

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

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Abstract

Logic and Biblical evidence suggest that God wishes that some but not all humans become convinced of His existence and desires. If so, this suggests that attempts to either prove or disprove such things as 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.

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Story 1

Leaving the room, Eli told his three-year-old son to behave because he'd be watching secretly, hidden so the boy wouldn't be able to see him. "Remember," Eli 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.

The boy played quietly for a while and got bored. Was his dad really watching? He took a big cookie from the cookie jar, and nothing happened. He tried running into other rooms to see if his father was watching from there. Nobody was there, but a couple of times the boy did think that maybe he heard footsteps running away. He tried calling out for his dad, but with no response.

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

Story 2

I wanted to win the war. I carefully loaded the gunpowder into my cannon, added the cannonball, and tamped it down. It was a very good cannon, and my target, Josh, would have no chance once a ball that size and that fast hit him. I lit the match and looked down the sights.

Unfortunately, I didn't see Josh. I'd forgotten to aim, and he was standing eight feet to the left of where the cannonball would go, smiling at me.

"I can fix that," I said. I go the turning spike out and turned the cannon slightly to the left. New problem. He'd moved eight feet to the right while I was adjusting the firing position.

I needed a new strategy. I moved the cannon again, to point at the path to his house, and got ready with the match. After a while, it burned out. Seventeen matches later, I realized he was smart enough not to walk into my line of fire. Time for more thought. Maybe I needed a bigger cannon, or even two cannons. Or maybe three, all much bigger than the one I had, which clearly wasn't working. Or maybe...

At that moment I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Josh. "You're my prisoner. Come home for dinner with me." And so I did.

1. Introduction

In everyday life you must answer questions such as whether a pair of shoes will last for a year, whether it will rain later today, or whether your friend is angry with you. We are used to balancing evidence, seeing how it fits with theory, and using authorities while remaining aware that they are fallible. Whether God exists and is active in the world is an issue no different in kind. While we may not be able to comprehend God, it would seem we should be able at least to detect His impact on the world and thereby test for His existence. It should be even more straightforward to test claims such as miraculous healings or answered prayers— claims

that are non-transcendent in the sense that while we may not hope to understand how they work, their effects on the material world should be measurable. Quine said in his 1951 “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 more and 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. Someone without divine inspiration has no choice but to look at the physical evidence, though this of course includes evidence of miracles, and the behavior of those who purport to have inspiration.

I will argue here that the empirical approach will fail. It will fail to find definite proof of God’s existence. If God does not exist, that might be demonstrable, but if He does, it can’t be either proved or disproved.

In much of my own field of economics, a person making a decision takes the world as given and tries to figure out how to make the best of his situations by using the actions under his control. Thus, if you are trying to decide whether to sell your computer on eBay, you look at the prices and decide whether it’s worthwhile for you to part with your old computer at that price. An important part of economics, however, is game theory, which studies situations where the behavior of different people interacts. If Dell decides to sell ten thousand more computers, it can’t take the market environment as a given. When it tries to sell those computers, its rivals will react by reducing their prices, and what looked like it would be a profitable move may turn out to be a disaster. One of the most important insights in game theory is that when you change your behavior to try to gain an advantage over a rival, you will be sorely disappointed if you fail to take into account that your rival can change his behavior too. You are shooting at a moving target.

God is a moving target too. Suppose He doesn’t want us to succeed in proving

or disproving His existence. He would then tantalize us, providing just enough evidence so that we could not rule Him out, but not enough to rule Him in either. Science can detect the laws of nature because those laws are not trying to hide. Science cannot detect God, because He deliberately evades the scientist.

I will call this idea “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 proveable.

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

Premise 1b. God does not exist.

Premise 2. God is powerful.

Premise 3. God wishes not to be proveable.

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

Overall argument : Either Premise 1a is true or Premise 1b is true.
Therefore, any effort to prove God exists will fail.

“God”, “exists”, “powerful”, and “prove” are all big ideas, and I use the words in specific ways here. 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. This is not really novel. I am joining 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 this being actually does the things ascribed to Him rather than being imaginary, in the same sense as we say that the Moon exists and causes Earth’s tides. By “powerful” I mean able to perform miracles such as described in the Bible and to manipulate Nature far beyond the ability of man. By “to prove” I mean to persuade after a few years of instruction the vast majority of open-minded men of average intelligence. We can prove that the Earth goes around the Sun, but we cannot prove that had John Kerry been elected President in 2004 he would have

reduced unemployment more than George Bush. Something may be unproveable in this sense even if people rely on evidence rather than blind faith in forming their opinions.

