Three Objections to Soul-Building Hiddenness Theodicies

‘Soul-building’ solutions to the problem of divine hiddenness maintain that God refrains from making his existence obvious to us because if he made his existence obvious, we would be coerced to behave well morally. For, if God made his existence obvious to us, we would fear his punishments to such an extent that evildoing would not strike us as a “live” option. Proponents of soul-building solutions contend, however, that if we were coerced to do good, we could not freely do good, and thus, we would be robbed of the opportunity to build our characters morally. In this essay I present two different ways of understanding this argument and I offer a critical discussion of each. Then I offer major objections to the argument on either interpretation.

1. Soul-Building Theodicies

The “problem of divine hiddenness” is an alleged problem for theism which arises from the contention that, if God existed, more people would find it obvious that he existed. There are multiple ways of arguing for this contention. The most prominent argument is that if God existed, he would want us to have a relationship with him, since it would be a great good for us. So, to the extent that we would need to believe in God to enjoy a relationship with him, God would give us the conditions we needed to develop and sustain theistic belief.

The first “soul-building” response to this problem was introduced by Richard Swinburne (1991, 211-2).[[1]](#footnote-1) His argument is that God needs to refrain from making his existence obvious to us in order to secure for us the capacity for a certain measure of moral accomplishment. For, Swinburne reasons, if God renders his existence obvious to us, he must also render it obvious to us that he has severe punishments in store for sinners. For to recognize God *as* God we must recognize that he is perfectly just, whereas it is obvious, Swinburne suggests, that a perfectly just God would not let unrepented-for sins go unpunished.

As a result, if God were to make his existence obvious to us, we would be so terrified to sin[[2]](#footnote-2) that we would be coerced to avoid sin and to do good. But actions are less voluntary—and thus, less praiseworthy—if they are coerced than they would be otherwise. It follows that, if God were to make his existence obvious to us, he would thereby diminish the degree of praiseworthiness that we could aspire to by doing good or avoiding evil. So—whatever evils might result from divine hiddenness—God has a justifying reason to remain hidden, since it is so valuable for us to have a heightened capacity for praiseworthiness.

There are, however, at least two importantly different ways of interpreting Swinburne’s argument. On one hand, we might interpret him to be defending the *strong* thesis that if God were to make his existence obvious to us then we would be so terrified of his punishments that we would *altogether* lose the capacity for praiseworthy behavior. (For, the argument on this interpretation would go, if we were sufficiently terrified of the punishments God has in store for sinners, we would altogether lose the capacity for sin. And, it would be argued, we must have the option of sinning if we are to perform genuinely praiseworthy actions.) On the other hand, we might interpret Swinburne to be defending the *weaker* thesis that if God were to make his existence obvious then—while we might not lose the capacity for praiseworthy behavior outright—we would not be capable of achieving as exalted of a *degree* of praiseworthiness as we would otherwise.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In what remains of this section I will standardize both interpretations of the argument. I will begin with the strong interpretation, pointing out various difficulties that it faces. Then I will introduce the weakened interpretation and argue that it faces difficulties of its own.

Here is the argument on the strong interpretation, call it The Strong Argument.

**The Strong Argument**

1. If God renders his existence obvious to us, then God renders it obvious to us that he severely punishes sins.
2. If God renders it obvious to us that he severely punishes sins, God makes us incapable of sinning.
3. Therefore, if God renders his existence obvious to us, God makes us incapable of sinning (From 1, 2, Hypothetical Syllogism).
4. If God makes us incapable of sinning, God makes us incapable of praiseworthy behavior.
5. Therefore, if God renders his existence obvious to us, God makes us incapable of praiseworthy behavior (From 3, 4, Hypothetical Syllogism).

From this conclusion, it is meant to follow that God has a justifying reason to refrain from making his existence obvious to us, that is, that God has a justifying reason to remain hidden.[[4]](#footnote-4) Although various evils might result from divine hiddenness, these are counterbalanced, since it is only by remaining hidden that God can give us the capacity for praiseworthy behavior.

