, we won't be able to find convincing proof that he does. One response, though no less troubling, is that disbelief in God is equally unfalsifiable. In a less "tu quoque" vein, a theory can be useful even if it is not falsifiable in present circumstances. You must decide how to live your life now, and be content to decide which is the *better* theory, in terms of upside and downside consequences of adopting it. Ultimately the best choice will be clear, so the choice does matter and one theory or the other will be falsified, but we must act without full information. You must decide whether to worship God today, even if you'd rather wait till Judgement Day to decide.

It should also be emphasized that the concealment argument applies to any being who satisfies Premises 2 and 3— that is, any powerful being desirous of remaining concealed. Peter Siegelman suggests leprechauns as an example. Leprechauns are small and clever enough to stay hidden from most people, and it is natural to think they would want to remain hidden. After all, though powerful, they are not *all*-powerful, and we would bother them about their pots of gold if their existence became known. Thus, the concealment argument says that if leprechauns exist, we would not be able to prove or disprove it. Even they exist, they would conceal themselves effectively and the vast majority of us, having never seen them, would scoff at someone who said he saw them.

We can conceive of many potential beings who are powerful and desire to stay concealed, but without evidence it is not rational to believe in them. The concealment argument is useful to say why we should not wait for more evidence to

believe in God, but it does not say we should believe in Him without *any* evidence. Rather, it says that if He exists, the evidence will be limited and many reasonable people will be unpersuaded by it. Second, not much is at stake with leprechauns. We do not care enough to investigate further. Even if you do investigate, you will not find enough information to get you much past your initial ignorance. Moreover, since even if you decide they exist you won't be able to get at their gold, nothing is at stake. If at Judgement Day you discover that leprechauns exist, you will not wish you had lived your life differently. Compared to the hard questions in science and theology, learning has much less potential to affect our decisions. Returns to investigation are bigger for leptons than for leprechauns.³

Some Christians may be dismayed by the concealment argument, because it says that Christians should be agnostics, in the sense that they should not believe God's existence can be proved to every reasonable man's satisfaction. This implies that Christians should be less certain of God than they are of facts such as that Washington is the capital of the United States. If God exists, then agnosticism, atheism, and Christianity will all be reasonable beliefs, because God has created conditions under which it is hard to determine the truth. This is not to say that there is not a correct answer or that God's existence is not worth discussing. God's existence is still open to argument and persuasion, and your conclusion about it has the utmost importance to how you conduct your life, but we cannot hope to find proof. As in most of life, one cannot wait for certainty before acting, and one's action is an implicit acknowledgement of belief.

William James says in his 1896 "The Will to Believe" that in deciding what to believe, we generally have two goals: to avoid believing false things, and to believe true things. These are distinct aims. One can avoid believing false things simply by having no opinion. That also avoids believing true things. We economists are used to that problem; in our standard framework of frequentist statistics we "fail to reject the null hypothesis" rather than "accept the null hypothesis"; we recognize that in avoiding false positives, we run into more false negatives. When it comes to action, however, suspension of belief is not an option. Religious belief, James says, is a "live" option: it is not forced or prevented by the evidence. Thus, "We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve" (italics in the original).

Neither William James nor the concealment argument are fideistic, saying that reason is useless or harmful for religious belief. Rather, although reason and evidence may be helpful in coming to the truth about God, they will not be any more

³See "Cosmic Leptons Challenge Dark-Matter Detection" *CERN Courier* <http://cerncourier.com/cws/article/cern/40117> (Aug 25, 2009).

conclusive than in determining whether Obama or McCain would make the better president, or whether Napoleon would have won at Waterloo had he been feeling better. Those questions have answers, and with an infinite amount of time and energy we could perhaps find them and convince everyone, but in actuality we do not come to agreement. At the same time, reason can certainly rule out a great many beliefs, and combined with the right starting point, with luck, or with divine grace, it can lead to the truth.

