How to Hide Something Properly

Lawrence Moonan

After recalling a Scriptural text in which God (something supposed in no way finite) is said to be hidden, I accept for discussion the position (arguable elsewhere) that if you are to succeed in asserting in a proper mode of speech that something is hidden, the "something" is going to have to be finite in at least some way. In the main discussion I consider how these may be reconciled, and just what it is that can properly be said to be hidden, if it can, when it is true in whichever way the Scripture should be understood to be implying it to be true, that God is hidden. In an application of the result, I seek to clarify some famous contentions of Barth's on the hiddenness of God.

I

The *Bible de Jerusalem* [1961] recognises in a footnote that the text of Is 45:15 which has been handed down to our modern Hebrew bibles is indeed the one Jerome translated, and von Rad could speak of as 'the clearest statement in the Old Testament' of the contention that 'All true knowledge of God begins with knowledge of his hiddenness'[1] The text which runs 'Truly, thou art a God that hidest thyself' (RSV), 'Verily, thou art a hidden God' (DV).

Yet the *Bible de Jerusalem*, following Duhm apparently, argues there that we ought to correct the text, so as to read not 'Truly, you are a hidden God', but 'Truly, within you [i.e., within Israel] God is hidden', envisaged as being declared by visitors from the heathen nations,[2] as they come to themselves, to recognise the God of Israel, not to mention recognising the reflected glory of Israel itself. The reading obtained would run well in the context, acknowledging as it

[1] G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, tr. D.Stalker, Edinburgh 1962, 1965, 2 vols, vol.2, 377; where he also refers to Barth's famous treatment of God's hiddenness in *Church Dogmatics* II,1. Von Rad also lists this text among 'references to the incomprehensibility of Jahweh' (vol.1, 453n.), thus taking for granted the 'hidden God' interpretation. See too L.Perlitt, 'Die Verborgenheit Gottes' in the von Rad Festschrift, 367–68, which I have not yet seen.

[2] Using *'el* (twice in 45:14,15) for God 'shows that it is the foreigners who are speaking here' (Baltzer, p241, as at n.3 below), though not everyone need agree that it does.

© The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2004, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

does – whether soberly or in irony – a presence of God securely housed within Israel.[3]

Dictionaries do not greatly help in the present case. In English, as Sir James Murray notes in NED, 'hide' and 'hidden' are to be connected etymologically with the OE *hewe*, for a house, a secure housing, or a household. The use of the words for that meaning is well attested from Alfred to modern times, but so for that matter are the many uses of the words for something in some way concealed from view or discovery, whether intentionally or not.

Neither is any great logical sophistication called for in our analysis, before a crucial problem appears. Even an embryonic logical grammar for either type of use is going to have to start from something like

> something or someone *is hiding* something or other *in respect of* something or other *from* someone or some place of observation

or,

> something or someone *is hidden from* something or other *in respect of* something or other....

Details of the function chosen are unimportant here. What is important is that somewhere in its expression there are going to be words such as 'from', 'by', 'in respect of', implying a particular perspective. If that is so, then you can expect that in any such function determinate enough in sense to be usable to even broadly scientifical purpose, as in an even modestly explanatory theology, no name of anything other than something determinate in its kind can serve without absurdity in the slots.

So a first answer to How to hide something properly – more precisely, how to use 'hide' or 'hidden' properly in (true) assertions

[3] 'If we could emend 'thou' (*attah*) to 'with thee' (*ittak*), with Duhm and others, we should have to decide for the latter, but the textual evidence for this is slender' (C.North, *The Second Isaiah. Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL-LV*, Oxford [1964], xii + 290pp., 157. For a distinct variant of the 'hidden within Israel' interpretation see M.Dijkstra, 'Zur Deutung von Jesaja 45:15ff.', in *Zeitschr. f. Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89(1977)215–22, summarised at 222: 'Isa. 45:15 cannot be understood as a prophetic doxology or as a confessional statement by the nations, but is a lamentation of the nation, which is quoted by the prophet as if uttered by his opponents, and is then contested in 45:17–19'. The hithphael in *mistatter* ('conceals himself') can take the sense of 'shows himself protective' (North, p. 158), and indeed that was how Kissane had translated it: 'Truly, with thee is a protecting God, The God of Israel is a saviour' (*The Book of Isaiah. Translated from a critically revised Hebrew Text with Commentary*, vol. 2 (Dublin 1943), p. 84. For further refs see K.Baltzer, tr. M.Kohl, ed. P.Machinist, *Deutero-Isaiah. A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, Minneapolis [2001] xxv + 597pp.