Here Swinburne assumes that, by giving us the capacity for praiseworthiness, God would totally compensate for hiddenness. Perhaps it would be more plausible for Swinburne to argue that God would thereby *partially* compensate for hiddenness. Such partial compensation might give God a reason to remain hidden even if not a *justifying* reason. And thus, it might contribute meaningfully to a hiddenness theodicy. But I shall not pursue this issue further.

Let us, then, examine The Strong Argument in more detail. Swinburne’s argument for premise 1 begins with the sub-premise that, if God’s existence was obvious to us, then his perfect justice would also be obvious to us. Swinburne does not explain his reasoning here, but—as I suggested above—his thought seems to be that God cannot be recognized as God unless he is recognized as a perfectly just being. The rest of the argument is hazy. While some sins like murder call for severe punishments, surely others like subtle vainglory do not**.** But Swinburne seems to reason that since sin *as such* deserves severe punishments, and since everyone understands this, everyone who knew (or at least, everyone to whom it was *obvious*[[5]](#footnote-5)) that God exists would understand that God would punish them severely for their sins.[[6]](#footnote-6)

What is meant in the above argument by “severe punishments”? Swinburne’s argument is that, if God’s existence were obvious to us, sin would bring with it a minimum punishment of shame before an all-knowing God. The virtue of this approach is that it allows him to sidestep the issue of whether a merciful God could eternally punish sinners in hell. But it comes with the cost of making premise 2—*i.e.*, that we would lose the capacity to sin if God made his existence obvious to us—implausible. Theists of all stripes habitually sin even though it makes them ashamed before God. It strains credulity to suppose that our shame would become too strong to allow us to keep sinning if only God’s existence were more obvious to us.

Swinburne’s argument for premise 2 of The Strong Argument is also dubious. This argument proceeds as follows:

**(2A)** If God renders it obvious to us that he severely punishes sins then we cannot but conclude that sinning is all-things-considered inferior to doing good (212).

**(2B)** In order to perform any action φwe must believe that φ-ing is our all-things considered best option (98-101, 212).

**(2)** Therefore, if God renders it obvious to us that he severely punishes sins, he renders us incapable of sinning.

But premise 2A seems problematic since humans can form wildly irrational beliefs. Hence, even faced with the knowledge that God eternally punishes sins, it would still seem within the realm of human possibility to rationalize the notion that sinning would be all-things-considered beneficial.[[7]](#footnote-7) (*A fortiori* we could easily rationalize sin despite knowing that we will, assuming we repent, eventually be ashamed of our sins before God.)

There might, however, be ways of successfully responding to this objection.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is, at any rate, some intuitive weight behind the notion that, were God to clearly communicate to everyone that he would eternally and severely punish anyone who intentionally killed innocent people, many people at least would be so terrified of God’s punishments that they would lose the psychological capacity to decide to perform such actions. To reiterate, it is not part of Swinburne’s argument that God eternally punishes sinners in the afterlife, but it is worth accounting for this possibility.

Let us now turn to address Swinburne’s argument for Premise 4 of The Strong Argument—*viz.* that if God makes us incapable of sinning, God makes us incapable of praiseworthy behavior. Swinburne’s basic idea here is clear: in order to be capable of praiseworthy behavior, we must be capable of doing evil. Stated in this way, the premise might appear to receive support from the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP).

**Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP):** In order to be morally responsible for φ-ing, one must have been able to refrain from φ-ing.

PAP does not lead straightaway to Swinburne’s desired conclusion that we must be able to sin in order to behave in praiseworthy ways, however. All that the principle tells us is that in order to behave in a praiseworthy way, we must be capable of *refraining from behaving in a praiseworthy way*. To arrive at Swinburne’s desired conclusion, we need an additional premise, namely, that one cannot refrain from behaving in a praiseworthy way without sinning.

