

Hiddenness and Free Will: Divine Hiddenness, Coercion, and Autonomous Choice — 29

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Central claim

Freedom-based defenses of divine hiddenness divide into two claims. The logical claim—that clarity is incompatible with free response—fails if clarity can settle belief while evaluation and allegiance remain open. The empirical claim—that clarity would predictably dominate normal human response—requires a supported causal mechanism and a proportionality case for the actual amount of hiddenness. This challenges the freedom defense, not every rationale for hiddenness or theism.

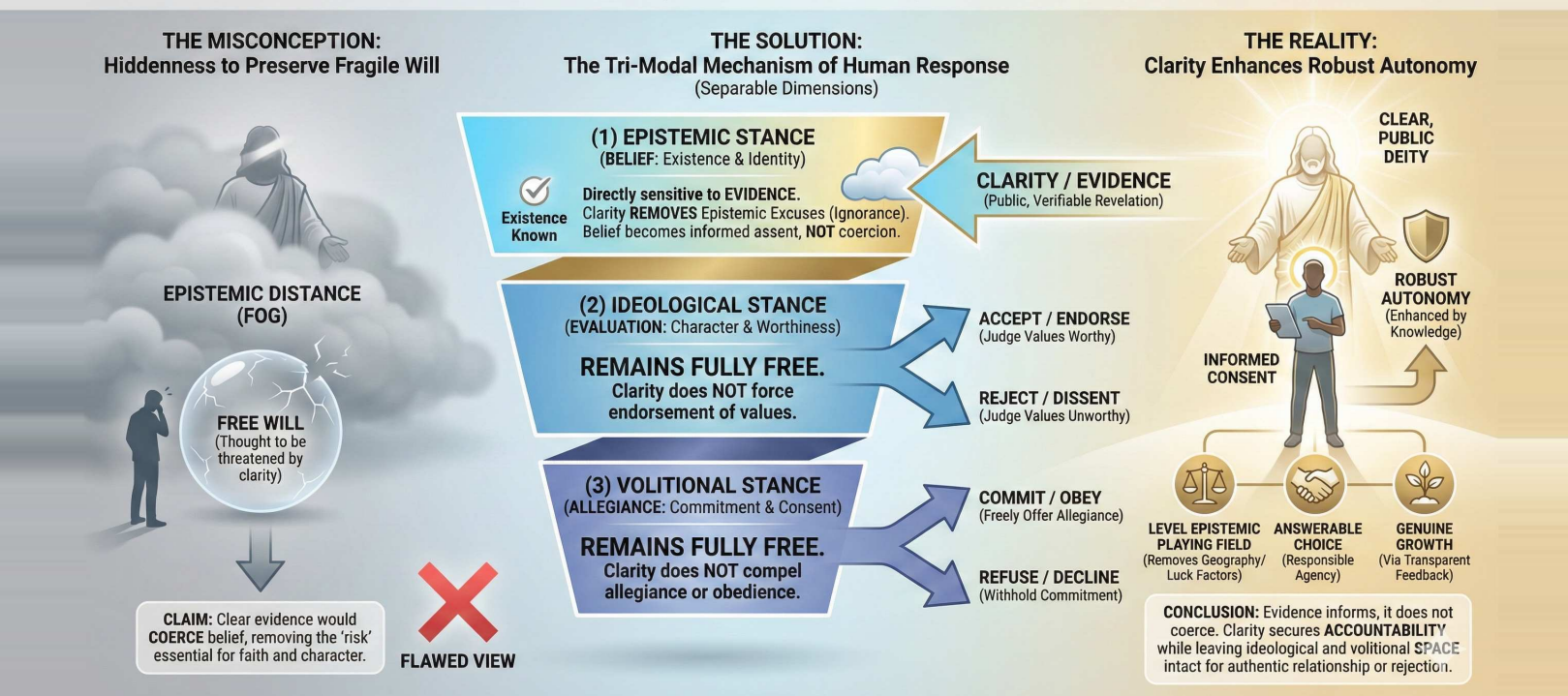
Preview:

Target	Logical branch	Empirical branch	Result
Hiddenness is necessary to preserve a free response.	A coherent clarity-with-freedom case defeats necessity.	A tendency claim needs a causal mechanism, expected strength, and proportionality.	The logical claim fails; the empirical claim remains an evidential burden.

