HOPE AND THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE SILENCE

AARON D. COBB

Auburn University at Montgomery

Abstract. The silence of God either by itself or in circumstances of profound suffering can induce hopelessness and despair, eroding a person's ability to act in ways conducive to her own good. Given the role of hope in human agency, the loss of hope is an event of a significant moral and personal concern. And the standard responses to the problem of divine hiddenness may not address the existential crises occasioned by God's silence. This paper seeks to develop and address this challenge by evaluating two potential responses to the problem of despair-inducing experience of divine silence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of divine hiddenness is among the most significant challenges to the rationality of religious belief.[1] There are many who seek evidence concerning God's existence, but fail to find sufficient grounds for belief. And this lack of compelling evidence raises concerns about the underlying justification for the claim that God is perfectly loving. If there were a God who created persons and desires their good, wouldn't he make his presence more obvious? At a minimum, wouldn't God provide clear signs of his existence for any person who is willing to believe? The challenge for theists is to find ways to reconcile the rationality of their belief in divine love with the experience of divine hiddenness.

One of the central strategies theists employ to address this challenge is to articulate reasons a perfectly loving God may have for remaining hidden.[2] If God has justifying reasons, then divine hiddenness is neither

[1] For a collection of essays framing the problem of divine hiddenness along with a number of replies see Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002).

[2] For a sample of recent responses to the problem, see Cuneo (2013); Maitzen (2006); McBrayer and Swenson (2012); Moser (2004); Parker (2014); Poston and Dougherty (2007); Rea (2009, 2012); Timpe (2014); and Tucker (2008).

inconsistent nor incompatible with divine love. One could argue, for instance, that if God were to make his presence more obvious, the person would not be able to approach him freely and from the proper motivation.[3] Overwhelmed by evidence of God's existence, the person may approach God out of fear of punishment or the hope of reward rather than out of love for God. Thus, the experience of hiddenness enables a person to align her will properly to God.

Others have argued that epistemic distance could lead to the development of important states of character essential to union with God.[4] Divine hiddenness may enable the cultivation of a deeper form of commitment to or faith in God. Likewise, the felt absence of God may be essential to developing the virtues of patience and perseverance. Finally, if union with God moves the person toward friendship and solidarity with those God loves, the experience of divine hiddenness might be crucial to cultivating an empathetic concern for others. This experience may make one more attuned and responsive to the suffering of others.

These replies may go some way toward untangling the intellectual knot posed by divine hiddenness, but it is not clear that they address a related challenge: the existential weight of divine silence.[5] Michael Rea notes that the notion of hiddenness implies either that God deliberately conceals God's presence or that God's presence has been concealed "to such a degree that those from whom it is hidden can't reasonably be expected to find it" (2009, 78). But the fact that many people lack sufficient evidence for belief in God does not justify the charge that God is hidden in either of these ways. Rather, it indicates only "that God hasn't made a special effort to ensure that most of his rational creatures detect (as such) whatever signs of his existence there might be or whatever messages he might be sending us" (2009, 78). God's failure to make this effort becomes an existential burden for those who suffer because of divine silence. And a defense of the rationality of theistic belief alone may provide only small comfort for those who feel the weight of God's silence.

Within the Christian tradition, there are good reasons to focus on existential concerns related to divine silence. As Nicholas Wolterstorff

[3] See Moser (2004) and Murray (1993).

[4] Or, one might argue that God's silence establishes a kind of good that obtains independent of whether the agent experiences silence as a benefit. For more along these lines, see Rea (2012).

[5] Rea (2012) and Timpe (2014) directly address the problem of divine silence. See Parker (2014) for a critique of Rea (2012).

(2002) observes, the God revealed in scriptural narratives is a God "who is not only capable of speaking but has on many occasions spoken" (215). And God reveals himself as the creator of individuals for whom he desires an abundant life. In light of this expressed intent, God's selective reticence in some contexts is curious. Wolterstorff laments, "Suffering and life duration have gone agonizingly awry with reference to that intent" (2002, 221). And he joins his voice with scriptural narratives like the story of Job, many of the personal and corporate laments expressed in the Psalms, as well as Jesus's cry of abandonment from the cross.[6] These texts give full voice to the desolation caused by the silence of God.