A different Christian approach is to argue that with an unclouded mind any reasonable man would believe in God based on available evidence but that many reasonable men have minds clouded by Original Sin, the Fall of Man. The bias might have been instilled by God, or it might be universal but removed from some people by God's grace. This is the basis of the "presuppositional apologetics" of Cornelius Van Til and John Frame (see the *Wikipedia* article "Presuppositional Apologetics"). Presuppositional apologetics is compatible with the concealment argument. Whichever is true— that we are all on level ground, or that God clouds some minds and unclouds others— the concealment argument is unaffected. It simply says that "reasonable men" in the sense of men who ordinarily take strong evidence and come to the same conclusions will fail to do so if God exists and the evidence is about God. Whether their disagreement comes about because God controls the evidence or because He controls the thought process, the result is much the same. Men who are considered reasonable and open-minded by the standard of the irreligious world will disagree on the existence of God, even if one wishes to say that by some absolute standard the nonbelievers are being unreasonable, biased, or resistant merely because they do not want to admit that God exists.

The concealment argument is not specifically Christian, to be sure. It applies well to Christianity and Judaism, but I do not know enough about other religions to discuss whether it applies to, say, Islam. One of Christianity's claims is that God does not want everyone to believe in Him, or, more mildly, that God refrains from revealing Himself so obviously that everyone would believe. We could deduce that God does not want to be detected from the fact that He is hard to detect, but we also have the evidence of the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments contain ample evidence that God has no wish to be obvious, so the concealment argument also applies to the God of Judaism. It would certainly fail to apply to the god of a religion that claimed that the god's primary aim was to be worshipped by the most people possible.

The argument would also fail to apply to a deistic god, one who created the world and then abandoned it, letting things work out without further intervention. Such a god is powerful, but He does not care about what people think, and so would not bother to cover His tracks. To avoid detection, He would have to pre-sciently arrange the world's clockwork in just the right way. A version of deism

could be built to specify such prearrangement, but a god who must build all the concealment into the arrangement of atoms in the Big Bang needs to exert much more power than one who can intervene selectively and inobtrusively some billions of years later. I find the more economical use of miraculous powers more attractive, as a simpler way to explain the world.

The concealment argument has a variety of practical applications. Before coming to them, it may be useful to address the question of whether economists ought to be exploring theology at all. The proof is in the pudding, of course—in whether awareness of such concepts as incentives, payoff functions, and game theoretic strategies helps the analyst reach interesting conclusions. I have not applied game theory to theology formally here, but formal economic reasoning has been used by others. Almost all of the work on the economics of religion (surveyed in Iannaccone [1998] and Kumar [2008]) concerns, to be sure, religions, not God or religious texts, but economics has also made the bigger stretch to theology. The best-known works are Robert Aumann (2003) and Robert Aumann & Michael Maschler (1985) on the Talmud (see also Aumann’s discussion of method in Sergiu Hart & Robert Aumann [2005]), Steven Brams’s articles (1980a, 1982, 1983b) and books (his 1980 *Biblical Games: A Strategic Analysis of Stories in the Old Testament* and 1983 *Superior Beings: If They Exist, How Would We Know?*), and Geoffrey Miller’s articles (1993a,b, 1994, 1996) applying the law-and-economics approach to Old Testament exegesis. James Heckman (2008) has applied probability theory to the effectiveness of different levels of prayer. Others have also applied the economic approach to theological objectives (Edward Kane [1966]), miracles as randomization (Heike Harmgart, Steffen Huck & Wieland Muller ([2006]), biblical exegesis (Ian Smith [2002]), free will (Edward Glaeser & Spencer Glendon [1998], Douglas Allen [2000], Oslington [2005], and Beck [2007]), and the choice of religion under uncertainty (John Durkin & Andrew Greeley [1991], James Montgomery [1992], Laurence Iannaccone, Rodney Stark & Roger Finke [1998], Tabarrok [2000], and Craig Duncan [2003]).

Of these works, the most relevant to the present topic is Brams (1982). He constructs The Belief Game, a two-by-two game between God and Man in which God either reveals His existence or not and Man believes or not. This is a game of complete information, so it assumes that God exists and Man knows with certainty that God exists. Man, however, still has the option to believe or disbelieve, because belief is treated as a choice rather than a result. This is nonstandard in economics, but has been studied as a possibility in philosophy since William Clifford’s 1877 essay, “The Ethics of Belief,” on a person’s deliberate choice of what to know and how to react to information. Given the payoff structure assumed by Brams, iterated dominance yields an equilibrium, Conceal-Disbelieve, which is pareto-dominated by another outcome, Reveal-Believe. I might quarrel with Brams’s model as a description of reality—or of, if you like, the reality assumed in Christian and Jewish

theology— but what is more relevant here is that Brams is tackling two different, much more difficult, questions than the present paper: why God does not reveal Himself, and why Man does not believe. I take God's concealment as a starting point and treat Man's belief as an involuntary reaction, limiting myself to the implications of those two assumptions.

