Divine Hiddenness: Defeated Evidence

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Abstract
This paper challenges a common assumption in the literature concerning the problem of divine hiddenness, namely, that the following are inconsistent: God's making available adequate evidence for belief that he exists and the existence of non-culpable nonbelievers. It draws on the notions of defeated evidence and glimpses to depict the complexity of our evidential situation with respect to God's existence.

The question 'Why doesn't God make himself more obvious?' is pressing for many people. Even those who trust God's self-revelation are sometimes painfully aware that his revelation is partial. Anyone whose prayers have gone unanswered or who has experienced periods of God's silence or felt absence is likely to resonate with the thought that God is hidden – even if only partially hidden. What many see of God is most like a glimpse.

But the way in which God is supposed to be hidden in the arguments under discussion in the literature on the problem of divine hiddenness is a different kind of hiddenness. This kind of hiddenness is directly related to the evidence available for God's existence – specifically, it refers to the poverty of our evidential situation with respect to God's existence. The existence of a perfectly loving God is allegedly in tension with the evidential situation in which many find themselves: the evidence, some have claimed, is not *enough* to make the belief that God exists rational, and God, it is thought, would have put us in a very different evidential situation. Our evidence would be stronger than it actually is, if there were a loving God.

My goal in this paper is to clarify this argument and point to a couple ways the argument, as presented in the literature, needs elucidation. Specifically, I want to challenge a common assumption in the literature, namely, that the following are inconsistent: God's making available adequate evidence for belief that he exists and the existence of nonculpable nonbelievers. (Throughout I will use 'nonbeliever' to refer specifically to a person who does not believe that God exists.) I conclude with the suggestion that glimpses may be a more apt analogy to use to represent our evidential situation than some of the prominent analogies in the literature.

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Section 1 The Argument

Most of the arguments from divine hiddenness are offshoots of J.L. Schellenberg's central argument.[1] I will be working with the following simplified reconstruction:

(1) If a loving God exists, then there are no nonresistant nonbelievers.
(2) There are nonresistant nonbelievers.
(3) No loving God exists.

In this context, nonresistant nonbelief is usually equated with nonculpable nonbelief and is characteristic of those who lack belief through no fault of their own. Nonculpable nonbelief is contrasted with culpable nonbelief. Culpable nonbelievers *resist* the evidence in some way. The existence of nonresistant nonbelievers gives rise to the problem because it is thought that a loving God would provide or make available sufficient evidence of his existence to all those who want to believe.

Philosophers have responded to this argument in a variety of ways. Some replies involve rejection of (2).[2] That is, some deny that there are nonculpable nonbelievers. This is to claim that everyone who does not believe that God exists is resisting the evidence – something akin to having one's eyes closed. Other replies to the argument involve rejection of (1). This strategy generally proceeds by offering plausible reasons God might have for permitting nonresistant nonbelief.[3] For example, some appeal to a kind of benefit that accrues to

[1] See J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell University Press, 1993) and his *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Cornell University Press, 2007).

[2] See, for example, D. Henry, 'Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?', *Faith and Philosophy* 18(1) (2001), 75–92 and 'Reasonable Doubts about Reasonable Nonbelief', *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), 276–289, P. Moser, 'Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. Ed by Howard-Snyder & Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and W. Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God' in Howard-Snyder and Moser (eds.) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98–119.

[3] For examples of this strategy, see S. Coakley, S. 'On the Very Idea of "Divine Hiddenness": Analytic Approaches to "Apophasis"' Address at the BSPR 2015, A. Cullison, 'Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (2010), 119–134, M. Murray, 'Coercion and the Hiddenness of God', *American*

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individuals when God hides himself, and others appeal to an opportunity for development that the individual would not have were God to make his existence obvious to that person.