There are modern voices within the Christian tradition that raise similar worries. In his *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis writes,

> ... go to [God] when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. (Lewis 1961, 17-18)[7]

And Helmut Thielicke writes,

> The silence of God is the greatest test of our faith. We all know this...Can we not all sing about this today? Can we not shriek it out? Is not God silent about Stalingrad? What do we hear above and under its ruins? Do we not hear the roar of the artillery, the tumult of the world and the cries of the dying? But where is the voice of God? When we think of God, is it not suddenly so quiet, so terribly quiet, in the witches' kitchen of this hell, that one can hear a pin drop even though grenades are bursting around us? There is neither voice nor answer. And even if I think I hear God – hear him in the judgment as the One by whom the proud waves are stayed (Job 38:11) – he is silent again the next moment when I have to ask: Why this man, my brother or my husband? (Thielicke 2010, 28).

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[6] For a novel discussion of Jesus's cry of dereliction, see Stump 2013.

[7] In an earlier draft, I incorporated some of Mother Teresa's expressions of her suffering on account of divine silence. In comments, however, Paul Moser suggested that Mother Teresa's experience of felt abandonment was an answer to her (perhaps imprudent) prayers to identify with Christ's experience on the cross. I agree that Mother Teresa's case is unique and, for this reason, I have not included her experiences of desolation and dejection in this essay. Nonetheless, I think her expressions of suffering on account of God's silence point to the real difficulties associated with enduring this experience. See Kolodiejchuk (2007) for an account of Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles with divine silence.

These authors raise the complaint that divine silence can be one of the most acute forms of suffering. God would not be so silent if God were truly loving. God would find a way to communicate signs of his love to those who persistently plead for his care. But God's silence fractures their ability to trust; their hopes dissipate. In the midst of otherwise harrowing experiences of loss or grief, persons experience the silence of God as a burden that compounds their sorrow. Some may even come to believe that divine silence is an indication that God is indifferent to their plight. Lewis observes,

> Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer. (Lewis 1961, 18).

The silence of God either by itself or in circumstances of profound suffering can induce hopelessness and despair, eroding a person's ability to act in ways conducive to her own good. The standard responses to the problem of divine hiddenness may not address the existential crises occasioned by God's silence. The person may find herself without the willingness to remain open to the possibility that God is good, let alone to approach God with the kind of humility and selfless concern proper to the alignment of her will to God's. She may fear that God is indifferent or worse and, as a result, be unable to approach God from a motive of love. Without hope, it is not clear that she will possess the patience and perseverance essential to develop the kinds of commitment, faith, love, or empathetic concern divine silence might otherwise make possible. It is not clear how one can understand the love of a God who permits demoralizing experiences of divine silence.

In this paper, I take up the task of developing and addressing this challenge. In section 2, I frame the challenge in light of recent discussions of the nature of hope and its connection to human agency. According to this view, hope is a fundamental human need the loss of which can permanently damage a person's ability to act for her own good. In section 3, I provide an explicit statement of the problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence. In section 4, I develop and assess two replies to this challenge. Part of the task of this section is to show how a Christian might address this challenge without questioning the underlying conception of the relationship between hope and human agency. Ultimately, I contend that these defenses do not adequately

address the existential force of the problem. It seems that an adequate response may require critical appraisal of the conception of hope underlying the challenge. In section 5, I conclude by noting how the traditional distinction between hope as an affective response and hope as a theological virtue complicates the Christian understanding of the relationship between hope and human agency. I briefly map a few of the ways this Christian understanding of hope might provide resources to address the problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence.[8]

II. HOPE, AGENCY, AND HUMAN NEED

The problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence assumes that the loss of hope can undermine a person's ability to act for her own good. For this reason, those who advance this challenge must presuppose a conception of hope according to which its presence in human life is an important good. The burden of this section is to sketch an account that displays the value of hope. Recent discussions in contemporary analytic philosophy have highlighted hope's function in human agency as an important aspect of its value.[9] Rejecting a common view that hope can be reduced to a mere complex of desires and beliefs, much of the recent discussion has focused on describing hope's distinctive nature along with its characteristic patterns of feeling, expression, and activity.[10]

Consider, for instance, a parent's hope that a cure will be found for her terminally ill child. The experience of hope in this case goes beyond mere desires for and beliefs about its possibility; her hope manifests itself in the way the parent engages in activities aimed at realizing a cure even when its possibility is remote. She may research the disease, inquire about the latest studies, seek out alternative forms of therapy, and cultivate a rich life of prayers while sitting with her daughter to offer promising

[8] A full development of this defense would require a separate paper. I have developed this response in a companion essay. Please see Cobb (2017).

