

Comments for Harrison Lee

“Four Objections to Soul-Building Hiddenness
Theodicies” Saint Louis University Virtue and
Wisdom Conference

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Harrison, I'd like to thank you for an engaging and enjoyable paper and for the opportunity to defend soul-building hiddenness theodicies against the objections you've raised. I'll begin by outlining your argument and conclude with a response rooted in the work of Richard Swinburne.

First the outline. Soul-building solutions to the problem of divine hiddenness rely on the following claim:

For any rational moral agent a , if God were to fully and perspicuously reveal himself to a , then a would be incapable free moral action (which is essential for moral development and thus soul-building theodicies).

Let's call this claim *epistemic distance* in honor of John Hick (2010). Epistemic distance, in turn, relies on the following support claims:

1. For any rational moral agent a and action x , if a is objectively coerced to x , then a does not x freely.
2. For any rational moral agent a , God cannot fully and perspicaciously reveal himself to a without also revealing that he punishes unrepenting sinners eternally in the afterlife.

Taken together these claims provide the rational basis for *epistemic distance*. From here, your argument proceeds to undermine epistemic distance by challenging the truth of (1). Specifically, you rely on the example of Jones₃ from Harry Frankfurt's "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" (1969), to argue that, contra (1), human "agents can freely x in spite of being objectively coerced to x " (sec. IV).

I will begin my defense by pointing out that soul-building solutions to divine hiddenness need not base their appeal to epistemic distance on the coercive force of eternal punishment. To see this, consider the following argument from Swinburne's *Providence and the Problem of Evil*:

To like and to like to be liked are essential elements of friendship. And . . . friendship with the good, and above all, with the perfectly good perfectly wise all-powerful source of my existence, would be an enormous good. . . .

Now if I acquire a deep awareness of the presence of God, I will then become deeply aware that if I do bad, especially wrong actions, the all-good creator will strongly disapprove. Hence if I have the proper desire to be liked, I will have a strong inclination not to do wrong; there will be a balance of desire against choosing wrong and so no overall temptation to resist reason. I will inevitably do the good. (1998, 205–6)

Let's call this *the argument from divine charisma*.

To see the force of his argument we need to take a brief look at two elements of Swinburne's action theory. First, he is an incompatibilist—that is, he believes that free will is incompatible with determinism. Second, he believes that human persons act freely in a limited number of circumstances. In most situations, he believes that our intentions are determined by the combination of our desires and beliefs.¹ There are, however, two cases in which a human person will exercise free will. The first case is when the combination of a person's desires and beliefs lead to two or more equally best and equally desirable options. Swinburne calls this very unserious free will. The second case is when a person's desires and moral beliefs come into conflict. Swinburne calls this conflict "temptation" and it takes three forms: a belief that action x is best coupled with (i) a desire to do what is good, but is less than best, (ii) the desire to do what is bad, or (iii) the desire to do what is wrong. In these cases a person will exercise unserious free will, serious free will, or very serious free will, respectively (1998, 84–86).

¹"Just as if reasons alone influence action, an agent inevitably does what he believes to be the best, so if desires alone influence action an agent will inevitably follow his strongest desire" (1998, 86). For more on Swinburne's action theory, see Swinburne (1998, 84–86; 2013, 174–209).

Now let's return to the argument from divine charisma. If we grant Swinburne's theory of action, "The only way in which a strong awareness of the presence of God will leave open the possibility of free choice between good and evil will be if the desire for divine approval is weaker than the desire to do wrong" (206). Without some degree of epistemic distance, this will not be the case. While it would be helpful to dwell on this point a little longer, I must press forward in the interest of time. I think the argument from divine charisma is successful.

I also think that Swinburne's theory of action, or something very much like it is correct, which is relevant to your argument against (1). Consider the firefighters in section II of your paper. On Swinburne's theory of action, Jones will lend Black his bunker gear, but not voluntarily. Why not? Because the situation cannot be classified as an instance of very unserious, unserious, serious, or very serious free will. To act freely Jones must experience an internal conflict or be required to make a trivial choice. So while Jones lends Black his bunker gear, and does so with no regard for Black's threat, his action is nevertheless determined by the desires and beliefs held by Jones in the moment.

If my argument is correct, there are two important take-aways. First soul-building theodicians like myself can support *epistemic distance*, for reasons unperturbed by the falsehood of (1) and (2). Second, we may embrace both (1) and (2) should we come across convincing reasons for their truth.

References

- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1969. "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility." *The Journal of Philosophy* 66 (23): 829–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2023833>.
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