Although this additional premise might initially seem implausible, I believe there is something to be said for it. To be sure, one can refrain from behaving in some *particular* praiseworthy way without sinning. For example, if I refrain from donating money to Goodwill, I have refrained from doing something praiseworthy, but I have not necessarily sinned, for instance if I give to another charity. But if I *voluntarily* refrain from behaving in *any* praiseworthy way whatever, then it seems plausible that I have sinned. Here it should be borne in mind that everyday actions like eating a meal can be morally good even if they are not heroic, and that moral goodness is all that is required for praiseworthiness in a minimal sense. (Some readers might doubt that eating a meal can be morally good under normal circumstances. I bid these readers to consider that whether an action is morally good is plausibly a matter of whether it is reasonable, since moral responsibility is a consequence of the capacity of reason in humans.)

So perhaps Premise 4 of The Strong Argument is unassailable. Thus, a modified argument might keep this premise while revising the problematic premises 1 and 2. For instance, these premises might be revised so that they did not suggest that it would be impossible for *all* or even *most* peopleto sin given the relevant kind of knowledge of God’s existence, but just that it would be impossible for *some* people. For, as I suggested above, it might seem plausible that *some* people would be psychologically incapable of sinning if God made it obvious to them that he would severely punish them for sinning. And, given premise 4 of The Strong Argument, it follows that these people would not be capable of praiseworthy behavior.

But what this revised argument gains in plausibility it loses in its capacity to serve as the basis of a theodicy. If hiddenness was necessary to give everyone the capacity for praiseworthy behavior, God might have good reason to remain hidden. But if hiddenness is only necessary to give *some* people that capacity, it is less clear that God’s decision to remain hidden is justified. To be sure, God might achieve a partial justification for hiddenness thereby, and this partial justification could be combined with others to add up to a complete justification. But the major objections I present to the Strong Argument below will show that the reasoning underlying even the partial justification here would be flawed.

There is a weaker interpretation of Swinburne’s argument that can avoid many of these objections. I shall formulate this interpretation of the argument as follows:

**The Weak Argument**

1. If God renders his existence obvious to us, he renders it obvious to us that he punishes sins.[[9]](#footnote-9)
2. If God renders it obvious to us that he punishes sins, he makes it easier for us to do good.
3. Therefore, if God renders his existence obvious to us, he makes it easier for us to do good (From 1, 2, Hypothetical Syllogism).
4. The praise we deserve for doing good is proportional to how difficult it is for us to do good.
5. Therefore, God cannot render his existence obvious to us without diminishing the extent to which we can be praiseworthy for doing good (From 3, 4).

This argument avoids some of the problems faced by The Strong Argument. It is not plausible, as we have seen, that threats of divine punishment would render everyone, or even most people, *incapable* of sinning. It is plausible, however, that such threats—by incentivizing good behavior—would make it *easier* for most people to choose to do good. And the conclusion of The Weak Argument—*viz.* that God must remain hidden in order to secure for us the potential for a certain degree of moral accomplishment—would nonetheless contribute meaningfully to a hiddenness theodicy.

Here it is worth noting that The Weak Argument, like The Strong Argument, could be used as a partial, rather than a total, defense of hiddenness. Even if the conclusion does not show that God has a justifying reason to remain hidden, it might show that he has *a* reason to do so.

Swinburne does not defend premise 2—*viz*. that if God renders it obvious to us that he severely punishes sins, he makes it easier for us to do good. Here I’ll offer a few considerations which make the premise seem plausible. Suppose you knew that God would punish you severely if you did not take the trash out tonight. Then—supposing at least that you did not have serious reasons to refrain from taking the trash out—you would probably not need to engage in arduous reasoning to arrive at the conclusion that you ought to take out the trash. It would be obvious to you that this was the only reasonable course of action. And even if you were originally lethargic, you might now find it easy to overcome your lethargy given all that was at stake.

The thought behind premise 2 of The Weak argument could be that matters are similar when we turn to the question whether to behave well morally. In this latter case, too, if God was in the background threatening us (in obvious ways) for non-compliance, we could more easily see that the right choice was to do good rather than evil. (I am assuming here that these—good and evil—are the only two alternatives. But this assumption is plausible since, as I argued above, omissions to do anything-good-at-all can be construed as evil at least when those omissions are voluntary.) And we would have an extra bit of motivation which might also make it easy (or, at least much easi*er*) to follow through with the decision to do good, since most of us would want to avoid divine punishments.