[9] Contemporary analytic philosophy has only recently begun to devote sustained attention to the significance of hope. For recent discussions, see Bovens (1999); Cobb (2015, 2016, 2017); Govier (2011); Gravlee (2000); Lear (2008); Martin (2008, 2011, 2014); McGeer (2004, 2008); Meirav (2008, 2009); Pettit (2004); Shade (2001); Snow(2013); van Hooft (2011); Walker (2006); and Webb (2007).

[10] For a clear articulation of this common view, see Day (1969). For criticisms of this view, see Bovens (1999); McGeer (2004); Meirav (2008, 2009); Martin (2014); Pettit (2004); Shade(2001); and Walker (2006).

words of comfort. And if none of these secure for her the object of her primary concern, hope enables the parent to restructure and reconfigure the goals she seeks in ways that enable her to cling to the good implicit in her original desires.

Victoria McGeer (2004) and Margaret Urban Walker (2006) offer instructive analyses of these characteristic patterns of hope. McGeer begins by noting the crucial relationship between hope and the exercise of human agency. Hope is often at the root of human motivation and activity. But limitations in human agency can be, and often are, those features of human experience that trigger hope. In fact, there are times when person hopes for things completely beyond what she could possibly accomplish through her own agential powers. Nonetheless, McGeer claims that in these cases, there is still an "aura of agency" within the hopeful person (2004, 103). Hopefulness, she maintains, is primarily about the process of engaging with and inhabiting one's agency. She writes,

> hoping is a matter, not only of recognizing but also of actively engaging with our own current limitations in affecting the future we want to inhabit. It is, in other words, a way of actively confronting, exploring, and sometimes patiently biding our limitations as agents, rather than crumpling in the face of their reality. (McGeer 2004, 104).

Humans don't just exert their agency; they explore its parameters. "In hoping," she writes,

> we create a kind of imaginative scaffolding that calls for the creative exercise of our capacities and so, often, for their development. To hope well is thus to do more than focus on hoped-for ends; it is crucial to take a reflective and developmental stance toward our own capacities as agents – hence, it is to experience ourselves as agents of potential as well as agents in fact. (McGeer 2004, 104-105)

Walker emphasizes similar features of the richness and complexity of hope's role in human agency. On Walker's account, hope is an affective attitude characterized by a syndrome of desires, perceptions, attendings, expressions, feelings, and activities (2006, 48). She contends that hope's distinctive function is to recruit and mobilize a person's attention, emotion, and cognitive capacities toward the pursuit of a hoped-for outcome. Hope motivates and energizes the person, creates incentives and heightens the imagination to look for routes to the realization of

a desired outcome, facilitates greater self-awareness and restructuring of goals, and endows the agent with resolve and resilience to continue even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In most cases, hope causes a person to act in ways that might facilitate the realization of the good she seeks. Even in those circumstances where her agency is irrelevant to the realization of a desired outcome, hope issues in characteristic thoughts and expressions that take the realization of this good as their intended object. Walker rightfully notes that people "have varied and characteristic ways they try to invite, affect, or produce an outcome for which they hope, even when the outcome is not open directly, or at all, to their own effort" (2006, 49).

This syndrome analysis is not a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the locution "*S* hopes that *p*," but it does characterize core features of hope. Specific hopes involve a *desire* for a *good yet to be realized* which one believes is *possible* though its realization is *uncertain* and may be *difficult to obtain*. But more than this, hope is a kind of *attitude* one possesses concerning the future and the means by which her good may be secured. In this sense, hope is charged with a sense of *attentiveness* and *agential efficacy*. Hope contains "dynamic tendencies to attend to or be attuned to what is hoped for in a way that tilts or propels us toward making it so" (2006, 47).

Walker acknowledges that there are risks associated with hope. A person may hope for something she believes can be attained but which is no longer possible. Likewise, the person may falsely believe that she possesses sufficient power to secure a hoped-for outcome. In this sense, her hopes would be misplaced and unreasonable. Nonetheless, Walker maintains that this is neither a significant practical concern for the person nor is it a unique worry concerning hope as an affective attitude. Any emotion can tempt a person to act in unreasonable ways. A hope based upon just the slight chance of fulfillment may tempt a person to engage in imprudent or dangerous actions, but this is not sufficient to counsel against hope in desperate circumstances. Hope is more than a good for the agent; on her account, it is a human need especially "where that is all there is against inertness, terror, or despair" (2006, 57). The death or loss of all hope is crucial threat to human agency; without hope, a person may not be able to endure the difficult and tragic circumstances that characterize her life.