Jerome notes that in Theodotion the passage runs 'In te est fortis, et non est alius praeter eum deus; propterea tu fortis, absconditus deus salvator'. See *Commentaires de Jerome sur le prophete Isaie*. Introduction R.Gryson, Livres XII-XV, Texte etabli par R.Gryson & C.Gabriel, avec la collaboration de H.Bourgois & V.Leclercq, Freiburg 1998, p. 1376.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

usable to even broadly scientifical purposes – is this: You must first catch something determinate enough even to say that you can hide it, or find it hidden.

II

When you wish to refer to something in your speech, and wish to speak without incoherence, you are going to need to refer determinately to whatever it is you want to refer to. Failure to refer determinately can arise in many ways. The main ones here are vagueness or indeterminacy of reference, which can in principle affect even expressions which are being used only because of what they are being taken to stand for, and not for anything we might wish them to signify out of context. Reference is 'vague' when it wanders as, for example, in 'indexed' locutions such as 'There is only one person in this room', which has been true but is currently during this presentation false. Reference is indeterminate when it could be applied to any of more than one possible referent. Such linguistic vices have their uses, in diplomacy for example, but in the same areas they also have their dangers. The Oder-Neisse line, it is said, was drawn where it was because the British negotiator was unaware that more than one river in the region had a name represented by the insufficiently determined 'Neisse' in German. The reference of 'the South Atlantic in winter' is vague, if the boundaries between the South Atlantic and neighbouring oceans are shifting. It is indeterminate if the boundaries between winter and summer, for practical purposes, do not neatly fit the calendar. Yet both 'South Atlantic winter' in relation to ships' Plimsoll lines, and 'the Oder-Neisse line' in Realpolitik have played important roles, made determinate by agreement or stipulation. But neither stipulation nor agreement is necessarily good enough or even available for all purposes, especially in science.

I see no more than two ways of 'referring determinately to something', most philosophers are unwilling to consider more than one. A first way is by referring to something determinate in some kind or other, so that there will be 'No entity without identity', as in the ontology repeatedly urged by Quine, and widely taken as something of a paradigm of the only kind of metaphysics worth pursuing.[4]

A second way of referring determinately to something is by referring to something in no way determinate, something strictly infinite, something which simply exists and cannot fail to exist – if there is any, of course. If there is any, there is no way that my attempts to refer to it can miss it, and hit anything else; or can hit only a part of it,

[4] See, for example, W.V.O.Quine, 'Existence and quantification', printed as Ch.4 of *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*, New York [1969]. Quine's ontology, of entities in some way determinate, is arguably a reliable regional ontology for all possible objects of science, whether or not it should be taken to hold for things unrestrictedly.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

and not all of it. If it really is in no way determinate it has no parts, and there logically cannot be more than one of it, and it cannot be confounded with anything else. Not with anything in any way determinate, not with "nothing", for "nothing" does not exist in the first place. Not with itself, for nothing can be confounded with itself, it just is itself. If nothing simply existent exists, then of course our attempts to refer to something simply existent will fail, for the reason that it is not there to refer to. But who save a fool or a knave will want his referring expressions – whether 'proximately menacing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction', or 'God' – to succeed in the case where their purported referents do not exist?