I think this work is important, but this paper will not contribute to either of these strategies. Instead, I want to advance a different route for rejecting (1). It is usually assumed that if nonresistant nonbelievers exist, it is because God has not provided or made available evidence sufficient for belief.[4] Schellenberg maintains that a perfectly loving God would want to be in personal relationship with his creatures and that:

> …seeking [personal relationship] entails the provision of evidence sufficient for belief in the existence of God.[5]

The idea is that if God makes evidence of his existence available to these people and they 'have their eyes open', they will be in a position to believe and relate to God.[6,7]

Philosophical Quarterly 30 (1993), 27–38, M. Rea, 'Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God', in K. Timpe (ed.) *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honour of Eleonore Stump* (New York: Routledge), 76–96, and R. Swinburne's *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[4] The evidence might be publically accessible, but it need not be; it could consist of personal religious experience.

[5] J.L. Schellenberg 'Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism', in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. Ed by Peterson VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 40.

[6] Whether being in a position to believe that God exists entails that the respective individuals will actually believe that God exists is a matter that turns on certain assumptions about belief. The way I understand Schellenberg's position, he thinks that a nonresistant agent that has sufficient evidence is not only in a position to believe, but in fact believes. The assumption that the evidence will always be efficacious in producing belief is problematic for reasons Kvanvig discusses in J. Kvanvig, 'Divine Hiddenness: What is the Problem?', in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. Ed by Howard-Snyder & Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[7] Although in this paper I follow recent literature and present the argument in a way that assumes an evidentialist epistemology, one could construe the problem in an alternative framework. One might suggest, for example, that if God exists he would make it such that each person is in a position to rationally (or safely/sensitively) believe that he exists. Whether this can

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In this way, the reasoning that underlies (1) can be unpacked in the following two steps:

(4) If a loving God exists, then he provides (or makes available) adequate evidence of his existence.
(5) If God provides (or makes available) adequate evidence of his existence, then there are no nonresistant nonbelievers.

I will argue that on some plausible understanding of 'provides adequate evidence', (5) is false. That is, I want to suggest that nonculpable nonbelief is compatible with God's providing or making available sufficient evidence for his existence. If successful, the considerations I raise undercut one route to premise (1) of Schellenberg's argument.

Two questions naturally arise when we look at the suggestion that God has not provided adequate evidence: *what exactly is God obligated to do that he hasn't?* and *what is wrong with our evidential situation?*[8] Discussions of the problem of hiddenness do not generally make clear how to answer these questions. In what follows, I examine several ways the argument and associated terminology could be sharpened.

Section 2 On 'Providing' Evidence

Consider a few statements from Schellenberg of what we would expect a loving God to do:

> God would make conscious awareness of the Divine available to every finite personal creature [capable of experiencing it].[9]

> If there is a perfectly loving God, S, unless prevented by her own culpable activity, will at all times in question find herself in possession of evidence that renders *G* probable….[10]

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be done without loss of some significant features of the argument is a question I will not pursue here.

[8] We need a gloss on 'our evidential situation' to make progress. For the most part, I will make a simplifying assumption that there is some group of people whose evidence is roughly counterbalanced for and against theism. I do this so that 'our evidential situation' refers to something close to what advocates of the argument seem to have in mind when they claim God is hidden.

[9] Schellenberg (2007), 200.

[10] Schellenberg (1993), 39.

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> If God exists and is perfectly loving, humans will be given access to evidence sufficient for belief in God's existence.[11]

Without much further explanation of what this availability might look like, Schellenberg states that:

> Just by looking around us with our eyes open, we can see that this state of affairs does not actually obtain.[12]

I will suggest that to determine whether adequate evidence has been provided, we need to better understand what it is to *provide* someone with evidence.

At first glance, this might seem like a straightforward question. In fact, given the way the notion is used in the literature, one might easily get the impression that we all have a pretty good idea what it looks like. Under scrutiny, it is not so straightforward. One difficulty is due to the numerous and complex ways evidence might be available to someone.

In *The Wisdom to Doubt,* Schellenberg identifies and describes various ways evidence might go unrecognized. Among these are the following categories:

> **Overlooked evidence**: evidence that is overlooked even though accessible.

Evidence is sometimes overlooked due to distractions or interruptions. It may also be overlooked because one simply has not directed attention to it yet. Since nonresistant nonbelievers are supposed to be individuals who have given sufficient attention to the evidence, this category is ruled out as a description of our evidential situation. That is, Schellenberg rules out the idea that God provides evidence but we overlook it.