As far as I know, the concealment argument is new, but it is hard to believe that someone has not thought of it already. C.S. Lewis alludes to a form of it in *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape writes to his nephew saying that in past centuries, devils found the best strategy was to appear and make humans fear them, but in the 20th century, the grand strategy is to remain concealed and make humans believe that devils do not exist. If any reader of this knows of some philosopher or theologian whom I ought to have cited, please let me know.

Applications

The concealment argument is more than a cute argument. It has implications for how we should behave, because it dooms many projects to failure and helps explain a number of puzzles. Consider the following.

1. Finding proofs that God exists.
2. Proving that prayer heals the sick.
3. Proving that miraculous healings happen nowadays.
4. Proving that prophets predict the future.
5. Showing that an intelligent designer is responsible for the coincidences found in the laws of physics and in the mutations needed for evolution to fit observation.
6. Searching for ancient manuscripts and inscriptions to confirm the miracles in the Bible.
7. The lack of records of Biblical miracles in secular ancient history.
8. Sociobiology's success in explaining certain aspects of ethics.
9. The belief in God of some people and the disbelief of others when faced with the same evidence.
10. The suffering of Christians.

Below I will say a little about each item in this list.

1. Finding proofs that God exists.

Many people have tried to prove the existence of God using arguments based purely on logic or on evidence— see, for example, Richard Gale’s 1993 *On the Nature and Existence of God*, Richard Swinburne’s 2004 *The Existence of God*, or Alvin Plantinga’s much-circulated lecture notes. St. Anselm wrote the earliest version of the Ontological Proof, relying on pure reason, in the second chapter of his *Proslogion* in 1087, arguing roughly that since existence is good, if we can think of something that is perfectly good, i.e., God, then that something must exist. Thomas Aquinas famously rejected this argument in his *Summa Theologica*, but they have continued to tantalize. Oppy’s 1995 book, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* lays out a variety of ontological arguments.

Ontological arguments do not rely on experience, and so are less clearly affected by the concealment argument than arguments based on evidence. Nonetheless, if we start from the premises that God does not wish to be provable and that He is omnipotent, it follows that He would create a universe in which logical arguments will fail to convince, whether because He can control the rules of logic (a difficult question), because he can cloud our fallible minds so that the logical argument is too hard for us to follow, or, as the Presuppositionalists say, because men are sinful and refuse to admit to what reason tells them.

On the other hand, insofar as the logical proofs do not try to prove that the Christian God exists, but just that a Supreme Being with characteristics such as omnipotence, atemporality, and utter goodness exists, the concealment argument fails to apply. I believe that the God of the Bible does not necessarily have these characteristics, needing merely to be very powerful, long-lived, and good, but this is not the place to go into that topic. More relevant is that even if there exists a God who is omnipotent, atemporal, and utterly good, the Bible might be false and Christianity misguided. Thomas Aquinas wrote that logical proofs may be able to prove the existence of God, but not of the Trinity (*Summa*, Part I, Q.2, A.2, “Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists?”; Q.32, A.1, “Whether the trinity of the divine persons can be known by natural reason?”). Some bridge would be needed to go from the existence of god generally to the existence of the Christian God. Thus, the concealment argument does not say that we might not come across some convincing logical argument about ultimate beings, so long as the bridge to detection of the Christian God is not found.

2. Proving that prayer heals the sick

Suppose we wanted to try to decide whether prayers heal the sick. A straightforward way would be to collect data on people diagnosed with cancer and see whether churchgoers go into spontaneous remission more often than a control group of atheists. Scientists have tried various tests of this sort ever since Francis Galton (1872) looked at the lifespan of the royal family (the most prayed-for people in the kingdom) and insurance rates for ships carrying missionaries versus mercantile or slave-trading vessels. He found no evidence of any differences. C. Joyce & R. Welldon (1965) did a double-blind experiment on the effects of prayer on hospital patients. They, too, found no difference. William Harris et al. (1999), and L. Leibovici (2001) did find prayer to be effective in their double-blind experiments, but Krucoff et al (2005) and others found the opposite. For a survey, see D. Hodge (2007).