There is a wrinkle for this analogy, however, between taking out the trash and behaving well morally. For it is obvious that fear of divine punishments could motivate someone to take out the trash. It is less obvious, however, that one can fulfill all of his moral obligations if his sole motivation is to avoid divine punishments. I shall work out the implications of this problem in Section II of this essay.

So much for premise 2 of The Weak Argument. Let’s examine premise 4—namely, that the praise we deserve for doing good is proportional to how difficult it is for us to do good. Gwendolyn Bradford has defended the closely related thesis that achievements are by nature difficult. For example, she notes, while it would not be a significant accomplishment for a two-armed man to tie his shoes, it might be for a one-armed man. And climbing Mt. Everest is a much more significant accomplishment than taking a helicopter (12-3). These considerations lend prima facie plausibility to premise 4.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Let us take stock. Premise 1 of The Strong Argument is implausible because it implies that God severely punishes even the slightest of sins. And if the only way God punishes us is by making us feel ashamed before him then Premise 2 is also implausible. For theists regularly sin even though they believe that they will feel ashamed before God for doing so. The Weak Argument avoids these worries. In what remains of this essay however, I will raise major objections to each argument.

1. Three Objections
   1. Objection One: Psychological Constraints on Morally Good Behavior

My first major objection to both arguments—The Strong Argument and The Weak Argument—is that the second premise of each of them rests on a failure to grasp important psychological constraints on morally good behavior. Many counterexamples to both premises help to demonstrate this point.

Recall, the second premise of The Strong Argument states:

1. If God renders it obvious to us that he severely punishes sins, God makes us incapable of sinning.

But suppose God threatens Jones that, if Jones sins, he will severely punish him. And suppose that Jones is a father of young children. To be sure, Jones might be so afraid of God’s punishments that he would lose the ability to fail to fulfill some typical parental obligations. For example, supposing Jones was previously capable of malnourishing his children, he might lose that capacity. But Jones would still have morally significant choices to make as a father. For example, he could still decide whether to feed his children out of paternal love or out of fear of punishments. And assuming he chose the latter, he would sin. Thus, the second premise of The Strong Argument is false. Jones retains the capacity to sin even after God has revealed that he severely punishes sins.

One might reply that the situation I have described is impossible. For in such a situation, it would be argued, Jones would be irresistibly compelled, not only to feed his children, but also to do so *out of fear*. Thus, Jones would lose the capacity to feed his children from a loving motivation. So, he would not be obligated to feed his children from a loving motivation. For no one is obligated to do what he cannot do.

But this objection is implausible. For Jones would avoid God’s punishments if he fed his children out of love rather than fear. Thus, Jones would not be disincentivized, in any way, to feed his children out of love. Therefore, there are no grounds to suppose that he would be afraid to do so.

Alternatively, one might reply to my objection by arguing that, were God to reveal to Jones that he severely punished sins, Jones would be coerced, not only to feed his children, but also to feed them out of love. Thus, contrary to my objection, Jones would lose the capacity to feed his children for the wrong reasons.

But it is absurd to suppose that Jones could be forced *by his fear* of divine punishments to act from a *non-fearful*, loving motivation. Perhaps Jones could act through both fear and love. Thus, he could feed his children out of love solely in order to avoid punishments. But then his paternal love does not suffice on its own to motivate him to feed his children. This suggests that his motivation in feeding his children is still morally defective.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This counterexample is not an isolated incidence. For many of our moral obligations have a similar structure to the obligation that parents have to feed their children out of love. None of these obligations can be fulfilled by acting through fear of punishments. For example, we are not only obligated to refrain from lying, but we are obligated to so refrain out of respect for others. If we refrain from lying solely in order to avoid divine punishments, we sin. Similarly, if we avoid adultery solely in order to avoid divine punishments, we sin. If we try to fulfill the obligations to avoid lying or adultery just as a means of avoiding divine punishments, we fail to fulfill further obligations which require us to avoid these actions, not out of coercion, but out of respect for persons.