In the case where something in no way determinate does exist, no one way of referring to it tells us anything more about it than any other. With determinate things, that is not so. 'The addition of oxygen' is preferred to 'the subtraction of phlogiston', for reasons to do with the nature of what is purportedly being described, and with how well the explanation of which it forms a part ties in with other explanations. If something is in no way determinate, nothing in its nature can be understood by us. It may be more helpful conversationally, less puzzling to our interlocutors, more reverent . . . to use 'something in no way determinate', 'something strictly infinite', 'something simply existent' rather than, say, 'Mickey Mouse'.[5] But any grounds for preference are not to be sought, and are certainly not to be found, in the nature of the simply existent, whatever that nature might be. This holds even when Christian theologians from pre-Deistic periods used 'God' to stand for something in no way determinate, and to stand for nothing else.

By using 'God' to stand for something strictly infinite, whether they were driven to this chiefly by their faith, and even by reflecting on what they had taken over from the faith of Israel, as I suspect, or were taking their lead from Greek philosophers, as you will often hear – and often on a basis of little if any of the needed historical argument in support – they could not without absurdity say properly that God is hidden. Being hidden, like being red, or being morally admirable, is something that can be said properly only of something determinate. Unlike being descriptively good, or wise, it will not even sustain predication *secundum analogiam* in the manner offered by Aquinas; which itself, precisely in virtue of being *secundum* something or other, is not properly predication anyway.

Metaphors can be used honestly or otherwise, and without taking up any position on the nature of metaphor, or any position on whether there may or may not always have to be a properly expressed

[5] Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II,1, p. 189: 'we do not really know what we are saying when we say 'God', no matter whether we try to express it by this word or any other word'.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

"real meaning" lurking in the background, I would hazard a more modest contention. If you want a metaphorical assertion such as 'God is a hidden God' to be importantly action-guiding – and we are told that every piece of Scripture 'inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice' (2 Tim 3:16) – then you ought at least to be able to justify some materially equivalent, properly expressed reductive assertion, even if you have no pretensions to catching everything in your reduction which is caught in the original metaphor.

Can we find at least this for 'God is hidden' or 'hidden God'? If we can, what is it then that is hidden properly, when the improper, metaphorical assertion 'God is a hidden God' is true in whichever way it may be true?

One possibility of finding something properly hidden, for this purpose, is finding something which we cannot see in the things around us yet which might reveal to us convincingly, if we could find it, that something strictly infinite does exist. What we see around us – if we have guessed right in extrapolations from our experience within a modest planet within a suburban solar system within one slowly rotating spiral galaxy among God knows how many – is a sum of things.[6]

According to Hobbes and the ancient atomists it is 1/a sum of things and 2/nothing more than a sum of things. That second contention goes beyond the evidence, for even if we should happen to have experienced all the things that there are, nothing in what we have then experienced entitles us to conclude 'and these are all the things that there are'.

Christians are at least as dogmatic. Our official line is that what we see around us is indeed 1/a sum of things, in agreement with Hobbes and the atomists. It is in addition 2/an order of the unique kind which can co-exist with something strictly infinite[7] – this, against Hobbes and the atomists, and in agreement with any philosophers who might repudiate the 'sum of things' view for non-Revealed reasons such as Aristotle opposed to the atomists in early parts of the *Physics*. So far, this official line is not a matter of theology or Revealed religion, but a matter of metaphysics: and if we keep that in mind, we need not be astonished, as many journalists seemed to be, when Paul VI went out of his way to insist on the importance of metaphysics at the Aquinas Septuagenary celebrations in Rome in 1974, or when John Paul II insisted likewise in late 1999. In addition further, however, our

[6] And the 'sum of things' itself is not necessarily more than a sense-array, if you want to be awkward.