If you accept the concealment argument, however, you needn't bother to look at this line of research. According to the concealment argument, even if God answers prayers, we would find nothing in our sample. God would treat the sample differently from prayers in general and would choose not to answer those prayers. Or, he would cure more atheists than usual in the sample we use for our control group. He might at the same time be answering every prayer for a person not in the sample. Our scientific study would be trivially easy for him to evade. And since He has perfect foreknowledge, it not enough for us to go back and collect data from 20 years ago, because He would have foreseen that, and arranged for those past prayers to be answered accordingly. Recall Figure 1's *Far Side* cartoon of God in a game show. You can't win at poker with the Omnipotent. Any results that show up will be inconclusive, and might well be due to publication bias (journals' bias towards accepting studies with positive results rather than negative results, a bias which result in more false positives than true negatives).

Another scientific approach to studying the efficacy of prayer would be to try to find and document specific cases thoroughly. That has the immediate problem that many illnesses have occasional spontaneous cures for no apparent reason even apart from prayer or laying on of hands. If we could find and confirm a whole series of such cures, however, in a small space of time and place, this would be convincing evidence. The Roman Catholic Church does this when it decides whom to call "saints". A candidate must have two miracles to his credit—ordinarily, miracles that follow prayers to the candidate. The fact that the seeming miracles follow prayers is supposed to confirm that they are indeed miracles, which is a valid argument if we can be sure that there are not so many prayers that we would expect some apparent successes by chance. The concealment argument says that such efforts will fail to be convincing. God may well do miracles, but not in such a way that they can be checked convincingly.⁴ He will perform them on a systematic

⁴The amazing cure of a Costa Rican woman's brain aneurysm, an element of Pope John Paul II's

basis only in places or times so obscure (or unfriendly for skeptical inquiry) that the evidence will be thin— in ancient Palestine or modern Mongolia.

3. Proving that miraculous healings happen nowadays.

Christianity depends critically on ancient miracles. Without the Resurrection, not much is left of Christianity. Christianity does not depend on current miracles, however, though it is compatible with them. “Cessationists” believe miracles ceased after the time of the apostles; “continualists” believe they still occur. Note that even cessationists do not necessarily reject divine intervention. They deny that God intervenes with spectacular miracles, but might well believe that divine providence is active in answering prayer or inflicting punishment by means of seemingly natural causes. Some continualists do make miracles a central part of their doctrine, notably Roman Catholics and some pentacostalists. The concealment argument says that any such miracles, while credible to believers, will not be accepted as such by unbelievers. Thus, while the Roman Catholic process of canonization does require miracles to be proved to the satisfaction of the Vatican, it does not require them to be proved to the satisfaction of atheists (see Beccari (1907) in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* for further detail).

4. Proving that prophets predict the future.

Christianity does not depend crucially on ancient prophecy, as it does on ancient miracles, but the ancient prophecies, unlike the miracles, are works in progress. Some prophecies have been fulfilled and some are obsolete, but some are still open. In particular, many Christians believe that the prophecies of the book of *Revelation* started to be fulfilled in the 19th and 20th centuries with such things as the creation of Israel (see Hal Lindsey’s 1970 bestseller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*). In addition, continualists who believe that miraculous healings still occur also believe that prophecy still occurs, though in practice the prophecies seem to consist of admonitions rather than predictions.

The concealment argument applies to prophecy as it does to miracles. It implies that we will not see dramatic confirmation of the Bible’s truth in the form of the fulfillment of its prophecies, or that we will see proof of the divine inspiration of current prophets in the form of predictive public prophecies that are fulfilled today.

5. Showing that an intelligent designer is responsible for the coincidences found

Canonization,” is an example. See Alexander Smoltczyk, “Pope John Paul II’s Canonization: The Making of a Miracle,” *Der Spiegel Online*, (March 7, 2014).

in the laws of physics and in the mutations needed for evolution to fit observation.