Indeed, a plausible case can be made that it is impossible to coerce a man to act morally well in anything that he does. For morally good action requires us to act ultimately from a love of moral goodness. But coercion cannot change our most fundamental values, but instead presupposes them. For example, suppose the state threatens Jones with prison sentences if he neglects his children. Such a threat might coerce Jones to value responsible fatherhood, but only instrumentally. For the coercive force of the threat requires Jones to value his freedom (from imprisonment) more fundamentally. In general, the values inculcated in us through coercion are instrumentalized to values we hold more fundamentally—namely, the values that the coercion threatens to deprive us of. So, coercion cannot inculcate in us a fundamental love of morality. But to the extent that we hold a fundamental love of morality independently of coercion, then no coercion is needed to make us behave morally well.

It is now easy to see that premise 2 of The Weak Argument is subject to a similar objection. Recall, that premise states:

1. If God renders it obvious to us that he punishes sins, he makes it easier for us to do good.

Granted, it might be easier for Jones to decide to feed his children if God threatens to punish him for negligence. But it is not clear that it would be any easier for Jones to perform praiseworthy actions at all. For if Jones only feeds his children out of fear of divine punishments, he does not behave in a praiseworthy way. And as I have argued, God’s threats cannot give Jones any incentive to feed his children out of love rather than fear, whereas this is what he is morally obligated to do.

In reply, the proponent of the soul-building strategy could argue that heaven consists in seeing God face-to-face in the beatific vision, whereas hell consists in having this vision withheld from us eternally. Moreover, it would be argued, it is noble to want, above all else, to achieve the beatific vision. Therefore, if Jones were to feed his children out of fear of hell, he would act nobly. In general, by introducing threats of damnation, God would powerfully incentivize us to do the right things for the right reasons, since it is noble to pursue the beatific vision in all we do. In this way, it would be argued, the second premises of both The Strong and The Weak Arguments are vindicated. Contrary to my criticisms, God’s threats of damnation would not provide ulterior motives for good behaviors, rather they would provide very good motives for such behaviors.

This reply has two shortcomings. The first is that it is not psychologically plausible that, if only it were obvious to us that God deprived sinners of the beatific vision, we would altogether lose the capacity to sin. The beatific vision simply does not have a powerful enough grip on the desires of ordinary people to dictate their behavior so thoroughly.

The second shortcoming of the reply is that it seems to rest on an implausibly strong intellectualist picture of the will. The idea seems to be that, if only it were obvious to us that our ultimate good consisted in the beatific vision, we would never deliberately choose what was contrary to the good. On such a picture, the source of all sinful action is ignorance of the true nature of our ultimate good. Now, either the ignorance that makes sin possible is culpable or it is not. But if it is not culpable, then there is no reason why actions performed as a result of it should be considered sinful. And if it is culpable then it must be feigned, which is to say that it must not truly be ignorance at all.

Schellenberg offers a similar objection to soul-building theodicies to the one I have provided in this section. His argument is that even if God coerced us to choose the good, and eliminated temptations to choose the contrary, we would still face strong temptations to choose the good for the wrong reasons—namely, to avoid divine punishments. Thus, contrary to soul-building theodicies, we would still have opportunities to develop our characters through resisting these temptations (2005, pp. 294-6).

The assumption here that, even if God were to coerce us to choose the good, we would still face strong temptations to choose the good for the wrong reasons may seem like a bit of armchair psychology. But here is an argument for it. In our present state, we are *not* always inclined to choose the good for its own sake. This is to say that we do not always desire the good fundamentally; sometimes, if we desire the good at all, we desire it instrumentally for the sake of some further, non-good end. But it is impossible for God’s coercive threats to change this situation. For, as I have argued, coercion cannot change what we desire at the most fundamental level. So, even if God threatened to punish us for sinful behavior in an obvious way, we would still occasionally desire to perform good actions for the wrong reasons—to the extent that we desired to perform them that all.