[7] Christopher North finds warrant usable for such a doctrine in Is 45: 18, 'It is an orderly creation, not a chaos (*tohu*, see on xl.17 and cf. Gen.i.2) but a habitable world' (North, *The Second Isaiah*...1964, 159); and in 45:19, 'Not only is Yahweh's creation orderly but his word is clear. He has *never spoken in secrecy* (cf. xlviii.16), *in some place in the land of darkness* (*hosek*)' (same p. 159), North's emphasis.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

official line contains a third contention: that the God-compatible order we claim in 2/to see around us is 3/in further addition an order which non-necessarily will not be rescinded, annihilated, left uncompleted . . . even in any of the ways which, considered "absolutely" in their intrinsic content merely, are possible in general even for those orders which can co-exist with something strictly infinite. This is required by the purely revealed doctrine to the effect that 'God has sworn and will not repent', what I have sometimes called the Immutable Decree doctrine, under which Christian theologians as such – but not philosophers as such, whether Christian or not – would seem to have to work, in their putatively explanatory discourse on God.

So what is properly hidden, when it is true, in figure, that God is hidden, or even that God's ways as purportedly manifested in creation are hidden? Any of a number of things. Here are three.

1. What may be 'hidden' in the way needed are, first, some of the descriptive facts from a comprehensive description of what there determinately is. No doubt we are as yet ignorant of most of these. We may often imagine that at least we know more of the furniture of the world than the contemporaries of Hobbes, or the ancient atomists: but we should not forget that we lose knowledge, as well as gain it. How much knowledge have we lost, for example, about how to domesticate animals, or how to start fires without matches or the like?
2. Crucially, from an apologist's point of view, what may also be hidden to us, is a convincing "take" on the facts on the basis of which philosophers or others might be persuaded that the things around us have to be viewed, or even can be viewed, not only as part of a sum of things, but also as part of an order of things of the kind of order that cannot be accounted for, save on the supposition that not everything that exists, exists in some or other determinate kind.
3. Crucially, from Christian theologians' point of view, and indeed from the point of view of faithful Christians generally, when using everything available to them, what is even more hidden to common observation is how things are according to Revealed truth, including things in no way due to any created nature, or things not even susceptible of being dreamed up by any created nature. Such things need not be perceptible, even to the sharpest observers using the most powerful instruments we have. Why should they be, if our natural powers are for using on the things of nature? If anything is revealed to us as being beyond the things of nature, we cannot expect to have access to them, save within a view which is itself literally non-natural, super-natural. And that something is authoritatively Revealed to be, rather than simply alleged to be, is not something that any amount of honest natural observation, by itself, can tell us.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

So whether the hidden 'ways of God' referred to by von Rad on the page following the remarks from which I began are meant to refer to the unknowable divine nature or the supposed traces of God in creation, you have at least some ways in which the metaphor of God's hiddenness can be cashed out properly. Also, these ways are neutral as towards which of the two interpretations of Is 45:15 is to be thought correct.

III

Furthermore, these three modest enough ways of hiding something properly, can serve to clarify more famous and arguably more profound discourses mentioning hiddenness. Here, I consider only a couple of contentions from Barth's famous treatment of God's hiddenness.

If, as he says, 'The hiddenness of God is the content of a statement of faith'[8], then that God is a hidden God has to be construed not as a lament, or a complaint, about the invisibility of traces of God whether in nature or in grace. It has to be construed as part of our faith, something of a boast, perhaps. But is it true that what Barth thinks the hiddenness of God to be, is available to humans only as 'the content of a statement of [Christian] faith?'. Do you have to accept that you cannot with truth assert the substance of what Barth believes the hiddenness of God to be, without doing so for the arguably sufficient reason provided by the Christian faith to faithful Christians?

It is, he says, in a historical contention, 'the great positions of the biblical attestation and of the Church's confession of the being and activity of God, which moves us to assert God's hiddenness' (p. 184). To assert, that is, the substantive contention that 'Between God and man, as between God and creature in general, there exists an irrevocable otherness.... Even within the fellowship between God and us ordained by God's grace, this negation exists and is valid' (p. 189). There is no need, I think, to dispute those contentions.

But when he insists 'we must now continue that it is only in faith, only in the fulfilment of the knowledge of God which is real because it is grounded in God's revelation, that we conceive God's hiddenness'[9], it could be time to demur.

