

The Incognito Failure

Kierkegaard's King, Divine Hiddenness, and the Difference between Non-Coercion and Non-Recognition

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Revised August 2026

Central claim

Kierkegaard's king-and-maiden parable can explain why a loving deity might avoid overpowering spectacle, but it does not explain why the lover's identity should remain unavailable to capable, nonresistant seekers. Compared with clear yet non-coercive self-identification, deep or uneven hiddenness blocks the recognition that conscious relationship requires; unless an independent argument shows that this loss is necessary, the parable fails as a defense of such hiddenness. This critique targets that analogy, not every form of theism or every possible reason for divine silence.

Preview:

Starting insight	Needed bridge	Recognition test	Bounded result
Love should not be compelled by status or fear.	Protecting free response must require obscuring who seeks relationship.	Can the seeker identify the lover while remaining free to refuse love, trust, or obedience?	If yes, clarity is not coercion; if no, disguise defeats the stated relational aim.

The decisive comparator is not spectacular certainty. It is minimally clear, personally apt, non-manipulative disclosure that leaves affection and allegiance open.

Visual preview:



The king stands between recognizable, non-coercive contact and a darker route where added disguise, rival claims, developmental variation, and accountability obscure the referent. The image displays the paper's conceptual dilemma; it does not establish that every seeker is nonresistant or that no independent hiddenness defense can succeed.

Abstract

Kierkegaard's king-and-maiden parable is sometimes recruited to defend divine hiddenness: a king who wants unforced love approaches the maiden without royal display, and a loving deity may likewise remain incognito. The parable supports restraint, but it does not support non-recognition. This paper rereads the thought experiment in its setting, separates four stages of relationship—detection, identification, understanding, and voluntary response—and compares deep hiddenness with minimally clear, non-coercive self-identification. The result is a dilemma. If the incognito lover remains recognizable, the analogy does not explain capable, nonresistant nonbelief; if the lover becomes unrecognizable, the strategy prevents the conscious relation it was supposed to protect. A Referent-and-Bridge Test then asks what agent an alleged sign identifies, why the sign should be expected under the specified God-concept, and which responses remain free after recognition. Religious diversity, demographic variation, and the difficulty of classifying belief complicate the empirical premise, but they do not supply the missing bridge from non-coercion to identity-obscuring hiddenness. The conclusion is limited: the parable alone does not justify deep or uneven hiddenness. Other defenses and other forms of theism remain open, but they must do independent work.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; divine hiddenness; nonresistant nonbelief; recognition; coercion; religious diversity; philosophy of religion

1. The Question the Parable Must Answer

Kierkegaard's image is compelling. A king loves a maiden of low social standing. If he commands her response or surrounds himself with the force of rank, he risks obtaining compliance, awe, or self-interest rather than reciprocal love. He therefore approaches in a lowly form. The thought experiment captures a real relational truth: power can deform the response that power seeks.

The image is often allowed to carry a second claim too quickly. From the fact that spectacle or threat could distort love, it does not follow that a lover's existence or identity should be difficult to recognize. A person may know who stands before her and still remain free to reject, distrust, dislike, or leave that person. Belief that an agent exists is not love of that agent; recognition is not consent; and clear invitation is not compelled allegiance.

The relevant target is therefore narrow. In this paper, a *God-concept* means a specified conception of a deity rather than an undefined use of a general religious label. The target is the claim that Kierkegaard's parable, by itself, explains why a perfectly loving deity of a relational God-concept might permit deep or uneven non-recognition among persons capable of relationship and not resisting it. The comparator is not a deity blazing across the sky or making denial psychologically impossible. It is clear but non-coercive self-identification: enough personally apt access to make responsive relationship possible while leaving love, trust, and obedience open.

Schellenberg's hiddenness argument is built around the apparent existence of nonresistant nonbelief, not a demand for maximal spectacle (Schellenberg, 1993, 2015). Its strongest versions claim more than this paper needs to establish. The present question is prior and conditional: if the king-and-maiden story is offered as a defense, does it supply the missing bridge from avoiding coercion to permitting non-recognition? The answer is no.