* 1. Objection Two: Parody Argument

In this section I will formulate an argument which parodies The Weak Argument. The basic idea behind the parody argument is this: If God diminishes our capacity for praiseworthy behavior by disincentivizing immoral behavior, then so too must parents diminish their children’s capacity for praiseworthy behavior by disincentivizing immoral behavior in their children. It is not plausible, however, that parents diminish their children’s capacity for praiseworthy behavior by disincentivizing immoral behavior in them. But even if it was, it certainly would not be plausible to conclude that parents have a justifying reason *not* to disincentivize immoral behavior in their children. So, it is not plausible to conclude, on the basis of The Weak Argument, that God has a justifying reason *not* to disincentivize immoral behavior in humans.

Here is the parody argument in standard form. It is deliberately presented in a way which closely mirrors The Weak Argument:

**The Parental Coercion Argument**

1. If parents raise their children well, they discourage immoral behavior in them.
2. If parents discourage immoral behavior in their children, they make it easier for their children to avoid immoral behavior.
3. Therefore, if parents raise their children well, they make it easier for their children to avoid immoral behavior (From 1, 2, hypothetical syllogism).
4. The praise we deserve for doing good is proportional to how difficult it is for us to do good.
5. Therefore, if parents raise their children well, they diminish the extent to which their children can be praiseworthy for performing any action (From 3, 4).

Something must have gone awry in this argument because the conclusion is implausible. But this argument closely mirrors The Weak Argument. So, it is likely that The Weak Argument shares the defects that plague The Parental Coercion Argument. To see this, it will help to run through some of the reasons why one might think that The Parental Coercion Argument fails.

Premise 1 of The Parental Coercion Argument seems obviously true, but there is reason to be suspicious of premise 2. Suppose that effective parents discourage immoral behavior in their children by scolding them for it. The argument for premise 2 would be that, if children know they will be scolded for immoral behavior, it will be easier for them to see that immoral behavior is to be avoided, since they do not want to be scolded. But one could object to this argument by maintaining that if children avoid immoral behavior just to avoid being scolded, they are avoiding it for the wrong reasons. And, it would be argued, avoiding immoral behavior for the wrong reasons is itself immoral.

It could be argued that this objection to premise 2 of The Parental Coercion Argument fails, but that is beside the point. What is relevant is that if the objection is successful, then so is the objection I offered, in the previous section, in response to premise 2 of The Weak Argument. Here the objection was that if we only avoid sin to avoid divine punishments, we avoid sin for the wrong reasons, and so we sin. So, *contra* premise 2 of The Weak Argument, the objection concluded, God’s threats cannot make it easier for us to refrain from sinning.

Where else might we say that The Parental Coercion Argument goes wrong? One might think that premise 4 needs to be revised, and that, once it is suitably revised, the inference to the conclusion becomes invalid. The revised version of premise 4 would tell us that “The praise we deserve for acting according to our conscience is proportional to how difficult it is for us to act according to our conscience.” It could be argued, however, that by scolding their children, parents do not make it easier for children to act according to their consciences, that is, according to what they believe their obligations are. Rather, they help their children to form their consciences correctly, that is, to form true beliefs about what their obligations are. Such a procedure might not make it any easier for children to act on their consciences once their consciences are properly formed.

If this objection is successful, however, then a similar objection could be made in response to The Weak Argument. For it could, with equal plausibility, be argued that God, by threatening us with punishments, does not make it easier for us to act according to our consciences, but instead makes it easier for us to form our consciences properly to begin with.

The point generalizes. Identify a plausible objection to The Parental Coercion Argument, and, I contend, it will also work as an objection to The Weak Argument given the relevant modifications.

To be sure, the proponent of The Weak Argument could avoid the objection I am putting forth in this section by maintaining that The Parental Coercion Argument is sound. After all, it is not crazy to think there is something especially praiseworthy about leading a morally good life if one was never discouraged from immoral behavior by his parents (or caretakers). So, maybe, by raising their children well, and by discouraging immoral behavior in them accordingly, parents diminish the extent to which their children can be praiseworthy for doing good after all.