[8] *Church Dogmatics* II,1, p. 183.

[9] *Church Dogmatics* II,1, p. 184; and cf. p. 183: 'When *we* say that God is hidden, we are not speaking of ourselves, but, taught by God's revelation *alone*, of God' (emphasis from me). If 'we' is being understood to refer to Christians, then 'we' could choose to argue only from premisses and only under pragmatic restrictions accepted because be believe them to be Revealed. But in that case Barth would be making his contention trivially true. I do not see how he either can or needs to exclude the non-trivial possibility mentioned above, of philosophers asserting the substance of Barth's claim ('between God and man, as between God and creature in general, there exists an irrevocable otherness...') on non-Revealed grounds.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

If Barth is right in his substantive contention – if we are saying something true by 'God is hidden' – we do not know which truth we are then asserting.[10] So when 'we conceive God's hiddenness' in the way Barth allows, and on the strength of Revelation, we still have at most a heuristic concept of God's hiddenness, not one which God's hiddenness "comes under", in such a way that we can understand something of it. We are not signifying anything more of the divine nature by 'God's hiddenness' than by 'God': and as Barth rightly says 'we do not really know what we are saying when we say 'God', no matter whether we try to express it by this word or any other word'.[11] On this supposition, that 'conceiving God's hiddenness' comes down to using a merely heuristic concept without the significance it can have in other contexts, signifying literally nothing to us of whatever it is that God is (*quid sit*), but enabling us to assert in an improperly predicative manner that God is (*quia est*), he arguably does have a use for 'God is hidden' to say something true and coherent – though it is not easy to show the assertion to be coherent, and arguably not possible to prove that it is true. He has given us something we can affirm, if it is true, or use in the antecedent of a true conditional, even if it is false. He has given us a use of 'God is hidden' that we can use in a profession of faith, or in a denial of it.

But can he also say with truth that all our knowledge of God starts from that assertion of God's hiddenness? He can – provided he is also content to hold, as is also arguably true, that all our knowledge of God, even given Revelation on the matter, comes down in the end to some kind of non-scientifical knowledge that (a strictly infinite) God exists (*quia est*). What he does not get, on his favoured interpretation of 'conceiving God's hiddenness', is any knowledge at all of what God is (*quid sit*), or any means of taking him from that foundation – using Revealed or any other sources – to the magnificent superstructure of his theology. Whether he can in some other way, or how he can, must be for discussion elsewhere.

Instead, I leave you with a query on his choice of rhetoric. Even granting him a coherent doctrine on creatures' radical otherness to a strictly infinite God, we do not have to find it at all helpful of him to describe it as 'the hiddenness of God'. If the doctrine is true, it would seem that, if we were to insist on calling it one of hiddenness, we would presumably have to say that God remains irrevocably hidden to the blessed, in the beatific vision. Also, bearing in mind *non confusione substantiae*, from the Athanasian Creed, we would also presumably have to say that the divine nature of Jesus remained and

[10] Aquinas, recognising this, added that in this unique case our ignorance could not matter, as no more than one truth – the unique truth justified in virtue of the existence of something strictly infinite – can be in question, no matter how many different expressions we might use to assert it.

[11] *Church Dogmatics* II,1, p. 189.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

remains irrevocably hidden to his human knowledge. I do not for a moment dispute the doctrine here – you can find it long before Barth, for example in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* 3a.10.1, *Utrum anima Christi comprehenderit et comprehendat Verbum, sive divinam essentiam*.[12] What I do respectfully query is the felicity of calling this 'the hiddenness of God', at any rate within contexts where such hiddenness is seen as something to be regretted or deplored.

[12] E.g., Est autem impossibile quod aliqua creatura comprehendat divinam essentiam, sicut in Prima Parte dictum est (qu.12 a.7): eo quod infinitum non comprehenditur a finito. Et ideo dicendum quod anima Christi nullo modo comprehendit divinam essentiam.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2004.0007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press