The Teleological Argument for God's existence (the "Argument from Design"), carefully laid out by William Paley in 1809 though much older, is that the universe is so wonderful and complex, interlocked in such a precise way, that a divine being must have created it. As Paley put it in his most famous passage,

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer that for anything I knew to the contrary it had lain there forever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place. I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that for anything I knew the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, namely, that when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive, what we could not discover in the stone, that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose . . . [The requisite] mechanism being observed, the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker. Every observation which was made in our first chapter concerning the watch may be repeated with strict propriety concerning the eye, concerning animals, concerning plants, concerning, indeed, all the organized parts of the works of nature.

Since 1809, the theory of evolution has blunted the force of Paley's argument, but as John Lennox describes in his 2007 *God's Undertaker*, the advances of science have raised as many questions as they have answered. (Bradley Boadview's 2009 book is a useful work on the subject by an atheist philosopher.) Evolution has proven highly useful in explaining a multitude of phenomena in Nature, but has signally failed to fulfill its early promise as a Theory of Everything. In Darwin's day, it lacked an explanation for how new attributes could arise in organisms— his theory was merely about how competition selected among existing attributes— but the ideas of mutations and discrete genes addressed that defect. What has become increasingly unsatisfactory, however, is the lack of fossil evidence for intermediate forms, the difficulty of explaining the numerous beneficial mutations that the grand theory requires, and the difficulty of explaining the origins of life itself, all of which seems to use the extraordinarily complicated DNA molecule and nothing simpler. The Intelligent Design movement has seized upon these widening gaps in the theory to suggest outside intervention as the explanation for genetic change, as opposed to denying the improbability and explaining change by the luck of the draw in solar radiation or copying errors. The result is confusion— the ID forces claiming the random-mutation theory is inadequate, the anti-ID forces

claiming that it is or that some new physical force will turn up to replace random mutations.

Advances in physics and chemistry have led to similar puzzles, the “fine tuning” of the universe. For carbon to form from helium or beryllium, the nuclear ground state energy levels have to be fine-tuned to within 1 percent of the levels they have. Otherwise, life would not be possible. If the ratio of the strong nuclear force to the electromagnetic force were different by one part in 10 to the 16th power, stars could not form. If the ratio of the electromagnetic force constant to the gravitational force constant were different by one part in 10 to the 40th power, then either only small stars or only large stars would exist. Life needs both: large stars to produce the elements and small stars to burn long enough to sustain life. The Earth must not be more than 2% away from its present distance from the Sun, or either all the water would evaporate or the world would be too cold for life. If the proportion of energy released when hydrogen fuses into helium were .006 or .008 instead of .007, we could not exist. (Lennox, pp. 69–72, Rees [2001]).

Yet proving the existence of the Christian God from Nature is doomed to failure, according to the concealment argument. Even in Paley’s day, there was the problem that the divine being was not necessarily Jehovah, but could instead be any of a number of gods. By now, evolution has provided another explanation for the wonders of Nature. It shows how complex animals could come about, and also why they are not better designed than they are. This is a weak point of intelligent design. Both evolution and design can explain why the world “works”, but evolution can also explain why it sometimes does *not* work so well. The human appendix and weak back muscles are not what we would expect from an intelligent designer. Even mere mortals can improve on the human body by removing the appendix and eliminating the possibility of appendicitis (though the risk and cost of the operation means in practice we wait till appendicitis arises and is dangerous). Evolution explains this by path dependence— that human evolution proceeded by relatively small increments of improvement, and these two defects are hard to eliminate because of the initial conditions of the process. .

The concealment argument suggests, however, that perfect bodies were not God’s goal. Instead, if He is to remain concealed from modern science, He would have to suggest a material explanation for the wonders of Nature— evolution, or something else. The argument from design would be too strong otherwise. The concealment argument says that God would obscure the evidence and provide an alternative theory. The argument from design can still be useful— indeed, I myself explore it with Eric Hedin in our “Fine Tuning, Hume’s Miracle Test, and Intelligent Design,”— but it will not be a knockdown argument and we will find no smoking gun in some obscure molecule.