It is worth noting that it is not obvious what constitutes sufficient attention. How easy does it need to be to take account of or appreciate the evidence? There is considerable variation on the circumstances one might be in, many of which do not fall neatly into categories. Consider a few examples. Suppose I write you a note and hide it in your house. There is a sense in which the note is available to you, though it is not easy for you to find. After looking for 20 minutes, you may get distracted. Or, you look in the wrong place. Does this count as overlooked evidence? Suppose further that I write you a

[11] Schellenberg (1993), 41.
[12] Schellenberg (2007), 205.

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note but in a language you do not understand. You have the means to hire a translator (and I know this), but you have not found the time to do so yet. Or perhaps the letter is hundreds of pages long and you have not set aside the time to read it yet. Does this count as evidence provided? We should avoid ruling out too quickly the possibility that there are some people to whom God seems hidden but who fall into this category.

Schellenberg delineates other categories, as follows:

> **Neglected evidence**: evidence that is accessible and failure to recognize it is avoidable.
>
> **Inaccessible evidence**: evidence that has not been discovered.

Neglect of the evidence may be due to laziness or involve culpable self-deception. The explanation for why I do not have the evidence involves some failure on my part—perhaps I should have been more attentive. In this kind of situation, the evidence is available and the agent is culpable for not observing it. By contrast, when evidence is inaccessible one is in no way responsible for failing to possess it. For example, the evidence might be in a cave and no one has found it. It is possible to uncover, and we would recognize it as evidence were we to see it, but we have not discovered it.[13]

Although this discussion takes us in the right direction, these options fail to fully describe our evidential situation. In particular, the evidential situation of the group that Schellenberg is especially interested in discussing – that of former believers – does not fall into one of these categories.

Former believers, for Schellenberg, display the most disturbing type of nonresistant nonbelief: this is the nonbelief of those who regret the loss of belief and wish to regain it but are unable to do so. Schellenberg asks us to imagine individuals who:

> start out assured of the power and presence of God in their lives and of their participation in a meaningful conscious relationship with God, and then they *lose* all this—often by being exposed to reasons for doubt about the reliability of the support they have for theistic belief.[14]

[13] See Schellenberg (2007), 17–27 for further discussion, including further categories of undiscovered evidence and undiscoverable evidence, neither of which are relevant for my purposes here.

[14] Schellenberg (2007), 228.

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I suggest we need to consider another category: Defeated Evidence. The problem is that it is often assumed that if adequate evidence is available and an agent is not in willful resistance to the evidence, the agent will believe that God exists. But on a plausible understanding of 'available evidence' this is not the case. God might provide evidence – evidence which on its own is sufficient for belief – but one might also possess defeaters, or misleading evidence, that makes agnosticism rational despite the availability of evidence. So the dichotomy of either 'culpable resistance' or 'not enough evidence' strikes me as an incomplete description of the types of evidential situations one could be in. The epistemic situation of many people is more complicated than this.

Consider the following case where under normal circumstances we might take the evidence provided as a paradigm example of 'adequate evidence'. Suppose I have a red cup, and I want you to know that the cup I have is red. One thing I might do is tell you I have a red cup, or I might take the red cup and set it on the table in front of us, in clear view. Placing the red cup on the table seems like a paradigm example of providing you with sufficient evidence for believing there is a red cup in front of you. But consider this case where we introduce what is often called 'defeating' evidence:

> **Red Lighting:** I place a red cup on the table in front of you. You see it clearly, but then you are told by someone you trust that the room is fixed with trick lighting – lighting which makes objects that are not red appear to be red. In fact, the testifier is mistaken, and there is no trick lighting.