At this point, however, it is essential to remember that The Weak Argument is meant to serve as the basis of a hiddenness theodicy. And here, it is a fundamental part of the strategy to maintain that since, by discouraging immoral behavior, God would make it easier for us to do good—and since God would thereby diminish the extent to which we would be praiseworthy for doing good—God has a justifying reason to refrain from discouraging immoral behavior in us. But, carried over to the case of parenting, this argument clearly will not do. Suppose we concede, along with the presently considered strategy, that, by discouraging immoral behavior in their children, parents would diminish the extent to which their children could be praiseworthy for doing good. We should still resist the conclusion that parents have a justifying reason to refrain from discouraging immoral behavior in their children. This conclusion is ridiculous on its face, and we have very strong reasons to be suspicious of any arguments offered on its behalf.

Here, then, is the problem for the attempt to use The Weak Argument as the basis of a hiddenness theodicy. To successfully execute this strategy, one would need to maintain that God has a justifying reason *not* to discourage immoral behavior in humans, since, by discouraging immoral behavior in humans, he would diminish our capacity for moral accomplishments. But this argument seems to stand or fall with the following parody argument: parents have a justifying reason *not* to discourage immoral behavior in their children, since, by discouraging immoral behavior in them, they would diminish their children’s capacity for moral accomplishments. But this parody argument is completely implausible.

As I mentioned above, however, The Weak Argument could be enlisted in a more modest program than a complete hiddenness theodicy. If God promotes our capacity for praiseworthiness by remaining hidden, he might have some reason to remain hidden even if he does not thereby have a justifying reason to do so. Combined with other reasons, this one might contribute to a complete defense of his decision to remain hidden. But if the potential for heightened capacities for praiseworthiness gives parents any reason at all to neglect their children’s moral development (since the children would be especially praiseworthy if they had to transcend the circumstances of their upbringing to become virtuous), this reason would be extremely slight. It is hard to imagine it being invoked in a neglectful parent’s defense. And so, it is hard to see how the parallel strategy helps to get God off the hook for hiddenness.

* 1. Objection Three: The Problem of Divine Non-Hiddenness

It strikes me, perhaps counterintuitively, that if either The Strong Argument or The Weak Argument is successful, its success is bad news for theism. The Strong Argument maintains that if God’s existence became obvious to us, we would be coerced to do good, thereby altogether losing the ability to do good freely. But suppose that God’s existence becomes obvious to someone once it becomes rationally warranted (or required) for her to adopt a certain credence in theism. Suppose that credence is .95. What happens, in that case, when someone’s (warranted) credence in the truth of theism is .94?

Surely, if a credence of .95 brings with it a fear of divine punishments so severe that one altogether loses the capacity to sin, then a credence of .94 should bring with it comparable fears. Although these fears might not have reached the level necessary to completely erase one’s capacity for sin, it would be surprising if they did not diminish that capacity at all, or even very severely.

There is a similar problem for The Weak Argument. Here the idea is that if God made his existence obvious to us then we could aspire to a less exalted degree of praiseworthiness than we can presently. Indeed, the degree of praiseworthiness we could aspire to would be so much lower than what we can aspire to presently that God’s obviousness would not compensate for the potential we had lost. Suppose, then, that God’s existence becomes obvious once it is rational for us to adopt a credence of .95 that he exists. Surely, if the Weak Argument is sound, the degree of praiseworthiness we could aspire to would be significantly diminished—compared to what it would be if God’s existence were substantially less evident—once it became rational for us to adopt a credence of .94.

But if our capacity for praiseworthiness declines as the probability of the truth of theism increases then we have an opposite problem to the one we started out with, not a problem of divine hiddenness but of divine non-hiddenness. We would need a theodicy, that is, for why God makes his existence seem probable to billions of people. Moreover, many religious traditions teach that belief in God is conducive if not essential to an upright moral life. But this cannot be so if it impinges on our capacity for praiseworthiness to the extent that it is present.