The comparison concerns evidential clarity by itself, not a disclosure joined to threats, punishment, surveillance, manipulation, or an irresistible psychological presence.

Visual preview:

CLARITY & AUTONOMY: Why Divine Self-Revelation Enhances Human Freedom (A Tri-Modal Framework)



The preserved public visual maps belief, evaluation, and allegiance. It illustrates their conceptual separation; its embedded slogans do not themselves establish that every disclosure preserves freedom, improves autonomy, or avoids psychological domination.

Abstract

The claim that divine hiddenness preserves human freedom has two importantly different forms. On the logical form, evidential clarity is incompatible with a free relational response. On the empirical form, clarity would predictably dominate normal human evaluation or allegiance even if it did not do so by necessity. This paper separates belief, evaluation, and allegiance and tests each form against that distinction. A coherent disclosure can settle existence and identity while omitting threats, sanctions, manipulation, and cognitive bypass; evaluation and allegiance can therefore remain open. That possibility defeats the logical necessity claim. It does not establish how people would actually respond to unprecedented disclosure. The empirical form consequently requires a causal mechanism, an estimate of its expected force, and a proportionality argument showing why less harmful clarity would not protect the same good. Murray's coercion proposal, Dumsday's victim-centered account, and a Kantian concern about providential reward become more precise when treated as different mechanisms rather than as one inference from evidence to compulsion. The result is firm and limited: clarity alone need not remove relational freedom, while any psychological case for hiddenness bears an unresolved evidential and proportionality burden. This does not refute theism or distinct proposals based on mercy, moral formation, or human love.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; coercion; autonomy; belief; allegiance; doxastic voluntarism

1. One Defense, Two Claims

The problem of divine hiddenness begins from an apparent mismatch. A perfectly loving deity would seem to seek relationship with every capable, nonresistant person, yet some such people appear unable to believe that any deity is present. Schellenberg develops this mismatch into an argument from nonresistant nonbelief against the existence of a perfectly loving personal deity (Schellenberg, 1993, 2015). The literature contains many replies, and collections of the debate make clear that no single defense represents all theistic responses (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002).

This paper examines one reply: sufficient clarity would jeopardize human freedom. The intended thought is understandable. If a deity were as publicly undeniable as the sun at noon, perhaps human beings would no longer be able to form an unforced relationship, develop character at an appropriate distance, or refuse allegiance in a meaningful way. Murray's influential discussion places coercion at the center of this response (Murray, 1993). McBrayer and Swenson place such defenses within a wider critical landscape and argue that the major contemporary defenses fail, turning instead to a general skeptical response (McBrayer & Swenson, 2012). The present question is narrower: what follows from *clear evidence itself*?

A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including the attributes and aims relevant to an argument. The target here is a relationship-seeking God-concept said to remain epistemically hidden in order to protect free response. That is narrower than theism. A deity might have other reasons for hiddenness, and a theist might reject the demand for public clarity entirely. The present argument does not assess every such position.

The needed comparison is also narrower than "hiddenness versus a constant celestial spectacle." By *evidential clarity* I mean publicly available evidence sufficient for reasonable confidence that a particular deity exists and has a recognizable identity. Clarity, so defined, does not include a threat, an announced punishment, surveillance of every act, irresistible attraction, a command, or a promise of reward. Those additions may affect agency. Treating them as part of clarity from the outset would hide the very mechanism the defense needs to identify.

The freedom defense then divides into two claims:

1. **Logical necessity:** evidential clarity is incompatible with relational freedom; any sufficiently clear disclosure would eliminate a free response.
2. **Psychological tendency:** even if clarity and freedom are logically compatible, actual human psychology makes domination sufficiently likely to justify the relevant hiddenness.

These claims need different answers. A coherent counterexample is enough to defeat logical necessity. It is

not enough to settle a prediction about actual human responses. The tendency claim needs empirical support and a moral comparison between the freedom allegedly protected and the agency lost through obscurity.