Governing thesis

The parable establishes a reason to avoid coercive revelation only. To justify recognition-blocking hiddenness, a defender must add an independent premise showing why minimally clear self-identification would threaten a good important enough to outweigh the relational loss. Without that premise, the disguise either remains recognizable and fails to explain nonbelief, or becomes unrecognizable and defeats the relationship it was meant to protect.

2. Kierkegaard's King in Context

The parable appears in the second chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, a work published under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. Its governing concern is how unequal parties can be brought into unity and how a divine teacher might appear within history. The king's problem is not merely how to transmit evidence of his existence. It is how to overcome an inequality that threatens mutual understanding. The lowly form of a servant represents condescension and presence: the king comes near rather than remaining a remote rumor (Kierkegaard, 1985). Interpretive work on Kierkegaard likewise places the passage within his broader treatment of incarnation, faith, reason, and the learner's encounter with the paradox (Evans, 2006).

That context matters. The parable contains at least three features that are easily lost when it becomes a free-standing hiddenness defense:

1. **The king acts to establish contact.** He enters the maiden's world. Incognito names the manner of presence, not simple absence.
2. **The obstacle is inequality.** Royal splendor may make reciprocity difficult because it foregrounds status. The story does not establish that recognizing the suitor's identity would mechanically cause love.
3. **The reader has privileged information.** We know that the stranger is the king and that his purpose is love. The maiden does not automatically possess that authorial viewpoint.

The third feature creates the transfer problem. The story feels safe because the narrator tells us who the stranger is and why he is disguised. A real seeker confronted by silence, competing testimony, ambiguous experience, and contradictory traditions lacks that guarantee. Importing the reader's knowledge into the seeker's position quietly assumes the very identification that hiddenness places in dispute.

This is not an objection to Kierkegaard's use of the parable. It is an objection to a later use that asks the story to explain a different phenomenon. Accommodation can explain why revelation might be ordinary, humble, or non-dominating. It cannot, without further premises, explain why a capable and open person should remain unable to identify any divine partner at all.

3. Four Rungs of Conscious Relationship

Talk of revelation, belief, and relationship often compresses several tasks into one. Separating them reveals where coercion concerns and hiddenness concerns actually enter.

Relational rung	Question for the seeker	What failure looks like	Relation to freedom
Detection	Is some agent addressing or approaching me?	Silence, noise, or experience with no identifiable agency.	Detection does not settle whether the agent is good or worthy.
Identification	Who is this agent rather than a rival, projection, institution, or coincidence?	The same evidence fits incompatible claimants equally well.	Identification still leaves acceptance and affection open.
Understanding	What is this agent asking, promising, or revealing?	Intentions and terms remain too ambiguous for informed trust.	Understanding improves the quality of a choice; it need not remove choice.
Response	Will I love, trust, obey, resist, postpone, or refuse?	Fear, manipulation, or irresistible pressure bypasses considered response.	This is the rung most directly threatened by coercion.

The table's distinction is conceptual, not a claim that every relationship develops in a tidy sequence. Interpersonal knowledge can be embodied, affective, practical, and second-personal rather than merely a list of propositions (Benton, 2018). Even so, a conscious reciprocal relationship must have a sufficiently stable referent: the person needs some way to distinguish the putative partner from no partner and from incompatible alternatives. A thinner account of belief may change what counts as identification; it does not make an unidentified referent adequate by definition.

The four rungs also expose a common slide. A defender correctly observes that maximal manifestation might distort the final rung, then treats less access at the first two rungs as though it followed automatically. But a change in royal display and a loss of personal identity are different interventions. The argument needs a bridge between them.

4. Recognition Without Coercion: Three Concrete Cases

Abstract discussion makes clarity sound more controlling than it normally is. Three ordinary cases show why that is a mistake.

4.1 The unmarked letter

Suppose a woman receives weekly letters saying, "I love you and want a relationship." The letters are gentle and demand nothing, but they are unsigned. Some contain phrases used by several people she knows. She cannot tell whether the writer is a former friend, a stranger, a prankster, or no single person at all. The absence of threat does not create a relationship. Adding a stable signature, a verifiable memory, and a safe way to reply would improve recognition without forcing affection. She could still ignore the letters or decline contact.