Walker's discussion of the death or loss hope focuses on a range of cases of moral evil including genocide, rape, and torture. But she acknowledges

that this loss may be the result of the "grinding and cumulative effects of the everyday institutions and practices that discriminate against people or exclude them because they belong to groups that are 'second-class' or despised" (2006, 65). Any of these types of events can create a sense of despondency and despair that paralyze the person. The loss of hope can stunt the person's abilities to engage in effective agency, diminishing the person's ability to make choices and to act in ways that contribute to her flourishing. This loss may even lead a person to act in ways that are self-destructive or which permanently damage her agency. Despair-inducing experiences assault a person's hopeful reserves such that, from her perspective, it is practically impossible to hope. Those who raise the problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence hold that God's failure to communicate can cause just this kind of hopelessness and despair.

III. DIVINE SILENCE AND THE LOSS OF HOPE

Divine silence could induce despair by itself, but more than likely it will do so as a constituent element of the experience of significant suffering. In relatively comfortable circumstances, or even in circumstances that are not characterized by extreme suffering, a person's reserves of hope are often sufficient for her to resist despair. While specific hopes may be disappointed, persons are remarkably resilient. The danger is not specific disappointments but an assault to the conditions essential for maintaining hope. And it is the experience of significant suffering, whether temporary or enduring, that is most often a substantive threat to these reserves.[11]

Divine silence is problematic, in part, because of its potential for eroding these reserves. In an experience that would otherwise be despair-inducing, an agent could maintain some hope if God would make God's presence known. If God were to communicate God's presence in a way that would be meaningful, a person could find a hope sufficient to sustain

[11] It is important to note that experiences that could induce despair are often the experiences that ground traditional formulations of the problem of evil. And here, there are important connections to draw between the problem of evil and the problem of divine silence. Although the problem of hiddenness can be distinguished from the problem of evil, much of the personal force of the problem of evil may derive from the fact that God seems silent in the midst of harrowing circumstances of suffering. If God were not hidden, it is not clear that the problem of evil would be as salient for the agent.

her through the experience of suffering. The fact that God is silent leaves the person in doubt about God's love. It is the weight of the perceived silence of God that gives to the problem of divine silence much of its existential heft.

If hope is both a good essential to human flourishing and a human need, then the loss of hope is a morally significant event. A person who fails to demonstrate a proper kind of concern for those conditions that erode or diminish the reserves of hope demonstrates a kind of callousness toward the person who is suffering. A person who is capable of addressing those factors destroying the conditions essential to maintaining hope ought to work towards their correction or defeat. In cases, where correction is beyond a person's direct control, she ought to seek to ameliorate their effects. She ought to protest against the harms they cause. Moreover, an individual demonstrates proper concern for those who are in danger of losing hope only to the extent that she seeks to offer both consolation and solidarity. The failure to act in these ways is both a moral failure and a failure of love.

If these claims are true with respect to human persons, then, arguably, they are true with respect to a personal God who is unlimited in both goodness and love. A perfectly loving God who intends the good for individual human persons and who knows how the loss of hope can undermine human agency would seek to address the causes of the loss of hope by defeating them, ameliorating their effects, protesting against them, and offering consolation and solidarity to those who are in duress. It is unclear how to reconcile the claim that God is perfectly loving with the possibility that agents undergo despair-inducing experiences because of divine silence.

The most salient features of this statement of the problem concern God's apparent failure to protest against the causes of loss of hope and to offer consolation and solidarity to those who suffer. The perceived silence of God in these contexts is deafening. If a loving God exists, it is within God's power both to protest against those features of the world that assault the reserves of hope and to offer consolation in the midst of these attacks. The perceived silence of God in these contexts seems to be positive evidence against a God of perfect love and goodness.