I could have folded Premise 2, that God is powerful, into the meaning of "God", but I put it separately because it is crucial to the argument. A pantheistic or 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. Note that the argument does not require God to be omnipotent—just that He be enough more powerful than man that He can evade man's attempts to detect Him in the same way as the father could evade the boy in Story 1 at the start. Figure 1 captures the premise nicely.



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

Premise 3, that God does not wish to be proveable, is also a focus on a particular feature of the Christian God. Not every religion's God wishes to be unproveable, or even cares one way or the other. The Appendix contains much biblical evidence that the Christian (or Jewish) God does not wish to be proveable. A few passages will suffice here. From the Old Testament:

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

From the New Testament:

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

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

Pascal made much of Premise 3 in his *Pensees* as a way to make a first cut in determining which religions are 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.

Premise 3 does not mean that God wishes to be concealed from everybody. 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 proveable. By then, however, the question will be moot.

As for Premise 1a, this paper is about whether we can prove that God exists, not about whether God exists. I will not try to prove either Premise 1a or Premise 1b, its opposite. Available evidence is insufficient to prove either of those premises, as demonstrated by the fact that intelligent people take both sides of the question. The concealment argument says that whichever is correct, we will not be able to prove God's existence.

The concealment argument does *not* deny that we can disprove God's existence. If Premise 1a, I think I could argue convincingly that we cannot disprove it, on the grounds that God is good and if He exists He would not deliberately mislead us with false evidence that would prove His nonexistence to open-minded people. Also, if one accepts the Bible as convincing evidence, we can cite *Romans* 1: 20 as Aquinas does in arguing that God is proveable: "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?"). But that is different from the concealment argument, and less clear.

If Premise 1b is true, and God actually does not exist, the concealment argument does not deny that we could prove His nonexistence. Indeed, one might argue— though this, again, is a harder argument and one that I will not explore here— that if God does not exist we should, with enough effort, be able to prove that He does not. If that is true, then lack of a convincing demonstration either way is not evidence against theism, but is weak evidence, at least, against atheism.

The concealment argument has the implication, unpalatable to scholars, that reason might not be able to attain certainty on this subject. Usually, scientists (and economists) naively complain about theories not being falsifiable. Christianity is falsifiable. The concealment argument says, however, that Premise 1b, God's nonexistence, is not falsifiable. If the God we are speaking of exists, we won't be able to find convincing proofs that he does, even though if He does not exist we will be able to find proofs that He does not. I do not find this a serious objection to disbelief in the existence of God, but it might, wrongly, be persuasive to those

people who think a good theory needs to be falsifiable.

I also recognize that the concealment argument applies to any being who satisfies Premises 2 and 3— that is, any being powerful enough to remain concealed and desirous of remaining concealed. Peter Siegelman suggested leprechauns as an example. Leprechauns are small and clever enough to stay hidden from almost all humans, and it is natural to think they would want to remain hidden because they are not *all*-powerful we would chase them down for their gold if their existence were known. Thus, the concealment argument says that if leprechauns exist, we would not be able to prove or disprove it. If leprechauns exist, they could conceal themselves effectively and most of us would scoff at anybody who believed in them.

Where leprechauns differ from God, however, is in the feeble evidence for their existence and the unimportance of the question for our behavior. The evidence is not just conflicting, but nonexistent, and it is doubtful whether anybody believes in leprechauns nowadays . Moreover, we do not care enough to investigate further. The reward to investigation is a certain amount of gold and glory for the discoverer, but nothing that would affect the lives of millions, not to mention their afterlives. The uncertainty is much less than the uncertainty in business or science: we are willing to spend millions for the uncertain gains from detecting leptons, but not leprechaun (see “Cosmic leptons challenge dark-matter detection” *CERN Courier* <http://cerncourier.com/cws/article/cern/40117> (Aug 25, 2009)).