Here we have the presence of evidence normally sufficient to make belief rational, plus misleading evidence. It is a common judgment among contemporary epistemologists that in cases of this sort the testimony defeats the evidence you have that the cup is red. Thus, should you continue to believe that the cup is red, your belief would fail to be rational. (Many also agree that this is a case of knowledge-defeat. That is, on the assumption that you knew *the cup is red* prior to hearing about the trick lighting, your knowledge is defeated after hearing the testimony.[15])

[15] M. Lasonen-Aarnio Lasonen-Aarnio 'Unreasonable Knowledge', *Philosophical Perspectives* (2010) and Benton, M. & Baker-Hutch, M. 'Defeatism Defeated', *Philosophical Perspectives* ((2015) 29(1):40–66.) each provide useful discussions of the difficulties involved in articulating a systematic account of defeat, and also advance a minority view on which one may still be in a position to know the cup is red in cases of this sort.

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One point I want to draw attention to is that the situation in Red Lighting clearly differs from a context where there is a mere absence of evidence – that is, where I provide you with no reason at all to think that the cup is red. (I neither tell you about it nor show it to you, nor give you any indication that it is a red cup.) In Red Lighting, there is some clear sense in which I have provided evidence that the cup is red. Here are a few questions we might ask about this case:

Have I provided you with *sufficient* evidence that the cup is red?
Are you *in a position* to rationally believe (or know) that the cup is red?
Are you *in the presence of* evidence sufficient for belief?

It is difficult to answer these questions when your evidential situation involves defeaters. It is not immediately obvious that you are not in a position to believe the cup is red or that I have not provided sufficient evidence. We certainly cannot determine this just by looking around with our eyes open. But it seems equally clear that should you fail to believe that the cup is red, your lack of belief is not due to willful resistance of the evidence. The problem is not that your eyes are closed.

The difficulties that arise in Red Lighting also arise for some alleged cases of divine hiddenness. Clearly there are situations where agents have evidence that God exists but also have evidence that suggests God does not exist. Plausibly, God provides evidence—evidence normally adequate for belief—and agents fail to believe without willful resistance of the evidence. If such cases are possible, (5) is false.

I do not take these considerations to refute the argument from hiddenness but, rather to undercut one motivation for the first premise and to invite clarification of the argument. A few points to draw: first, we need a better understanding of the notion of providing (or making available) evidence. The literature is suffering as a result of a vague understanding of the locution. Second, we cannot reason from 'nonculpable nonbelievers' to the absence of adequate evidence. At least, this inference is not warranted without further argumentation.[16]

[16] A further issue that is relevant is whether permissivism or uniqueness is correct. If permissivism is true, it may be that there is no one body of evidence such that if God to provides it to each individual, the only rational response to the evidence is to believe that God exists. It could be irrational, for some people, to believe God exists given the same body of evidence on which it is rational for others to believe God exists, if permissivism is true.

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Third, there is a significant difference between an evidential situation where one fails to have evidence which, taken on its own, makes *p* probable and an evidential situation that involves evidence for *p* combined with defeaters of that evidence. The latter makes something along the lines of a free will defense plausible. Current resolutions of the hiddenness problem place the blame either on God or the nonbeliever. Either God has not provided adequate evidence, in which case God is at fault for failing to do something he ought to do, or there is culpable resistance of the evidence, which instead attributes fault to the nonbeliever. Shifting the focus to defeated evidence introduces a third option: a third party has misled the nonbeliever. (For example, a child might believe the testimony of a well-intentioned atheist family member, or a student might trust an authority figure who convinces the student that her religious experience is not to be taken seriously.)

In this way, the free will defense is relevant to the problem of hiddenness. Just as the free will of agents contributes to an explanation for why God allows (at least some) evil in the world, the free will of agents can explain the introduction of certain defeaters and thus contribute to an explanation of divine hiddenness. Of course, the freewill of agents will not explain every case of defeated evidence, since not every instance of nonbelief is due to defeaters that are introduced by agents. But insofar as the presence of evil in the world is a central source of counter-evidence against theism, and since a great deal of the evil in the world is due to the free will of agents, the relevance of free will to the hiddenness argument is significant.

Section 3 Is God Hidden? Fixing the Argument

There are various ways to understand the claim that God is hidden. If 'hidden' is taken as synonymous with 'God has not provided adequate evidence of his existence', then the reasoning above shows that the existence of nonculpable nonbelievers is not enough to conclude that God is hidden. Given this gloss on the notion of 'hidden', the following is false:

If nonculpable nonbelievers exist, then God is hidden.