The burden of a freedom defense

The logical branch fails if clarity can settle belief while evaluation and allegiance remain noncontrolled. The psychological branch must identify the causal mechanism, support its expected strength, and show that the resulting degree of hiddenness is proportionate. If terror, reward, punishment, manipulation, or overwhelming presence supplies the control, that added feature—rather than evidence as such—does the explanatory work.

The result matters in both directions. A critic should not infer from conceptual compatibility that every conceivable revelation leaves agency untouched. A defender should not call every predictable response to good evidence “coercion.” The analysis must name what is controlled, by what means, with what expected force, and at what cost to informed agency.

2. Three Responses That Should Not Be Collapsed

The simple freedom defense often treats acknowledgment of existence, moral approval, and personal commitment as one act. They are not one act. Three dimensions should be separated.

1. **Belief:** Does the person believe that the disclosed being exists and is correctly identified?
2. **Evaluation:** Does the person judge that being’s character, ends, and demands to be good, worthy, or authoritative?
3. **Allegiance:** Does the person consent to relationship, commit, obey, worship, cooperate, or otherwise align conduct?

Evidential clarity most directly affects the first dimension. If the evidence is genuinely decisive, continued disbelief may become psychologically difficult and epistemically unreasonable. That concession should be explicit. The argument does not try to preserve a freedom to believe contrary to one’s evidence.

Belief, however, is not the same as accepting a proposition as a policy for reasoning or acting. Cohen’s distinction between belief and acceptance is useful here: belief is ordinarily a disposition not produced at will, whereas acceptance can function as a deliberate policy in inquiry and action (Cohen, 1992). Contemporary work on doxastic voluntarism likewise distinguishes direct control over belief from indirect control over inquiry, attention, evidence gathering, and the maintenance of habits (Alston, 1988; Boespflug & Jackson, 2024). Poston and Dougherty show why the nature of belief is not a side issue in the hiddenness debate (Poston & Dougherty, 2007). If belief is normally not chosen by direct fiat, preserving the option to disbelieve is already a poor proxy for preserving practical freedom.

Evaluation and allegiance remain conceptually distinct even when belief is settled. A citizen may know that a ruler exists while judging the ruler corrupt. A defendant may recognize a court’s power while denying its moral legitimacy. A patient may understand a physician’s diagnosis while refusing the proposed treatment. These analogies are limited: no human authority exactly resembles a perfect deity. Their point is structural. Existence, approval, and commitment answer different questions.

The distinction does not prove that all three remain psychologically available under every disclosure. A manifestation could be terrifying, ecstatic, cognitively invasive, or paired with sanctions. It does establish a burden: the move from unavoidable belief to unavoidable allegiance is not valid without an account of how one produces the other.

3. Evidence, Coercion, and Autonomous Choice

3.1 Evidence is not automatically coercion

Coercion is disputed at its edges, but major accounts focus on force, conditional threats, enforcement, or pressure directed toward a particular action. The literature also distinguishes coercion from manipulation and other influences that may bypass or distort deliberation (Anderson, 2023). Evidence can be used within either setting. A captor may present accurate information together with a threat; a propagandist may mix facts with deception. It does not follow that the accurate information is the threat or the manipulation.

This separation is crucial. A clear disclosure could include at least four different features:

- evidence that settles existence and identity;
- affective force that produces awe, terror, or attraction;
- incentives such as promised reward or threatened loss;
- cognitive interference that bypasses ordinary deliberation.

Only the first is included in evidential clarity. If a defense relies on another feature, it may still succeed, but it is no longer entitled to infer coercion merely from the strength of evidence. This is not a verbal victory secured by defining coercion narrowly. Even on broader accounts, the defense must identify the pressure, interference, or control that converts accurate information into impaired agency.

3.2 Autonomy usually needs information

The relevant sense of autonomy is self-directed agency: the capacity to understand significant options, deliberate in light of one's values, and act without controlling influence. This is not a complete theory of free will and does not decide disputes between libertarian and compatibilist accounts. It identifies a condition shared by ordinary practices of responsible choice.