4.2 The hospital visitor

A patient wakes disoriented. A quietly dressed visitor sits nearby and says, "I am your brother; I came because I care." The visitor avoids uniforms, authority, and pressure. He offers a familiar detail and lets the patient check with staff. This is minimally clear and non-coercive. By contrast, a silent figure who repeatedly disappears before identification may avoid pressure, but the patient cannot knowingly respond to him as a brother. Less spectacle is compatible with more recognition.

4.3 The disguised king

Return to the maiden. The king can set aside crown, guard, wealth, and command while still introducing himself, sharing a history that identifies him, or allowing his identity to become responsibly knowable over time. Those disclosures do not guarantee love. If every reliable clue is removed because any recognition is treated as corrupting, the king no longer protects reciprocal love; he makes a response to *him* unavailable.

These examples do not prove that a divine agent must disclose in exactly the same way as a human agent. They establish a weaker point sufficient for the present critique: clear self-identification and freedom are conceptually compatible. Because the compatibility is easy to illustrate, a hiddenness defense must explain why the divine case is importantly different. It cannot simply rename clarity as coercion.

5. The Referent-and-Bridge Test

A putative sign can be meaningful, consoling, or morally fruitful without identifying one source. The Referent-and-Bridge Test asks two linked questions: *What does the experience identify?* and *why should that experience*

be expected under the particular account being defended? A third question checks whether recognition would actually remove freedom.

Context	Actual questions	What a successful answer must show
Private experience	Did the experience present an agent, or only peace, awe, conviction, or relief? What feature distinguishes one deity, a human source, and a psychological process?	A stable referent rather than a merely valuable effect; rival explanations need not be impossible, but the evidence must discriminate to some degree.
Sacred source	Why should this text be expected from the specified God-concept? How is its authority distinguished from incompatible texts making parallel claims?	A bridge from content, provenance, or performance to this source that does not simply assume the tradition under examination.
Answered request	Was the requested outcome specified in advance? How often do comparable requests fail? Would failure also have been interpreted as wise refusal or hidden help?	A result whose occurrence is more expected under the proposed agency than under coincidence, selective memory, or an every-outcome interpretation.
Sincere seeking	What access was realistically available to this person, in this language, culture, history, and psychological condition? What would count as openness or resistance?	A person-sensitive assessment rather than a moral diagnosis inferred solely from nonbelief.
After identification	If the source were identified, which options would disappear? Could the person still refuse trust, love, worship, or obedience?	A demonstrated threat to morally relevant response, not the bare fact that belief would become easier.

The test is intentionally modest. It does not demand certainty or a laboratory demonstration. It asks that evidence do the relational work claimed for it. If a sign identifies no speaker, it may still have other value. If it identifies a speaker but no specific theological account, it may support a thinner conclusion. If the same interpretive policy validates incompatible claimants, the policy cannot by itself select among them.

This comparative point also answers a familiar mistake. Compatibility is not confirmation. An ambiguous event can be compatible with a hidden lover, a different lover, impersonal causes, and no intended message. To count as public evidence for one account, the event must be more expected, or otherwise better explained, under that account than under relevant alternatives. Alston's defense of religious experience takes experience seriously while recognizing the need to address rival practices and defeaters (Alston, 1991). The present test applies that burden specifically to the identity of the alleged relational partner.

6. Nonresistant Nonbelief and the Distribution Problem

Schellenberg's central case is a person capable of conscious relationship who is not resisting it and nevertheless lacks belief in the relevant deity (Schellenberg, 1993, 2015). The king analogy is poorly matched to this case. The person is not refusing a recognized suitor because royal power has frightened or corrupted her. She is unable to identify a suitor. Explaining why the lover avoids command does not explain why the seeker lacks a recognizable invitation.

The empirical premise should not be treated casually. Belief is not a single clean switch, and religious cognition includes intuitive, reflective, affective, and behavioral dispositions that can diverge. Green's synthesis of cognitive-science research argues that the distribution of religious belief is messier than many hiddenness arguments or replies assume (Green, 2025). That complexity counsels careful classification. It does not license treating every apparent nonbeliever as resistant, nor does it show that coarse folk religion identifies a particular relational deity.