One way to fix the argument is to suggest that despite the availability of evidence for belief, there is still something inadequate about our evidential situation: it is still impoverished in a way a loving God would not permit. We can ask again: *what's wrong with our evidential situation?*

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One option is to argue that a loving God would provide sufficient evidence, where we understand 'sufficient' as providing adequate evidence for belief plus defeater defeaters. This initially seems to be a plausible fix. But note that this makes the argument more difficult to defend – it makes what is required of God more demanding. It might be easy to get on board with the idea that God ought to provide adequate evidence when doing so is minimal or easy. Once we introduce a requirement that God provide defeater defeaters, the demand for evidence is raised significantly.

One question that naturally arises concerns whether God is required to defeat *every* defeater anyone has. Is he obligated to make everyone's total evidence favor his existence (perhaps in a way that is obvious to each agent)? We might wonder whether this statement better captures what advocates of the argument expect of a loving God:

> (6) If a loving God exists, he provides each person with evidence that defeats each defeater that person has.

I have two worries about revising the argument in this way. One worry is that this version of the argument will strike some as less intuitive than the original argument (for the reason given above). Another worry is that there will be no limit to the amount of evidence God must provide. Notice that it is not clear what minimally I can do to get you to believe the cup is red once you believe the room has trick lighting.

Schellenberg at times uses language which suggests that he thinks a loving God would do whatever he can to ensure the belief of those seeking belief. So perhaps he would be happy with this reconstruction of the argument. But at the same time, Schellenberg maintains that he is not asking for much—nothing extreme, no compelling proofs or wondrous signs. He states that:

> …reflection on the nature of love….[does] not suggest reasons for God to provide us with some incontrovertible proof or overwhelm us with a display of Divine glory. Rather, what a loving God has reason to do is provide us with evidence sufficient for belief.[17]

It is plausible that if providing sufficient evidence requires that God defeat all defeaters, this may result in a requirement for fireworks or something similarly overwhelming.[18] Yet advocates suggest that they

[17] Schellenberg (1993), 212–13.

[18] Imagine, for example, an individual who has been convinced not to trust religious experience but rather only to trust evidence that is 'public'

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have something less than this in mind when they look for a stronger evidential position. So there is at least some cost to advancing the argument in this way, and some evidence that advocates of the argument would resist this strengthening but may be forced into it.

Another issue concerns whether there is some amount or kind of evidence God could provide that would defeat all defeaters, make belief that he exists rational, but do so without placing each agent in a position to know that he exists. One wonders, thus, whether one can avoid construing the central premise of the problem of hiddenness as follows:

(7) If a loving God exists, he would place each person in a position to know that he exists.

The line of thought in this paper leads the argument in this direction.[19] But I suspect that advocates of the hiddenness argument may not be happy with this construal of the argument.[20] The challenge then is to set up the argument such that it does not require God to place each of us in a position to know he exists, but nevertheless requires a great deal of evidence.

Regardless of whether a loving God must provide everyone with defeater defeaters—we might agree that doing so seems like a good idea—that it would be *better* if everyone had defeater defeaters, and thus it still makes sense to look for an explanation for why our evidential situation is not stronger than it is. Of course, as the literature attests, the reason might not be forthcoming. In the final section, I

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or objectively available to many people. Suppose further that this person has defeaters that make it such that only very strong evidence would make theism probable. If God is required to defeat the defeaters of every individual in order to provide 'adequate evidence', adequate evidence may, in this case, require public signs and wonders.

[19] Note that on an E=K picture of evidence, where one's evidence consists of all and only the propositions one knows, this is a natural way to present the problem of hiddenness. Williamson advocates for this view of evidence in T. Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[20] There is nothing in particular that ought to dissuade the advocate of the argument from presenting the argument in terms of knowledge, beyond the already mentioned cost of demanding more of God. The reason for expecting that advocates will resist this presentation is simply that much seems to be made of God failing to meet the minimal condition of making his existence merely more probable than not for any nonresistant individual, which is quite a bit less than is required for knowledge, on most views.