In one extreme form, this argument has already been made. This is the Creationist idea that God made the world with fossils and ancient rocks some 5,000 years ago, purposely making them look old so the young earth is observationally equivalent to a planet several billion years old. That, of course, cannot be refuted, except for its lack of supporting evidence and its implication that God is willing to pro-actively distort facts to mislead even the most open-minded and receptive human brain (a willingness that would cast doubt on the reliability of the Bible as much as of Nature; if God wishes to make it impossible for reason to convince, He would be as willing to make the Bible blatantly misleading too). More plausibly, I think, God created a world which by 2008 has enough signs of divine intervention to tantalize but too few to convince.

6. Searching for ancient manuscripts and inscriptions to confirm the miracles in the Bible.

It is quite plausible that new manuscripts and inscriptions will turn up in the Holy Land and that new scientific techniques will allow us to read faded writing. The James Ossuary came to light in 2002: a stone burial box with an inscription that read “ames son of Joseph, Brother of Jesus”. While not very substantial as evidence that Jesus was God, and while possibly a forgery (see the 2008 *Wikipedia* entry), the box was an exciting find and shows what might come up. Multi-spectral imaging has allowed scholars to make new discoveries from Oxford’s Oxyrhynchus Papyri, texts from an ancient Egyptian garbage dump. These have included parts of an unknown tragedy of Sophocles, a novel by Lucian, and an epic poem by Archilochos (see Owen [2005]). Entirely new manuscripts might be discovered, as the Dead Sea Scrolls were in the 1940’s.

The concealment argument says that we should expect that nothing will turn up that will lend dramatic support for the Bible’s accuracy. At best, discoveries would be like the James Ossuary, lending support to nonmiraculous details. Similarly, lack of discoveries should not discourage the Christian; it is part of his theory. It is not like the dismaying gaps in the evidence for evolution, which the theory says should diminish over time.

7. The lack of records of Biblical miracles in secular ancient history.

Consider the following two Gospel passages:

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed

his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"

—Luke 23: 44–47.

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

—Matthew 27: 50–54.

According to the Bible, Jerusalem was dark for three hours at the time of the Crucifixion, there was an earthquake, and dead people appeared in the streets. In the prior months or years a large number of people were suddenly cured of disease in Palestine. If so, why do we not read of such things in Roman or Jewish writings of the time? We might not expect to see the events described as miracles, but they ought to show up at least as peculiar stories like Herodotus's skeptical report in 4.42 of his *History* of Phoenician sailors claiming that the sun was to their north as they sailed around Africa.

The concealment argument provides an answer. Just as God does not want we moderns to videotape any miracles in the 21st century, so he did not want a Tacitus or a Josephus to write about them in the 1st century. Or, to be more precise, he did not want any such writings to survive till the modern age. This would be easy to arrange, since so much of what the ancients wrote is lost to us. Indeed, it is more surprising that an ancient history would survive than that all the early copies would be destroyed— as happened almost invariably— and medieval monks would fail to make copies that survived barbarians, Vikings, Arabs, pogroms, and Turks.

8. Sociobiology's success in explaining certain aspects of ethics.

The moral argument for God's existence relies on the presence of universal moral feelings in humans. C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* is a good presentation. The argument is based on evidence, and thus subject to the concealment argument. True, there seems to be universal moral sentiments. Also true, however, is that animals have many behaviors that look like morals and are instinctive. Those behaviors might have been generated by evolution in both animals and humans. This appearance is what we should expect whether God instilled morality in us or not. To be sure, morality and an instinctive belief in God do not always seem to promote

reproductive success. Unless we rely on the controversial idea of group selection or argue that in practice primitive humans rarely met non-relatives and so did not distinguish them in behavior, it is hard to explain why someone should behave nicely to non-relatives, and a belief in God takes us even a step further from the survival of individual genes. But the concealment argument predicts the existence of some halfway plausible counterargument to the moral argument, and such is sociobiology.

9. The belief in God of some people and the disbelief of others when faced with the same evidence.

James wrote “The Will to Believe” in reaction against William Clifford’s 1877 “The Ethics of Belief,” which argues that you should not suspend disbelief until you have carefully examined evidence for a theory. James makes the point that it is foolish to require a particular level of evidence when one must make a decision—one must act whether one is sure or not. James plays the bayesian to Clifford’s frequentist: why refuse to reject the null hypothesis even tentatively if you think it is less likely than the alternative hypothesis?