1. Conclusion

The two arguments for the soul-building theodicy that I have considered ignore important psychological constraints on morally good behavior. Specifically, they ignore the role that non-coercive reasons play in the psychology of the dutiful agent who must, for example, feed his children out of love rather than fear. Moreover, the reasoning involved in one of them supports the ridiculous conclusion that parents ought not to discipline their children. And finally, both arguments suggest that our capacity for praiseworthiness is limited to the extent that God’s existence is evident to us. I conclude that the soul-building theodicy is false. Consequently, if a defense of God’s hiddenness is available, it must lie elsewhere.

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1. Although John Hick offers a predecessor to this response in *Evil and The God of Love*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. By ‘sinning’ I will just mean ‘performing an action for which one is morally blameworthy’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Swinburne argues that we would altogether lose a “genuine choice of destiny” if God made his existence obvious (212). This argument supports the strong interpretation. But in the previous sentence his argument is just that we would face “*little* temptation” to sin if God made his existence obvious to us—not that we would face no temptation at all (212, italics added). And the argument of the rest of the paragraph is that we can only be praiseworthy *to the extent* that we are tempted by sin (211-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here, by “justifying reason,” I follow standard usage in meaning, “a reason in light of which some action is (all-things-considered) justified.” According to this usage, God has a justifying reason to remain hidden if and only if there is some reason *r* such that, were God to remain hidden for reason *r*, God’s decision to remain hidden would be justified. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. But note that “X is obvious to Y” does not imply “Y knows X”, since we can fail to believe what is obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Murray, who also defends a soul-building theodicy, offers a different, albeit highly schematic argument in favor of premise 1. What he says is that, if God were to make his existence obvious to Jones, then, unless God were to also make it obvious to Jones that God punished sins in the afterlife, Jones could not flourish. Why think this? One might think that, were God to make his existence obvious to Jones, Jones would take on heightened moral responsibility for his evil actions. For he would now know that such actions were not just evil, but also sins before God. In fact, any serious evils that Jones committed going forward would be so serious that they would be inconsistent with his flourishing. But inevitably, unless God warned Jones of the afterlife punishments he had in store for sinners, he would continue to commit serious sins, since this is human nature. But this argument is problematic. For it is hard to see how Jones could be free of serious sin if the only reason he avoided it was to avoid afterlife punishments. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J.L. Schellenberg develops this line of argument in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (115-30). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For such a response, see Murray 2002, especially pp. 72-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A weakened version of this premise might state that, by rendering his existence obvious to us, God would make it *seem more likely* to us that our sins will be punished. But this weakening of the premise would mitigate the significance of the argument. And more importantly, the objections that I raise in Section II would work just as well against this revised version of the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. And here is an argument that premise 4 is a corollary of PAP. Recall, PAP tells us that, in order to praiseworthily φone must have the option of not *φ*-ing. But plausibly, if one has the option of not φ-ing, then one must exert some non-zero degree of effort to bring it about that he φ-es. If so, then PAP tells us that, in order to praiseworthily φ, one must exert some non-zero degree of effort to bring it about that he φ-es. But, plausibly, the degree of effort that one must exert to bring it about that he φ-es is proportional to the degree to which he faces difficulty in bringing about that he φ-es. So, the argument would go, PAP implies that in order to praiseworthily φ, one must face some non-zero degree of difficulty in bringing it about that he φ-es. This conclusion lends credibility to the further thesis that the praise we deserve for φ-ing is proportional to how difficult it is for us to φ. And premise 4 is just a simple application of this thesis to the case of good actions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This counterexample has the structure of a Frankfurt-style counterexample to PAP, and its lesson is similar. In the FSC, an agent, call him Smith, is threatened to φ, and he is sufficiently afraid that he loses his capacity to refrain from φ-ing. But Smith chooses to φ, not out of fear, but out of desire. Frankfurt’s contention is that Smith is morally responsible for φ-ing, but some proponents of PAP have denied this, arguing that all he is responsible for is φ-ing *out of desire*—for he could have avoided φ-ing from this motivation. (Frankfurt seems to agree that he is responsible for at least this much.) Even if these proponents of PAP are right, Jones from my original example retains freedom, and thus, moral responsibility. For it is up to him whether to feed his children out of love—as he is obligated to—or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)