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will discuss one way in which thinking of one's evidential situation as involving defeaters may impact how we illustrate the problem of hiddenness.

Section 4 Glimpses

There are a number of analogies to divine hiddenness on offer in the literature. These analogies attempt to portray what God and nonbelievers are like. Schellenberg, the primary advocate of the hiddenness argument, compares God to a bad parent – a mother who has abandoned her child. In one picture he offers, God is compared to a parent silently watching from a distance as her child suffers and cries out, earnestly seeking the parent he believes loves him.[21] Those on the opposing side have portrayed culpable nonbelievers as analogous to people stubbornly clenching their eyes shut so as to resist the evidence that would otherwise make it obvious to them that God exists.

The analogies we use to discuss this issue are important. They prime us to see the argument in a certain light and serve as aids in making the argument more or less persuasive. When we focus on the bad parent analogy, we are more likely to be inclined to affirm premise (1). By contrast, if we think that nonbelievers are all clenching their 'eyes shut' and that getting evidence that God exists is as easy as opening one's eyes, it is much easier to deny premise (2), that there are nonresistant nonbelievers. But each of these depictions neglects an important aspect of the debate—namely, that our evidence is more complicated than this. (Note that the situation of defeated evidence is not captured by either of these images particularly well.) If in fact the evidential situation of many is mixed, our analogies ought to reflect that fact. In this way, some of the analogies in the literature fall short, and I want to suggest that we focus on a different set of analogies. By way of conclusion, I here put forward an image-type that strikes me as more adequate to the task of representing our evidential situation. (This kind of image seems to at least better depict the situation of former believers or those who have had some kind of religious experience.)

Consider glimpses. They provide the viewer with a partial vision, a glance. Glimpses are often momentary, and they are usually not

[21] See Schellenberg (2004).

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available on demand or at all times.[22] One feature of this kind of evidence is that in many cases it is easy to defeat. That is, while sometimes a glimpse is sufficient, given one's background knowledge, to draw a conclusion, it can also be outweighed by counter-evidence—sometimes very easily. Glimpses seem better fit to represent our evidential situation for two reasons: first, they concede that the evidence is not so clear as to make it obvious that God exists; second, unlike the image of a silent God, they represent God as having made some effort to reveal himself—while leaving it open whether he is obligated to give us more than a glimpse.[23] Analogies of this kind allow us to depict the evidential situation of the nonbeliever while maintaining neutrality with respect to the premises of the argument.

I do not mean to suggest that the analogy of glimpses will resolve the hiddenness debate. There is still ample room for disagreement regarding when glimpses constitute sufficient evidence and under what circumstances glimpses are defeated.[24] Although representing our evidential situation as similar to glimpses will not in itself resolve the issue, the image offers a more accurate representation of the complexity of our evidential situation than many of the analogies in the literature. A potential result of refocusing the central analogy for the problem of hiddenness to that of glimpses is that theists can agree that our evidential situation could be stronger than it is, without losing sight of the important point that it is not as though we have no evidence that points to God's existence. There is evidence for God's existence, even if the evidence is not as strong as we might

[22] Another salient feature of glimpses is the way in which they require one to rely on memory once the momentary vision is over. This makes issues relating to reconstructive memory salient to the problem of hiddenness.

[23] Has God given us glimpses as evidence? Here is not the place to argue that he has or has not – or that he has given glimpses to every individual. I will content myself to merely suggest that consideration of this image is conducive to constructive conversation.

[24] Consider, for example, Schellenberg's discussion of a case where an individual, Kim, receives a glimpse of her friend Flo at the park. (1993, 210–212) Kim is then told something that makes it unlikely that she saw Flo, such as that Flo is out of town for the week. We can easily fill in the details such that Kim will doubt that it was Flo that she saw and think it was someone else who looked much like Flo. But suppose Kim knows Flo well, and Flo was not very far away when she saw her, and it was a bright day and Kim got a clear glimpse. In this case, it seems more likely that Kim will think the testifier is mistaken.

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have expected to receive, if there is a loving God. The question remains whether such glimpses are enough.[25,26]

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