Distribution adds another pressure. Maitzen argues that geographic and cultural clustering of theistic belief is more expected on naturalistic explanations than on a simple expectation of universally accessible revelation (Maitzen, 2006). Baker-Hytch replies that socially dependent knowledge can itself realize goods a deity might value and can help explain uneven distribution (Baker-Hytch, 2016). The exchange is instructive because it shows what an adequate response looks like: not a slogan about disguise, but an additional account of why the distribution arises and why its goods might justify its costs.

The argument of this paper survives whichever side wins that empirical dispute. If there are capable, nonresistant nonbelievers, the parable does not explain their lack of recognition. If their number or classification is uncertain, the parable still supplies no method for distinguishing protective incognito from relationship-defeating obscurity. Empirical uncertainty narrows confidence; it does not create the missing bridge.

7. The Strongest Replies and Their Evidential Price

A fair audit should not pretend that the king analogy is the whole theistic response. The modern literature contains a wide range of Jewish, Christian, atheistic, and agnostic treatments of hiddenness (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002). Several stronger replies add premises that the parable lacks. Each deserves separate evaluation.

7.1 Coercion and moral freedom

Murray argues that some forms of unmistakable manifestation could create morally significant pressure, especially by making disobedience appear immediately costly (Murray, 1993). This possibility supports restraint. Yet pressure is graded, and belief in a person's existence does not determine one's attitude toward that person. The reply must identify the level of clarity at which morally relevant freedom is lost and explain why individualized, non-threatening disclosure cannot remain below that level.

7.2 Development, resentment, and delayed disclosure

Dumsday proposes that delayed revelation might sometimes prevent or reduce creaturely resentment (Dumsday, 2012). This is a genuine independent reason, not a restatement of incognito. Its price is case sensitivity. A delay that benefits one person may burden another, and a perfectly informed loving agent would know the difference. The proposal may explain some periods of hiddenness without explaining deep, lifelong, or badly distributed non-recognition.

7.3 Relationship without explicit propositional belief

Some accounts allow a person to participate in a relationship through trust, practice, second-personal experience, or *de re* contact without first holding a fully articulated proposition about the partner (Benton, 2018). This broadens the forms recognition may take. It does not remove the need for a referent. If the same practice and experience fit incompatible sources, the defender must still explain what makes the relationship a relationship with this agent rather than another or none.

7.4 Transcendence, lament, and alternative pictures of love

Rea challenges assumptions about what divine love should look like and develops a view on which divine presence may be widely available through experience, lament, protest, and religious practice (Rea, 2018). That project directly questions Schellenberg's parental or interpersonal expectations. It also illustrates the present conclusion: once the account appeals to a different model of love, transcendence, liturgy, or availability, those premises—not

the bare king analogy—carry the defense. The debate then concerns whether that model is independently credible and whether its claimed availability meets the recognition burden.

7.5 Unknown goods

A final reply says that a perfectly loving deity may have reasons beyond human understanding. This preserves logical possibility, but it reduces explanatory content. If any distribution of clarity and silence is declared compatible with an unknown good, favorable experiences cannot simultaneously be advertised as expected confirmation without an asymmetric rule. Unknown reasons may block a confident global inference; they do not make Kierkegaard's story an explanation of the observed pattern.

The evidential price of retreat

A reply may coherently deny that conscious relationship always requires explicit belief, revise the model of perfect love, appeal to developmentally timed goods, or suspend judgment about divine reasons. But each move abandons the claim that the king's wish to avoid coercion is itself sufficient. The defense succeeds, if at all, through the added account and inherits that account's evidential burdens.

8. Accountability Makes Identification More Urgent

The relational cost of non-recognition becomes sharper when explicit belief, trust, repentance, worship, or doctrinal allegiance affects accountability. Failing to answer a recognized invitation differs morally from failing to identify an ambiguous one. A king who conceals his identity and then blames the maiden for not recognizing him combines self-imposed obscurity with an evidential burden placed on the less powerful party.

Some religious traditions soften the problem by allowing implicit faith, judgment according to available light, or relationship without explicit doctrinal recognition. Such moves may improve fairness. They also reduce the urgency of claims that explicit identification is required now. The defender faces a calibration question: what exactly must the seeker recognize, by what means, and with what consequence for reasonable error?