The implication of the concealment argument is Christians should be agnostics, in the sense that they should not believe God’s existence can be proved to every reasonable man’s satisfaction. If God exists, then agnosticism, atheism, and Christianity will all be reasonable beliefs, because God has deliberately created conditions under which it is hard to determine the truth. This is not to say that God’s existence is not worth discussing. God’s existence is still open to argument and persuasion, and your conclusion about it is still of the utmost importance to how you conduct your life, but we cannot hope to find proof conclusive enough to persuade every open- minded person. Indeed, you may not find the evidence strong enough to convince even yourself to the same degree of certainty as, for example, that the sun will rise tomorrow. In this, as in most of life, one cannot wait for certainty before acting. 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, but that also avoids believing true things. We economists are used to doing that; in our standard framework, frequentist statistics, we “fail to reject the null hypothesis” rather than “accept the null hypothesis”. 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 for religious belief or even positively harmful in coming to religious truth. What the concealment argument says is that although reason and evidence may be helpful in coming to the truth about God, they will not be any more conclusive than in determining whether Obama or McCain would make the better president or whether Napoleon could have won at Waterloo if he’s been feeling better. Those questions have answers, and with an infinite amount of time and energy we could perhaps find the right answers and convince everyone of them, but in actuality we cannot come to agreement. At the same time, reason can certainly rule out a great many beliefs, and combined with the right starting point, luck, or divine intervention, it can lead a person to the truth.

One might also argue that with an unclouded mind any reasonable man would believe in God based even on available evidence, but that many reasonable men have minds clouded by Original Sin or some other sort of bias. This bias might have been instilled by God, or it might be universal but God might remove it from some people by grace, an idea that is the basis of “presuppositional apologetics” of Cornelius Van Til and John Frame (see the Wikipedia article “Presuppositional Apologetics”). That argument is compatible with the concealment argument. Whichever is true—that we are all on level ground, that God clouds some minds, or that God unclouds some minds—the concealment argument is unaffected. It simply says that “reasonable men” in the sense of men who can 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 processes, the result is much the same.

The concealment argument is not specifically Christian, but it applies better to Christianity and Judaism than it does to most religions. One of Christianity’s claims is that God does not want everyone to believe in Him, or, more mildly, that God deliberately 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 wished all men to worship him. It would also fail to apply to a deistic God 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 He would not bother to cover His tracks. To avoid detection, He would have to presciently arrange the world's clockwork in just the right way.

Quite a number of 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 Arguments which I discussed above. 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 would fail to apply. I believe that the Christian God does not have to have these characteristics, but merely needs to be powerful, long-lived, and very good, but this is not the place to go into that topic. What is more relevant is that even if there exists a God with all those characteristics, the Bible might be completely false and Christianity misguided. As Thomas Aquinas said, 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?"). Thus, the concealment argument does not say that we might not come across some convincing logical argument about ultimate beings.

The concealment argument has a variety of practical applications. Before coming to them, however, 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 I will point out that formal economic reasoning has been used by others. Almost all of the work on the economics of religion (surveyed in Iannoccone [1998] and Kumar [2008]) concerns, to be sure, religions, not God or religious texts, but economics has also made the wider 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]), and 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 Müller ([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 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. He asks 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 not merely a theoretical curiosity. 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. Trying to prove that prayer heals the sick will fail.
2. Trying to prove that miraculous healings happen nowadays will fail.
3. Trying to prove that prophets really predict the future will fail.
4. Trying to show that an intelligent designer is responsible for (a) the many coincidences found in the laws of physics and (b) the mutations which drive evolution will fail.
5. Searching for ancient manuscripts and inscriptions to confirm the miracles in the Bible will fail.
6. Why there are no Biblical miracles recorded in secular ancient history.
7. Why sociobiology can to some extent explain ethical feelings without using God.
8. Why some people believe in God and other do not, faced with the same evidence.
9. Why God allows Christians to suffer.

Our projects will fail if (a) God is powerful enough to thwart it, and (b) He wants it to fail. Below I will say a little about each item in this list. I apologize for the lack of order in it at present; in a later draft I will try to organize this more consciously.

1. 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 playing poker with the Omnipotent. Any results that show up will be inconclusive, and might well be due to journal's bias towards accepting studies with positive results rather than negative results, a bias which can 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 who to call "saints". A candidate must have two miracles to his credit, and those miracles are ordinarily miraculous occurrences 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 to the person that we would expect a few such events simply 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. He will perform them on a systematic 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.