In medicine, informed consent is defective when a person lacks material information, misunderstands the alternatives, or is controlled by coercion or manipulation. More information is not always better; excessive or badly framed information can confuse. Still, the governing norm is adequate understanding, not strategic ignorance. Pugh's analysis of autonomy and rationality illustrates why information, appreciation, reasoning, and voluntariness must be assessed together (Pugh, 2020).

The analogy does not assume that relationship with a deity is a medical transaction. It supplies a comparator. When a decision is important and the agent's understanding is poor, we ordinarily improve the information while removing threats and manipulation. A freedom defense reverses that presumption. It says that obscurity about the other party's very existence protects the decision. That reversal requires a reason tied to the particular agency at stake.

The two-track result

1. A coherent disclosure can settle existence and identity without threats, sanctions, manipulation, or cognitive bypass while leaving evaluation and allegiance open.
2. Therefore clarity is not *logically incompatible* with relational freedom.
3. This counterexample does not establish how normal human beings would respond to an unprecedented disclosure.
4. An *empirical tendency* defense must therefore identify and support a causal mechanism, estimate its expected force, and justify the amount of hiddenness imposed to avoid it.

The first conclusion is about possibility and is deliberately restrained: clarity *need not* remove relational freedom. The second is a burden-of-proof conclusion, not a prediction that actual disclosure would be harmless. Keeping these results separate prevents both sides from converting a conceptual distinction into an unsupported claim about human psychology.

4. Assessing the Two Claims

4.1 The logical necessity claim fails

Suppose a capable agent receives public evidence sufficient to identify a deity but receives no threat, sanction, command, engineered attraction, or cognitive interference. The agent can no longer reasonably deny the deity's existence. Yet the agent can still ask whether the disclosed character is good, whether the proposed relationship is trustworthy, and whether allegiance is warranted. Nothing in the description makes those practical responses contradictory or causally fixed.

The example need not be psychologically typical. Its function is to test necessity. If the freedom defense says that *every* clear disclosure eliminates relational freedom, one coherent clarity-with-freedom case is enough to refute it. A defender may respond that real human beings would not react as the case permits. That response leaves the logical branch and enters the empirical one.

4.2 The psychological tendency claim remains open

The three-response distinction does not prove that evaluation and allegiance would remain robust under actual disclosure. Salience, perceived power, anticipated consequences, awe, fear, and social imitation might make dissent difficult even without a literal threat. The magnitude and distribution of those effects are empirical questions about an unprecedented event. Available analogies can identify possibilities but cannot measure that hypothetical response.

This uncertainty is symmetrical. The critic cannot infer universal psychological harmlessness from conceptual separability. The defender cannot infer near-universal domination from divine status or evidential strength. A defensible tendency claim must name the causal pathway, the population and response it concerns, the expected severity, and why a capable deity could not calibrate disclosure to preserve deliberation.

4.3 Proportionality and the cost of hiddenness

Even a supported domination risk would not by itself justify every degree or distribution of hiddenness. The defense must compare that risk with the costs of obscurity. A person cannot knowingly evaluate, trust, refuse, or enter relationship with a party whose existence and identity remain inaccessible. Hiddenness can therefore remove information needed for the very autonomous relationship it is said to protect.

This is not the claim that more evidence always improves autonomy. Excessive, badly framed, or psychologically overwhelming disclosure could impair it. The point is proportionality: withheld information should be tied to a specified protective good, and the opacity should not exceed what that good requires. Calibrated clarity is the relevant alternative to both total concealment and overpowering manifestation.

5. What the Main Freedom Proposals Actually Show

5.1 From nonbelief to relationship

Some defenses hold that a degree of epistemic distance enables a person to form moral character or enter relationship without being overwhelmed. This possibility should not be dismissed. Human beings are affected by

salience, authority, perceived consequences, and social pressure. An undeniable disclosure might alter motivation even if it did not logically entail obedience.

But “alter” is not “control.” Knowledge that another person exists changes the landscape of every relationship, yet it is normally a precondition for consent rather than an obstacle to it. If divine salience would uniquely dominate attention, the explanation must say why. If punishment would make refusal too costly, the concern is the punishment. If majesty would disable deliberation, the concern is psychological overwhelm. Each is an intelligible proposal; none follows from evidential strength alone.