This is where the asymmetry of knowledge matters. The deity specified by a classical personal God-concept would know each seeker's evidence, trauma, language, social inheritance, cognitive style, and threshold for coercive pressure. The seeker does not know whether silence represents pedagogy, absence, error, or an unrecognized form of presence. A loving strategy need not eliminate all uncertainty, but it should not transfer nearly all identification risk to the finite party and then treat the resulting uncertainty as culpable.

9. What Successful Incognito Would Require

The critique can be constructive. A successful incognito strategy would preserve at least five conditions:

1. **Detectable presence.** The seeker has some basis for distinguishing an attempted relation from no attempted relation.
2. **Responsible identification.** Available signs support a stable referent and are not equally claimed by incompatible alternatives without a way to discriminate.
3. **Non-manipulation.** Disclosure does not bypass deliberation through terror, irresistible reward, deception, or status pressure.
4. **Corrigibility.** Misidentification can be checked and revised rather than being insulated by an every-outcome story.

5. **Person-sensitive adequacy.** Access is fitted to the capacities and history of the person whom the purported lover is trying to reach.

These conditions do not design a complete revelation policy. They state what the relational rationale itself appears to require. A defender may argue that one or more conditions are met through conscience, nature, scripture, community, religious experience, or non-propositional acquaintance. The Referent-and-Bridge Test then asks how those media identify the source, why they fit the specified account better than rivals, and what freedom remains once they succeed.

The parable points toward this standard more naturally than toward deep obscurity. The king comes close. He accepts vulnerability and enters a shared world. His lowliness removes status barriers so that encounter can occur. An application that turns this approach into persistent uncertainty about whether anyone is present reverses the narrative's relational direction.

10. The Incognito Dilemma

The paper's result can now be stated as a two-horn test.

Horn 1: Recognizable incognito

The lover is sufficiently recognizable for conscious reciprocal relation. This preserves the relational aim and shows that clarity can coexist with non-coercion. But it does not explain capable, nonresistant nonbelief, because the relevant seeker lacks the recognition the model retains.

Horn 2: Unrecognizable incognito

The lover's presence or identity is not sufficiently recognizable. This may resemble deep hiddenness, but it prevents the seeker from knowingly responding to the right agent. The strategy no longer protects a relationship; it blocks its initiation.

The invariant result is not atheism. It is explanatory failure by this analogy. To escape the dilemma, a defender must add a reason why recognition-blocking hiddenness is necessary or why the relationship need not involve recognition in the relevant sense. That reason must then answer the referent, distribution, freedom, and accountability questions on its own merits.

11. Conclusion

Kierkegaard's king remains philosophically useful because he exposes a genuine danger: power can obtain compliance while corrupting love. The story supports accommodation, humility, and restraint. It does not establish that a loving deity should be difficult to identify.

The central distinction is between non-coercion and non-recognition. Clear self-identification can leave love, trust, worship, and obedience open. When a disguise remains recognizable, it fails to explain nonresistant nonbelief; when it removes recognition, it defeats the conscious relation it was introduced to protect. Religious diversity, demographic variation, and the complexity of belief make the empirical assessment harder, but none supplies the missing bridge.

The rational change requested of the reader is precise. Do not accept an argument against overpowering spectacle as though it were an explanation of deep or uneven hiddenness. Ask who is identifiable, why the evidence points to the specified source, what response remains free after recognition, and what further reason

justifies any loss of relational access. Other hiddenness defenses may answer those questions. Kierkegaard's king, standing alone, does not.

Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Target conclusion. The king-and-maiden parable alone does not justify recognition-blocking hiddenness as necessary for freely offered divine-human relationship. This does not entail that theism is false, that every instance of divine silence is unjustified, or that no independent hiddenness defense can succeed.

A. Plain-language reconstruction

1. If the parable alone justifies recognition-blocking hiddenness as a protection for free relationship, then protecting free response must require permitting the lover's identity to remain unavailable to some capable, nonresistant seekers.
2. Minimally clear, non-threatening self-identification is compatible with a seeker's continued freedom to refuse love, trust, worship, or obedience.
3. Therefore protecting free response does not, by itself, require recognition-blocking hiddenness. (2)
4. The parable supplies the reason in Premise 1 only by showing why overpowering status or threat could distort response; it supplies no independent reason why the minimally clear alternative in Premise 2 must be unavailable.
5. Therefore the parable alone does not justify recognition-blocking hiddenness as necessary for freely offered relationship. (1–4)
6. If incognito remains recognizable, it does not explain capable, nonresistant nonbelief; if it becomes unrecognizable, it prevents conscious response to the right agent.
7. The failure of this analogy is compatible with the truth of theism and with other possible explanations of divine hiddenness.