Given the ways in which divine silence may cause an agent to lose all hope, Christians ought to do more than display how religious belief in divine love might be compatible with experiences of divine silence. They need to find a way to address the fact that divine silence might hinder or

harm human agency and, thereby, undercut human flourishing. In the next section, I evaluate two potential replies to this challenge. In order to appraise these replies carefully it will be helpful to provide a formal reconstruction of the argument:

(1) God is perfectly loving if and only if God demonstrates loving concern for any person *S* in conditions where *S* is in danger of losing all hope (*C*).
(2) God demonstrates loving concern for *S* in *C* if and only if God acts to ensure that *S* can sustain some hope in *C*.
(3) There are experiences of divine silence which (i) place *S* in danger of losing all hope and (ii) in which God does not act to ensure that *S* can sustain some hope.
(4) So, God does not demonstrate loving concern for *S* in these conditions. [From 2, 3]
(5) So, God is not perfectly loving. [From 1,4]

Much of the force of this argument depends upon the truth of premise 3. Both of the replies I consider in the next section challenge this claim, but I conclude that neither adequately addresses the existential burden of divine silence. In the final section of the paper, I suggest that this is related to their tacit endorsement of the underlying account of the relationship between hope and human agency.

IV. CHALLENGING THE PROBLEM OF DESPAIR-INDUCING EXPERIENCES OF DIVINE SILENCE

There are a number of ways one might respond to this argument, but I will focus my appraisal on Premise 3. One way to challenge the truth of Premise 3 is to critique the presupposition that persons can lose all hope. Even if there are experiences of extreme suffering that significantly impair the person's agential efficacy and persons can act in ways that are destructive to themselves in these contexts, it is not clear that these experiences can destroy or erode *all* reserves of hope. Consider the fact that minimal changes in circumstances can reveal that there are reserves of hope remaining even though a person had started to feel hopeless.

The erosion of hope may create a temptation to think that the future is hopeless; actions based on this thought would reflect a stance that the future is devoid of possible goods. But these actions depend upon an interpretation a person gives to her experience. She construes her experience as one in which it is impossible for her to be hopeful.

She may not be responsible or blameworthy for this interpretation; it may be the result of prolonged difficulty and suffering. Nonetheless, this interpretation is just one possible construal of her experience.

There are cases in which a person either fails to see or sets herself against the goods still available to her as potential objects of hope. Divine silence may be a constituent part of this experience, but it is the person's failure to see possibilities still open to her that acts as the triggering cause of despair. Given that her construal is not determined by the experience itself, one can argue that she retains the power to resist despair even in cases where God's silence is sustained over a long stretch of time. The upshot of this response is that the person's (perhaps inculpable) construal of her experience as hopeless is the triggering cause of the loss of all hope. If there are no circumstances under which a person can lose all hope without this kind of construal, then divine silence alone cannot be such that it endangers the person's fundamental capacities for retaining some residual hopefulness.

According to this response, premise 3 is false because there are no experiences in which divine silence *by itself* endangers a person's hopeful reserves. But there are reasons Christians should not endorse this response. First, there is no compelling reason to deny the possibility that a person could lose all hope. Even if humans are remarkably resilient, they are, nonetheless, radically fragile beings. And some are much more frail than others. A person's hopes may be one of those fragile elements of the human psyche. Denying the claim that there are experiences of this kind would require challenging the first-person perspectives of many who experience divine silence.

Second, even if humans have a minimal reserve of hope that cannot be destroyed, what the agent undergoes as hope dwindles may be such that it permanently damages her capacity to engage in expressions and activities that are conducive to her good. A repository of hope, however slim, may allow one to abide every assault, but it doesn't follow that one can abide every assault in ways that are compatible with flourishing. If God's concern for the agent is not merely for her survival, then Christians ought to reject this response. They should acknowledge the possibility that individuals can experience utter desolation or hopelessness. And they should endorse the view that individuals can experience despair in part because of their inability to detect any sign of God's presence with them.

Third, the claim that a person's construal of her experience is the triggering cause for her loss of all hope lacks sufficient justification. It may be true that some persons in circumstances of extreme or on-going suffering falsely construe their experience as hopeless, but it is not clear that this applies *in every case*. And from the perspective of a person who loses all hope, it is the silence of God that triggered this despair. Noting that her construal of her experience as hopeless may be inculpable does not adequately address the difficulty she faces in trying to endure the silence of God. Although there may be times when one must correct a person's construal of her experiences, it is not clear that this response is generalizable to every case of hopelessness.[12]

There is a second way to challenge premise 3: one can argue that it lacks sufficient epistemic grounding. In this context, one must ask whether individuals are in an epistemic position to infer that God does not act to ensure an agent's ability to sustain hope in the midst of divine silence.[13] The experience of divine silence is compatible with a number of ways in which God could be directly present to the person even without her awareness. Within the experience of divine silence, it may be that God is speaking directly but the agent fails to hear or fails to hear the message as a communication from God. Or, God could be present to the agent in a way that the agent lacks the present capacity to grasp but could later come to understand. Consider an analogous case involving human love. There are numerous experiences in which human love goes unnoticed or undetected in the midst of suffering. In this experience, one may take a friend to be absent but later come to see that she was silently present. Perhaps divine concern operates in the same manner; God may be a silent presence. God makes his presence known but in a way that the person will come to see and appreciate only in retrospect as she considers her experience from the perspective of future insights.