Murray’s coercion defense is strongest when understood in this mechanism-sensitive way, not as a verbal equation between obviousness and compulsion (Murray, 1993). It invites empirical and moral questions: What kind of manifestation is imagined? Which capacities would be bypassed? Would the person retain the ability to withhold trust, approval, or allegiance? Could a capable deity provide sufficient evidence without the damaging feature? A defense that leaves these questions unanswered has redescribed the concern rather than explained hiddenness.

5.2 A victim-centered free-will account

Dumsday offers a different use of free will. On his account, temporary hiddenness may protect victims of wrongdoing from forming hostility toward a deity whose existence remained obvious while their suffering was permitted for the sake of others’ free choices (Dumsday, 2010). The mechanism is not simply that evidence compels allegiance. It is that disclosure under severe suffering may predictably damage the victim’s attitude toward the disclosed being.

That proposal is importantly distinct from the simple coercion defense and is not refuted by showing that belief, evaluation, and allegiance are separable. It also illustrates why mechanism and proportionality matter. The account must explain which victims need opacity, for how long, why clearer disclosure or explanation would not mitigate hostility, and how the protective benefit compares with the relational costs of hiddenness. The two-track framework clarifies the proposal rather than dismissing it.

5.3 The Kantian moral-merit defense

Paytas develops a stronger proposal rooted in Kantian moral psychology. The concern is not simply that certainty would prevent transgression. Rather, confidence in providential justice could make conformity to moral law appear prudentially self-interested, weakening the agent’s ability to experience duty as requiring genuine sacrifice (Paytas, 2019). This avoids the crude claim that evidence physically or logically forces obedience.

The proposal deserves a narrower response. First, it concerns moral motivation under awareness of reward and justice, not belief in existence by itself. Evidence that identifies a deity need not disclose a reward structure, make every sanction immediate, or reveal how providence distributes outcomes. Second, agents routinely act from mixed motives. Certainty that honesty is generally beneficial does not make principled honesty impossible, though it may complicate the assessment of motive. Third, a defense of some uncertainty about cosmic reward does not yet explain nonresistant uncertainty about whether any relationship-seeking deity exists.

The Kantian account may therefore justify a particular kind or degree of distance. It does not vindicate the general inference from clarity to lost freedom. It shifts the debate from coercion to the conditions of moral worth. That shift is philosophically productive because it makes the proposed good and the needed opacity more precise.

5.4 The “enough but not overwhelming” dilemma

A common middle position says that evidence is available but deliberately not overwhelming. The proposal faces a dilemma.

1. If “overwhelming” means evidence strong enough to make belief rationally unavoidable, the three-response

distinction shows that evaluation and allegiance may remain open.

2. If it means a total encounter that terrifies, manipulates, irresistibly attracts, or makes refusal unbearably costly, the controlling feature is not evidential clarity alone.

The dilemma does not prove that a moderate evidential environment is impossible or undesirable. It requires the defense to specify the relevant threshold in terms of human capacities and the good being protected. Otherwise every degree of hiddenness can be labeled “just enough” after the fact, and no possible distribution of belief would count against the proposal.

6. An Argument-Strand Ledger

The paper’s conclusion rests on distinct conceptual, empirical, and moral strands. Calling all of them “evidence” would blur their roles; they are not independent numerical measurements and should not be multiplied into a fabricated probability.

Argument strand	What it supports	What it does not establish	Burden left for a defense
Logical counterexample	Clarity and relational freedom can coherently coexist	Typical or universal psychological resilience	Abandon necessity or show the case incoherent
Three responses	Belief, evaluation, and allegiance answer distinct questions	Every response remains psychologically easy under every disclosure	Show the bridge from settled belief to controlled allegiance
Doxastic control	Belief is ordinarily not chosen by direct fiat	Agents bear no responsibility for inquiry or belief formation	Explain why preserving selectable disbelief is the relevant freedom
Coercion analysis	Evidence can be separated from threats and controlling influence	Accurate information can never appear in a coercive setting	Identify the operative pressure, manipulation, or bypassing mechanism
Empirical tendency	Salience or perceived power might impair actual deliberation	The size, distribution, or inevitability of that effect	Support the mechanism and explain why calibrated clarity would fail
Proportionality	Hiddenness can itself obstruct informed relationship	Maximum information is always optimal or harmless	Match the opacity imposed to the protective good claimed
Kantian refinement	Certainty about providential reward may complicate moral motivation	Uncertainty about existence is required for all morally worthy action	Match the degree and object of hiddenness to the moral good claimed