Validity and support. Premises 1 and 4 specify what the proposed analogy would need to establish. Premise 2 is a conceptual claim supported by the ordinary cases and the four-rung analysis. Premises 3 and 5 follow by denying a necessary condition of the proposed justification. The inference is deductively valid conditional on those premises. Whether minimally clear disclosure would remain non-coercive for every person is a substantive and partly empirical question; the conclusion therefore concerns the insufficiency of the parable alone, not a universal proof that all hiddenness is unjustified.

B. Symbolic reconstruction

Symbols

- *J*: the king-and-maiden parable alone justifies recognition-blocking hiddenness as necessary to protect free relationship.
- *Q*: protecting free response requires permitting recognition-blocking hiddenness for some capable, nonresistant seekers.
- *M*: minimally clear, non-threatening self-identification is possible.
- *F*: under such minimally clear identification, love, trust, worship, and obedience remain freely rejectable.
- *R*: incognito remains sufficiently recognizable for conscious relation.
- *N*: incognito explains capable, nonresistant nonbelief.
- *L*: incognito achieves its stated aim of making conscious reciprocal relationship possible.
- *T*: the relevant form of theism is true.
- *D*: some independent hiddenness defense succeeds.

Necessary-condition argument

$$J \rightarrow Q, \quad (M \wedge F) \rightarrow \neg Q, \quad M \wedge F \vdash \neg J.$$

Plain-English annotation. If the parable alone justifies recognition-blocking hiddenness, then free relationship must require that kind of hiddenness. But minimally clear and non-threatening identification can leave every important relational response rejectable. Since that alternative is possible, the required bridge is missing, and the parable alone does not supply the claimed justification. The formula does not say that every actual disclosure would be equally gentle for every person.

The incognito dilemma

$$(R \rightarrow \neg N) \wedge (\neg R \rightarrow \neg L).$$

Plain-English annotation. If the disguise still permits recognition, it cannot explain the nonbelief at issue, because the relevant seeker lacks that recognition. If the disguise prevents recognition, it also prevents the conscious relation the strategy was meant to enable. The formula evaluates the analogy's two uses; it does not claim that every nonbeliever is nonresistant.

Scope limits

$$\neg J \not\vdash \neg T, \quad \neg J \not\vdash \neg D.$$

Plain-English annotation. Failure of this analogy does not imply that theism is false, and it does not imply that every independent defense of hiddenness fails. Those stronger conclusions would require additional premises and evidence. These non-derivability signs preserve the same principal limit stated on page 1 and in the conclusion.

Validity and support of the symbolic version. The first derivation is valid by modus tollens once $J \rightarrow Q$ and $(M \wedge F) \rightarrow \neg Q$ are granted. The body supports $M \wedge F$ with concrete cases and distinguishes recognition from voluntary response; its applicability to every person remains defeasible. The dilemma follows from the two ways the analogy can model incognito. The scope formulas block invalid movement from the failure of one defense to the falsity of theism or the failure of every other defense.

What remains contestable

The formal result requires only a coherent alternative in which identification is clear enough for relation while rejection remains free. It does not require the much stronger claim that one public form of disclosure would be equally apt for every person. Once that alternative is available, the parable's warning about spectacle no longer establishes that recognition-blocking hiddenness is *necessary*. A defender who maintains that even minimally clear identification would coerce every relevant seeker has introduced a new universal empirical premise; the parable does not supply it.

The argument also separates explanatory adequacy from complete atheological success. A defense may fail to explain capable, nonresistant nonbelief even if a perfectly loving deity has some other sufficient reason for permitting it. Conversely, uncertainty about how many such nonbelievers exist may weaken a broad argument against theism while leaving the analogy's missing bridge unchanged. The exact conclusion is therefore methodological and local: this story cannot do the whole justificatory job assigned to it.

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