2. Showing that miracles 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 that miracles ceased after the time of the apostles. “Continualists” believe that they still occur. Some Christians do make miracles a central part of their doctrine, notably Roman Catholics. They assert that miracles are common and public in their doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the Communion bread is transformed by the priest into human flesh. Special explanation is then required for why nobody can detect this miracle. Dropping that doctrine would not strike at the foundations of Christianity, however, any more than would dropping the doctrine that saints perform miracles.

What, then, of the Roman Catholic requirement that there be proof that someone performed a miracle (pre- or post- death) to be granted sainthood? The first thing to realize is that the Vatican does not really “make” someone a saint, able to intercede effectively with God on behalf of others. Rather, the Vatican officially recognizes that someone is a saint, and entitled to public veneration. It certifies saints rather than making them. The process of canonization does require miracles to be proved to the satisfaction of the Vatican, but it does not require them to be proved to the satisfaction of atheists, a much higher standard. See Beccari (1907) in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* for further detail, including discussion of whether canonization can be mistaken.

3. Trying to prove that prophets really predict the future will fail

Christianity does not depend crucially on ancient prophecy, as it does on ancient miracles, but ancient prophecies, unlike ancient miracles, can still be works in progress. Some prophecies have been fulfilled, and some are obsolete, but some are still “open”. In particular, some Christians have argued 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 (e.g. Hal Lindsey’s 1970 bestseller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*). In addition, the 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.

4. Showing that an intelligent designer is responsible for coincidences in the laws of physics and for the mutations which drive evolution

The Teleological Argument for God's existence (the "Argument from Design"), carefully laid out by William Paley in 1809 though much older, is that plants and animals function so wonderfully and complexly that a divine being must have created them.

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

Proving the existence of 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. Since then, 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 last implication— the numerous defects in physiology— is the Achilles Heel of intelligent design. Such things as humans’ appendices and weak back muscles can be explained by evolution, but not by a divine designer who is trying to make bodies work as well as possible.

The concealment argument suggests, however, that making perfect bodies was not God’s goal. Instead, we should expect there to be some material explanation for the wonders of Nature— evolution, or something else. Paley’s argument would be too strong otherwise, because it would prove God. By the concealment argument, God would obscure the evidence and provide an alternative theory.

In one rather absurd 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 world is observationally equivalent to one several billions of years old. That, of course, cannot be refuted, except for its lack of supporting evidence.

More plausibly, I think, God made the world several billion years ago and used evolution to bring it to its present state. Since time has little relevance for Him, spending billions of years to prepare for a few thousand relevant years is of little importance— or, it could be that He had some purpose in a world without humans. At any rate, He created a world which by 2008 has enough signs of divine intervention to tantalize but too few to convince. Life would not be possible without happy coincidences such as that water is one of the few substances whose solid

form floats on its liquid form (otherwise, all lakes would freeze in winter), or that when helium collides in stars it happens to form carbon. Evolution cannot explain the formation of new species without numerous favorable genetic mutations that are improbable even when we give solar radiation millions of years in which to strike bits of DNA. On the other hand, there are the appendices and bad backs that a good designer would not give his creatures. . In the end, Nature shows some evidence of God, but nothing conclusive.

In theory God might choose to conceal Himself from scholarly proof. But not only could God evade us in this way: we have reason to believe that He does want to evade us. If He simply wanted us to believe in Him, He could of course exhibit miracles that would persuade everyone. So we must start with the idea that God wishes to stay concealed from some people. But that means that He is not going to give away his presence by scientific evidence any more than by miracles. He wants people to believe for other reasons. He does want some people to believe, however, and so He does not provide false evidence against Himself either. He provides partial evidence, which cannot convince anyone either way.

5. Finding 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, or 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), this 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]). Or, entirely new manuscripts might be discovered, as the Dead Sea Scrolls were as late as the 1940’s.

The concealment argument says that this will not lend dramatic support for the Bible’s accuracy, though it may help a little, as the James Ossuary Description would have. 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.

6. Why there are no Biblical miracles recorded 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. In the prior months or years a large number of people were suddenly cured of disease in Palestine. If so, why do 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 such important happenings 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 (which, foreign to his experience, does happen south of the Equator).

The concealment argument provides an answer. Just as God does not want we moderns to videotape any miraculous healing that may be occurring in the 21st century, so he did not want a Tacitus or a Josephus to write about miracles of the 1st century. Or, to be more precise, he did not want any such writings to survive for more than a few hundred years. 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 or rabbis would fail to make copies that survived barbarians, Vikings, Arabs, pogroms, and Turks. The ancient texts of the classicist are just as few and precious as the intermediate fossil forms of the biologist.