The ledger makes the fork visible. The logical strand defeats necessity without predicting actual responses. The empirical strand identifies what would be needed to support a tendency claim without pretending that unprecedented disclosure has already been measured. A successful defense must supply a psychologically credible mechanism and show that less harmful forms of clarity would not protect the same good.

7. Objections and Replies

7.1 Clarity would make conformity automatic

Objection. Human responses to an unmistakably present, maximally powerful being would not resemble responses to a physician or ruler. The difference in power would make resistance merely theoretical.

Reply. The objection identifies a real variable: overwhelming power. It still needs to distinguish recognition, prudent compliance, sincere approval, and freely offered allegiance. A person can comply from fear while withholding approval; that would show that relationship has not been compelled, even if behavior has. If power plus threatened consequences makes refusal prohibitively costly, the objection has located the pressure in sanctions. A defense based on sanctions is different from a defense based on evidence and raises the further question of why clarity could not be supplied without the threat.

7.2 The possibility of refusal is too thin

Objection. Mere logical possibility is not meaningful freedom. If virtually every normal person would submit, pointing to conceptual distinctions does little.

Reply. Agreed for the empirical branch. Logical separability defeats only the claim of necessity; it does not show that refusal would be psychologically robust in the actual human population. But the objection states a prediction rather than supporting it. Because unprecedented disclosure cannot be read directly from ordinary cases, the tendency defense must identify the expected mechanism, its strength and distribution, and why calibrated disclosure could not avoid it. The paper leaves that prediction open rather than silently resolving it for either side.

7.3 Freedom requires not knowing the examiner is present

Objection. Conduct is more revealing when people do not know they are observed. Hiddenness lets character emerge without performance for a cosmic examiner.

Reply. Concealed observation may reveal existing dispositions, but it does not automatically respect the observed person's autonomy. It also differs from relationship, where awareness of the other party is ordinarily essential. If the aim is diagnostic testing, the proposal should defend that aim and explain why the evidence gained outweighs the costs of nonresistant nonbelief. It should also distinguish uncertainty about observation from uncertainty that the relationship-seeking party exists.

7.4 Faith loses integrity when evidence becomes decisive

Objection. Trust is valuable partly because it goes beyond proof. Decisive public evidence would convert faith into mere acknowledgment.

Reply. Evidence of existence does not exhaust trust. Trust concerns character, promises, vulnerability, and continuing commitment. Knowing that a friend exists does not eliminate the possibility of trusting or distrusting that friend. If faith is defined as believing with insufficient evidence, clarity would indeed remove that state; the further question is why that epistemic risk is necessary for a good relationship. The value cannot simply be assumed from the word "faith."

7.5 The argument ignores other goods served by hiddenness

Objection. Hiddenness may protect people from culpability, make human love possible, or serve goods unrelated to free allegiance.

Reply. Those are distinct defenses and lie outside the central conclusion. Dumsday proposes mercy as a rationale for hiddenness, while Sheeks argues that hiddenness can protect forms of human love relevant to relationship with a deity (Dumsday, 2012; Sheeks, 2023). Such accounts must be assessed by their own predictions, costs, and scope. Their availability confirms the need for precision: defeating the simple freedom defense does not defeat every theodicy of hiddenness.

8. A Positive Autonomy Condition

The critical argument suggests a constructive standard. If a deity seeks unforced relationship with finite agents, an autonomy-respecting evidential environment would aim for:

1. **identification:** enough accessible evidence for capable, nonresistant people to form justified belief that the relevant being exists and is not being confused with an impostor;
2. **understanding:** enough disclosure of character and proposed relationship for evaluation to be informed;
3. **non-domination:** no threat, manipulation, cognitive bypass, or engineered compulsion that substitutes control for deliberation;
4. **live response:** practical room to approve or dissent, trust or distrust, commit or refuse;
5. **proportionate opacity:** any withheld information is tied to a specified good and does not exceed what that good requires.