This skeptical defense may provide some reason for epistemic caution. One should not assert that one knows that God does not act directly to ensure that an agent can sustain hope. But it is not clear that it addresses the existential force of the original challenge. Given the contexts in which divine silence may trigger a loss of hope, the fact that God could

[12] I would like to thank Kevin Timpe for emphasizing this point.

[13] There are important connections here to skeptical theist defenses in the literature on the problem of evil. For a set of recent essays on skeptical theism, see Dougherty and McBrayer (2014).

be silently present does not offer the kind of protest or consolation the person might expect to see from a loving and all-powerful God. It is not clear how the suffering person could treat the possibility that God is silently present as a reason for hope.[14]

Furthermore, this response derives much of its force from analogous experiences with human love. A loving but silent friend may reveal that she has been silently present in the midst of suffering; she can offer an account of both her presence and her reasons for remaining silent. Given their love for each other, the sufferer can appreciate both the silent presence of her friend as well as her reasons. But unless there is a strong foundation of love and trust, it is not clear that something similar could be said of God. In cases of dwindling or eroding hope, especially in cases where the person has been enduring prolonged agony, it is not clear that a person would have any reason to hope that God will make God's presence known in this way. How long is it reasonable for the person wait until God makes God's presence known? And the longer God waits, the more difficult it would be to understand and appreciate God's reasons for waiting. Perhaps God's refusal to reveal his silent presence in these circumstances is to foster the virtues of patience and perseverance. But why would God sacrifice the hope of the human agent in order to cultivate these virtues? It is not clear that this defense of God's direct (though silent) activity to ensure a person's hope adequately addresses the existential force of the problem.

There is another possibility to which Christians may appeal. God may act to sustain a person's hopes through indirect means. For instance, Christians could invoke scriptural and theological considerations as a positive reason for the person to remain hopeful in the midst of God's silence. Appealing to the incarnation, Christians could argue that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus portrays a clear picture of a God who protests the causes of suffering and who offers consolation and comfort in the midst of anguish. One could encourage the sufferer to identify with the pain and anguish of Jesus as a way of finding meaning buried within her suffering. And one could argue that God has delegated the responsibility for protesting the causes of the loss of hope and offering consolation to the Church. Drawing on these resources, Christians could maintain that there is evidence that God expresses love and concern for

[14] This is consistent with the fact that some might treat this as a reason for maintaining hope. I would like to thank Kevin Timpe for emphasizing this point.

those who suffer both through direct activity in the person and mission of Jesus and, now indirectly, through God's chosen means, the Church. Thus, there may be positive reasons to think that the current experience of divine silence does not indicate a failure of divine love.

Moreover, there are communal practices that might count as a form of indirect or mediated presence even in the context of divine silence. These practices provide means by which persons can experience God's loving concern even if they do not immediately recognize this as the presence of God. For instance, the sufferer may experience the presence of God as mediated through liturgical practices or the Eucharist. By these means, she could access God's love even in the midst of silence.[15] Although God is silent, participation in these practices could secure a person's ability to maintain hope.

Although these responses may be promising, it is not clear that they provide the affected person with a reason to hope that God is, in fact, concerned with her good. Drawing hope from scriptural narratives would require the agent to place at least some provisional trust in the hopes expressed in the narratives and theology of the Christian tradition. And those who undergo prolonged experiences of divine silence may have very little reason to venture on these promises. It may be true that *if* one trusts the claims of revealed theology, one may have positive reason to think that God is lovingly present in spite of God's silence. But this will not be sufficient for those who currently lack the ability to place their hope in anything at all. And there will be very little motivation to engage in this act of trust if the person lacks independent reason to think that God is perfectly loving.[16]

Moreover, participating in religious practices does not guarantee that a person can sustain a reserve of hope essential to her well-being. It might be sufficient in some cases, but there may be other cases in which it will fail. And if the person lacks sufficient reserves of hope, it is not clear that she will see a point in participating in these kinds of activities. If God's silence itself has been part of the reason for her hopelessness, there would be no reason for her to engage in obvious expressions of religious devotion. God may have provided means by which she could

[15] Cuneo (2013) also challenges the notion that experience of the presence of God requires conscious awareness of this presence as the presence of God.