7. Why sociobiology can to some extent explain ethical feelings without using God

The Moral Argument for God's existence relies on the presence of universal moral feelings in humans. See, for example, C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. The

argument is evidence-based, 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.

8. Why some people believe in God and other do not, 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 suspend disbelief if you have not carefully examined good evidence for it. James makes the point that for many beliefs it is foolish to require "good evidence" to be evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. 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

9. Why God allows Christians to suffer

The concealment argument has nothing to say about the Problem of Evil. Indeed, Premise 3— that God wishes to remain concealed— is one aspect of the Problem. Some people would prefer not to believe in a God who purposely left people with drastically incorrect beliefs, and so reject the Biblical God. 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, refuting Premise 1a.

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 would leave 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 us recall Wittgenstein, not to mean what he actually intended in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (see Jehanus Terrianus [1999]), but something entirely different:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Appendix: Biblical Evidence for the concealment argument

If God wishes to be known, He could make Himself known much more clearly and to more people if He simply appeared on Earth and performed miracles. That He does not do so implies at least that He is not eager to be widely known. We can go further, however, using verses from the Bible to show that God is not simply neutral: he definitely wishes to stay concealed. These verses are useful for two distinct purposes. For non-Christians, they show that the Christian system is consistent: the Christian God wishes to remain concealed, and we find no convincing evidence of Him, but that lack of evidence does not refute Christianity, even though it does not support it either. For Christians, they show that God wishes to be concealed, so we must be modest about our ability to convince nonbelievers, and patient with their nonbelief.

Before coming to specific verses, note that according to Christianity, God has already appeared in secret— as Jesus Christ. He appeared as a man, without public claims of divinity. Thus, continued concealment is natural. If He did not make His existence indisputable in the 1st century, we would have to find an explanation for what changed to make Him want to make His existence indisputable in some later century. Christianity does predict that He will do this at the Last Judgement, but the possibility of that revelation does not provide proof at the present time.

Let us now come to specific verses. The following passages say that some things are known only to God:

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

—Deuteronomy 29:29

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

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages

—Romans 16: 25

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

—I Corinthians 2: 7

...and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden

for ages in God who created all things,

—Ephesians 3: 9

... the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

—Colossians 1:26

The following passages say that some people— and not the smartest people— learn things that are hidden from others.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

—Matthew 13: 44

But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind.

—Daniel 2: 30

At that time Jesus declared,

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children;

—Matthew 11: 25

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

—Matthew 11: 27

The following passages say that God wants some people to be left in ignorance.

In the cover of your presence you hide them from the plots of men; you store them in your shelter from the strife of tongues.

—Psalms 31: 20

It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.

—Proverbs 25: 2

But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this

saying.

—Luke 9: 45

Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.

—Isaiah 45: 15

But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.

—II Corinthians 3: 14

The following passages say that God deliberately works in the minds and hearts of some people so they will not see Him.

For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes (the prophets), and covered your heads (the seers).

—Isaiah 29: 10

Then the disciples came and said to him,

“Why do you speak to them in parables?”

And he answered them,

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”

—Matthew 13: 10–17

They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand.

—Isaiah 44:18

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

“He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”

Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.

—John 12: 37–41

And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement:

“The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

‘Go to this people, and say, You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ ”

—Acts 28: 25–27

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written,

“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.”

And David says,

“Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.”

—Romans 11: 7-10

Even miracles do not persuade some people:

They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

—Nehemiah 9: 17

He said to him,

“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

—Luke 16: 31

Those who by investigation hope to prove or disprove facts about God will be disappointed:

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.

—I Corinthians 1: 18–24

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

—I Corinthians 1: 27

For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written,

“He catches the wise in their craftiness,”

and again,

“The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

—I Corinthians 3: 19–20

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

—Hebrews 11: 3

There are even examples in the Bible where using experiments to test for God’s presence is raised. I quote below from Luke (the Temptation in the Wilderness), and Exodus (water from a stone in Massah).

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him,

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'

And Jesus answered him,

"It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

—Luke 4: 9–12

But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said,

"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried to the Lord,

"What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

And the Lord said to Moses,

"Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink."

And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying,

"Is the Lord among us or not?"

—Exodus 17: 3–7

"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

—Deuteronomy 6: 16

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