This condition does not describe one inevitable world design. It supplies a diagnostic. Clarity and freedom are not endpoints on a single scale. An environment can be evidentially clear and coercive, clear and noncoercive, obscure and coercive, or obscure and noncoercive. Once those dimensions are separated, hiddenness cannot be justified merely by invoking freedom. The nature of the information, the form of the encounter, the incentives, the psychological effects, and the available responses must all be evaluated.

The condition also prevents a symmetry error. Critics sometimes assume that more evidence is always better; defenders sometimes assume that more evidence is always more controlling. Both claims are too simple. The responsible target is adequate, proportionate clarity without domination. If such a combination is possible, the necessity claim in the freedom defense fails even if some dramatic forms of disclosure would be harmful.

9. Conclusion

The freedom-based defense of divine hiddenness should not be treated as one claim. Its logical form says that evidential clarity and relational freedom are incompatible. Its empirical form says that, given actual human psychology, clarity would predictably dominate evaluation or allegiance. The distinction matters because the two forms require different support.

The logical form fails. A coherent disclosure can settle whether a deity exists and is correctly identified while omitting threats, sanctions, manipulation, and cognitive bypass. Belief may then be constrained by the evidence while evaluation and allegiance remain open. That counterexample establishes compatibility, not a forecast of universal psychological resilience.

The empirical form remains a substantive proposal, but it needs more than an appeal to obviousness or power. Murray's coercion concern, Dumsday's victim-centered account, and Paytas's Kantian concern about providential reward point to different mechanisms and different goods. Each must specify the predicted effect and show why calibrated clarity could not avoid it. The defense must also justify proportionality, because hiddenness can itself deprive agents of information needed for informed relationship.

The conclusion is therefore bounded but consequential. Clear public evidence need not eliminate relational freedom; an empirical freedom defense bears an unresolved mechanism-and-proportionality burden. This result does not refute theism, establish that every revelation would be harmless, or answer defenses based on mercy, moral development, or human love.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Definitions

- *Evidential clarity*: public evidence sufficient for justified confidence that a specified deity exists and is correctly identified, considered apart from threats, sanctions, manipulation, or cognitive bypass.
- *Relational freedom*: the agent's capacity to evaluate the disclosed being and to offer or withhold allegiance through deliberation not controlled by those influences.
- *Logical freedom defense*: the claim that evidential clarity is incompatible with relational freedom.
- *Empirical freedom defense*: the claim that evidential clarity would, given actual human psychology, predictably impair relational freedom enough to justify a relevant degree of hiddenness.

Branch A: logical necessity

- A1.** If evidential clarity by itself necessarily eliminates relational freedom, then no agent can receive evidential clarity while retaining noncontrolled evaluation and allegiance.
- A2.** At least one coherent evidentially clear scenario leaves evaluation and allegiance noncontrolled because it settles existence and identity without adding threats, sanctions, manipulation, or cognitive bypass.
- A3.** Therefore evidential clarity by itself does not necessarily eliminate relational freedom. **C-A**

Branch B: psychological tendency and proportionality

- B1.** If actual human psychology is invoked to justify hiddenness, the defense must identify and support a causal mechanism by which clarity would impair evaluation or allegiance with sufficient likelihood and severity.
- B2.** If that risk is invoked to justify a degree or distribution of hiddenness, the defense must also show that the opacity is proportionate and that a less restrictive, calibrated disclosure would not protect the same good.
- B3.** A defense that supplies neither showing has not established that actual hiddenness is required for relational freedom. **C-B**

The move from A1 and A2 to C-A is modus tollens and is deductively valid. A2 is a possibility premise supported by the distinction among belief, evaluation, and allegiance; a critic can challenge it by showing that the deliberately restricted scenario is incoherent. Branch B is not deductive evidence that disclosure would be psychologically benign. It states the explanatory and moral burdens of an empirical defense. A supported mechanism could satisfy B1, and a successful proportionality case could satisfy B2. Until both are supplied, C-B records what has not been established rather than pretending to settle an unmeasured hypothetical response.

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