[16] Additionally, it is not clear how this would address cases in which those who are committed Christians (i.e., Mother Teresa) experience the agony of feeling God-forsaken.

sustain hope, but she may lack a sense for their availability as live options for her. Through no fault of her own, the person may refuse to participate and, thus, remove herself from a space in which she could experience God's loving concern in the midst of silence. This defense is not sufficiently sensitive to existential obstacles that stand between her and her participation in these religious practices.

The problem of divine silence raises both intellectual and existential challenges. In this section, I have canvassed two potential responses. Although they may address some features of this intellectual problem, neither is sufficiently sensitive to the existential import of the problem of divine silence. Perhaps the inadequacy of these replies reflects their tacit endorsement of the underlying account of the role of hope in human agency. In the conclusion, I offer a brief sketch of the kind of defense that challenges this implicit account of hope's function. A full defense of this response would require a separate paper, but here I provide a brief map of one way a Christian might construct such a reply.[17]

V. CONCLUSION

I framed the problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence in light of an attractive contemporary account of the relationship between hope and human agency. On this view, hope is an affective response to perceived goods. It issues in characteristic patterns of activity, attention, emotion, feeling, perception, and thought. These patterns are related to hope's functional role in human agency. Let's call this form of hope, "natural hope."

There are important ways in which a Christian conception of the nature of hope complicates this account of the connection between hope and human agency.[18] The tradition distinguishes between hope as a passion, or what I have called "natural hope," and hope as a theological virtue.[19] Both forms of hope involve the anticipation of a good that is future, possible, and difficult to obtain. As a passion, hope is an affective response to a perceived finite good that urges the agent forward toward

[17] For a full defense, see Cobb (2017).

[18] For broad discussions of the theological virtue of hope see Mattison (2012); Roberts (2007) and Walls (2012).

[19] St. Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologica offers the locus classicus for this distinction. For discussion of St. Thomas's views see DeYoung (2014, 2015); Doyle (2012); Lamb (2016); Pieper (1986); Pinches (2014); and Schumacher (2003).

the realization of this good. This passion can equip her with patience to face obstacles that stand between her and this good. Like natural hope, the theological virtue of hope seeks a good that is future, possible, and difficult to obtain – namely, eternal union with God. For Christians, this is the ultimate object of hope and the true source of fulfillment or joy. But the theological virtue of hope is also a *hope in* God, a kind of reliance on or trust in God to bring one into union with him. And as a theological virtue, this hope is a gift of God infused into the will.

Note that the theological virtue of hope differs from natural hope in that (i) its origin is external to the person's desires and will, (ii) the conditions for its appropriation consist in a person's openness and sensitivity to God, (iii) the possession of this gift is that which enables the person to place her hope in God, and (iv) God himself is the agent who secures the fulfillment of this hope. The contribution of the individual person to the maintenance of her own hopes is relatively minimal: she must engage in activities that would enable her to remain open to the gift of hope. The reception of this gift enables her to place her trust in God. By placing her trust in God, she enacts an aspect of the ultimate good that she seeks – that is, union with God.

This distinction shows that one must differentiate between the ultimate good, which is good for the person in an unqualified sense, and proximate goods, which are good only insofar as they are ordered properly toward one's ultimate good. Natural hopes for proximate goods are misaligned if they do not orient the person toward union with God as her ultimate good. In this sense, natural hopes are not an unqualified good in the life of the agent. Likewise, it is not clear that sustaining natural hope would be a fundamental need essential to a person's flourishing. Sustaining one's natural hopes are less important to a person's true good than her openness to God's gift of the virtue of hope. If the person's ultimate good is union with God, then it is the possession of this virtue rather than the possession of natural hope that is a fundamental need for human life.

This brief overview of the traditional Christian distinction between natural hope and the theological virtue of hope has significant implications for understanding the role of hope in human agency. There are two consequences in particular I would like to emphasize. First, one must attend carefully to the distinction between the objects of one's natural hopes and the object of theological hope. Natural hopes are for

perceived, finite goods; although these objects are good, they are not ultimately satisfying. Theological hope takes as its object full union with God. And it is this hope that constitutes true flourishing. If a person's natural hopes are misaligned or disordered, they can distract or obstruct her attaining her ultimate good.