James does not argue with another of Clifford’s points, however: that the decision to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgement is an ethical one, and we can rightly condemn mistaken acts undertaken with noble motives under an incorrect belief if that belief was wrongly chosen. This idea of choosing beliefs yields another application of the concealment argument. It may be that two people are confronted with the same evidence, but Smith believes in God and Jones disbelieves because they form their beliefs differently. On the bayesian view, it may be that Smith puts a higher prior probability on God’s existence than Jones does. This is the economist’s standard answer for why people disagree after sharing information, although it is standardly acknowledged to be unsatisfactory not to be able to explain why the priors are different to begin with (see the 1992 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* survey, “Common Knowledge,” by John Geanakoplos). On the frequentist view, it may be that both adopt atheism as the null hypothesis but Smith uses a 10% significance level for rejecting the null and Jones uses a 1% level. Going a step further, we might add presuppositionalism: Jones uses a 1% level because he is biased and wants any excuse not to believe in God. Either way, God may intentionally provide evidence just strong enough to fit between the decision criteria of the two observers, leaving them in disagreement.

10. The suffering of Christians.

The concealment argument has nothing to say about the fundamental Problem of Evil— why a good God would allow sin or pain in His world. Indeed, Premise

3— that God wishes to remain concealed— is one aspect of the Problem of Evil. Some people would prefer not to believe in a God who purposely left people with drastically incorrect beliefs, even if He did not actively mislead them. This is surely no greater a problem than a God who damns or one who allows sin, blasphemy, and physical suffering, however, so if the Problem of Evil undermines the concealment argument, it undermines the very existence of God even more.

What the concealment argument can provide, however, is a reason why God does not exempt the elect from sin and suffering. One might imagine that whatever reason God had for allowing sin and suffering in general, He could exempt His believers. If, for example, it is only just that unredeemed sinners suffer the fire of Hell, and if good behavior is no guarantee of sinlessness or redemption, then hurricanes, child molesting, and war would be easy to explain as merely a milder preface to Hell. But that leaves unexplained why the redeemed would have to wait for Heaven. The concealment argument provides an explanation. If hurricanes spared only the houses of Christians, God's intervention would be obvious. Thus, God's choice if He wishes to remain concealed is between eliminating evil for everybody or for nobody. The only remaining question is why either (1) He does not eliminate evil for everybody, or (2) He gives up His desire to remain concealed and eliminate it only for Christians.

Concluding Remarks

The concealment argument is exceedingly simple, yet it seems not to be well known despite its huge implications for how scholars should conduct their research. Simply using the premises that God does not want to be clearly detectable and that He is powerful enough to carry out His wishes, we can conclude that any academic effort to prove God's existence or activity is doomed to failure— either because He will frustrate it, or because He does not exist. Rarely does a philosophic argument have such practical implications for a professor. Yet the argument also is useful in defusing arguments against God that are based on the lack of progress in finding convincing evidence. Evidence there may be— faith does not have to be groundless— but we must not expect evidence that is convincing at the standard of scientific theories.

Looking at God as a person, a player in a game with actions and payoff functions, is essential to understanding His actions— or to knowing our limitations in understanding His actions. God will not stand still and let us examine Him with our microscopes. We must accept that if He wishes to limit our knowledge of Him, He is going to get His way. We will feel dissatisfied as scholars in not being able to pin things down one way or another, but as scholars we surely realize that one of the most important things we teach our students is what is known and what is not

known.

Let me end with two stories.

The Story of Eli's Son

Leaving the room, Eli told his three-year-old son Adam to behave. Eli would be watching secretly, hidden so Adam can't see him. "Remember," he said, "I'm a lot smarter than you are and you won't be able to see me, but I'll be watching and keeping track of what you're doing. At lunchtime we'll talk about it." Then he walked out the door.

Adam played quietly for a while. He got bored. Was his dad really watching? He took a cookie from the jar and nothing happened. He tried running into other rooms to see if his anyone was there. No sign of it— but a couple of times he thought maybe he heard footsteps running away. He tried calling, "Dad!" but with no response.