Second, the value of one's natural hope is not intrinsic; it derives its value from the manner in which it prepares a person for possessing the theological virtue of hope. Given that natural hope often produces within the person dispositions for biding her limitations and the obstacles that keep her from realizing her good, natural hopes scaffold both patience and perseverance as well as a kind of receptivity to the assistance of others. All of these dispositions are essential to remaining open to the gift of the theological virtue of hope.

Introducing the distinction between natural hope and the theological virtue of hope creates a need to clarify the premises of the problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence. Recall the argument:

(1) God is perfectly loving if and only if God demonstrates loving concern for any person *S* in conditions where *S* is in danger of losing all hope (*C*).

(2) God demonstrates loving concern for *S* in *C* if and only if God acts to ensure that *S* can sustain some hope in *C*.

(3) There are experiences of divine silence which (i) place *S* in danger of losing all hope and (ii) in which God does not act to ensure that *S* can sustain some hope.

(4) So, God does not demonstrate loving concern for *S* in these conditions. [From 2, 3]

(5) So, God is not perfectly loving. [From 1,4]

Premises 1 and 2 make explicit the requirements of perfect love in contexts where a person is in danger of losing all hope. Premise 1 holds that God is perfectly loving just in case God demonstrates loving concern to agents tempted by despair. But the premise leaves unspecified whether the loss in question is theological rather than natural hope. And given the nature of the theological virtue, it is not clear what it would it mean for the person to lose this virtue. According to the traditional view, the theological virtue is a gift and its reception requires openness to the giver. Loss of the theological virtue would require setting of one's will against the possibility of receiving this gift. In this respect, one does

not lose the theological virtue; one abandons the virtue of hope for the vice of despair.[20]

Premise 2 holds that God demonstrates loving concern just in case he acts to ensure an agent's ability to sustain hope in these conditions. But does God's loving concern require that he ensure the person's ability to sustain natural hope? Or, does God's love focus exclusively on the person's ability to persevere in openness to the gift of the theological virtue of hope? Given the distinction between proximate and ultimate hope, God might allow a person to lose all natural hope if this is essential to cultivating an openness to the gift of the theological virtue of hope. After all, a person may have misaligned or disordered hopes. In these conditions, divine silence may be an essential corrective for a person who has placed too much weight in the realization of finite goods.

Finally, one can raise similar concerns about premise 3 according to which there are experiences of divine silence that endanger a person's hope but God does not act to ensure her hope. Has God failed to do so with respect to her natural hopes or the theological virtue of hope? God can demonstrate serious concern for a person's ability to remain open to the gift of hope through indirect means unrelated to sustaining the capacity for natural hope. The presence of friends, or a Church, or participation in religious practices themselves might be sufficient to sustain a person's capacity to remain open to God even in contexts where there are no natural hopes to which she can cling.

The work of developing a full response to the problem of despair-inducing experiences of divine silence requires attending to the existential burdens of persons who suffer because of God's silence. The loss of natural hope can injure a person's ability to think of her life in meaningful terms and to seek her good. But before one can assert that divine silence is in tension with divine love, one needs to consider the distinction between natural hope and the theological virtue of hope. The loss of natural hopes may be essential to cultivating a capacity to receive the gift of theological hope. And the value of natural hope derives from (i) its alignment with the person's true, or ultimate, good as well as (ii) its role in preparing a person's dispositions for appropriating this gift. The loss of natural hope may make it difficult for the person to sustain these dispositions, but this is compatible with divine concern if God acts

[20] For a thorough discussion of theological despair in the classical discussion of St. Thomas Aquinas, see DeYoung 2015.

either directly or indirectly to sustain a person's capacity to remain open to God.[21]

The defenses canvassed in this paper might address some features of the intellectual puzzle of the problem of divine silence, but they leave much of the sorrow attending divine silence untouched. For this reason, Christians ought to seek a more robust defense – one that is sensitive to the suffering caused by the loss of hope and which offers consolation to those who suffer. One way of developing such a defense involves distinguishing between natural hope and the theological virtue of hope. This may be the best hope for addressing the existential weight of the problem of divine silence.[22]

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[21] In Cobb (2017), I maintain that God works through indirect means to provide this kind of scaffolding for the theological virtue of hope.

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