Was his father watching? What should Adam believe? Is there any way he can find out before lunchtime?

The Story of the Big Cannon

I carefully loaded the gunpowder, added the cannonball, and tamped it down. It was a good cannon, and my target, Josh, would have no chance against a projectile of that size and speed. I lit the match and looked down the sights.

Unfortunately, Josh wasn't there. I'd forgotten to aim first. Josh was smiling at me from eight feet left of where the cannonball would go.

"I can fix that," I said. With the turning spike, I turned the cannon slightly to the left and looked down the sights. New problem. Josh moved eight feet to the right.

I needed a new strategy. I moved the cannon again, to point at the path to his house, got ready with the match, and looked through the sites, waiting for him to enter the line of fire. The match burned out. Seventeen matches later, I looked up. When he saw me look up, he ran into the house before I could light the cannon.

I fell into deep thought. I need a bigger cannon. Maybe two cannons. Or maybe three, all much bigger than the one I kept failing with.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Josh. "You're my prisoner. Join me for dinner." And so I did.

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As C. Robert Mesle put it in 1988, "Does God hide from us? There is something slightly improper about putting the question in the active voice. Traditionally we have preferred the passive voice, speaking of the 'hiddenness' of God."

Antecedents in Pascal and in John Hick:

"We may accept the theological doctrine that for God to force men to know him by the coercion of logic would be incompatible with his purpose of winning the voluntary response and worship of free moral beings." Hick, John (1970) .

"A verbal proof of God's existence cannot by itself break down our human freedom; it can only lead to a notional assent which has little or no positive religious value or substance." Hick (19780) p. 107.

Hick's argument falters, though, because of the difference between *fides* and *fiducia*, between intellectual belief in God's existence and trust and devotion to him. Even if intellectual belief was coerced, in the sense of being mandated for rational thinkers by the presentation of massive evidence, trust in God would be optional.

James 2:19-20: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"

"if purely rational arguments (even the ontological argument which focuses on the perfection and worshipfulness of God) cannot violate that aspect of our freedom which is involved in our voluntary cognitive choice to believe that God exists (i.e., if we quietly admit that belief is not identical with faith), then there seems to be no explanation of why God has not given us clear evidence of God's existence. Hick had failed to explain what he set out to explain. He has gone to enormous trouble to solve a problem which he then says is not a problem!" MESLE

Laura Garcia's point that 'it could be that the requisite attitude of heart is more necessary for our ultimate good than simply acquiring true beliefs'.

"If there is a personal God who is perfectly loving, creatures capable of explicit and positively meaningful relationship with God, who have not freely shut themselves off from God, are always in a position to participate in such relationship - able to do so just by trying to." Schellenberg (2005).

MY RESPONSE: 1. This is a reiteration of the problem of evil. One half of the problem of evil is pain and sin in this present world. The other half, relevant here, is why God would allow damnation. Both are involved here— why not relationships on earth, and why not bring salvation to everybody?

2. Note that if God DID reveal himself to everybody, we'd still have the pain on earth part of this.

3. For my paper, it does not matter whether Schellenberg is right. Schellenberg sets out to show that the Christian God does not exist. I set out to show that we cannot prove the Christian God whether He exists or not. We can both be correct.

4. But I think Schellenberg can be answered by any other answer to the problem of evil. My personal response is that I think this is a proper mystery: knowing God's deep motivations is beyond humans. I think we can tell He is not going to save everyone, and that he has power enough to stop pain. Why he makes those choices is undiscoverable. We have too little data on what other possible universes he might have created. This could be the best of all possible worlds. He might be constrained in the worlds he could create. He might even be evil, in our imperfect eyes. A toddler boy whose parents let a man in a white coat stick needles into him would ask the same questions. Or, another possibility: a loving God would not insist on a relationship, and almost everybody MIGHT be saved in the afterlife, even if they don't believe.

M. Jamie Ferreira, who draws inspiration from Kierkegaard: here we have the suggestion that my argument fails because it expects the impossible: the existence of God could not be put beyond reasonable non-belief, in my sense. This, we are told, is on account of the nature of God as 'the absolutely different'.²¹

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