

## DEUS ABSCONDITUS

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Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.  
Why do you hide your face?  
--Psalm 44:23-4

It is no surprise to discover that few (if any) have found the existence of God to be an obvious fact about the world. At least this is so in the sense in which we normally use the word "obvious," as when we say that it is *obvious* that the World Trade Center weighs more than a deck of cards or that it is *obvious* that VanGogh is a better painter than I. Despite St. Paul's claim that God's eternal power and divine nature "have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20), few (if any) think that such is as "clearly seen" as the book you now hold in your hand.

This fact has raised troubles of at least two sorts for the theist. First, it leads the theist to wonder why God postpones that time at which, according to Christian tradition, we will see God "face to face." Since, at that time, God *will* be as clearly seen as the book you now hold in your hand, what accounts for the delay? Why is there this period of the earthly life where God's reality is less than obvious? Second, the theist has to confront the fact that God's hiddenness seems to lead a number of people to reject God's existence outright and thus to be a contributing cause to what the traditional theist would regard as a great evil: unbelief. For some, the route to atheism is indeed found in the fact that there is, in the famous words of Bertrand Russell, "not enough evidence." But more recently, some have argued that the hiddenness of God provides positive, in fact decisive, evidence in favor of atheism. J.L. Schellenberg, in a recent work, argues that if the God of Western theism exists, he would provide evidence of this fact sufficient to render reasonable unbelief impossible. Since, however, such evidence is not forthcoming, such a God does not exist.

Theists in the Judeo-Christian tradition have often argued that the hiddenness of God finds its explanation in the Fall and subsequent Curse. Sometimes, the passage immediately following the one from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans cited above is taken as evidence that hiddenness should be explained in just this way, at least for the Christian, since Paul there goes on to claim that "For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:21). Yet, while the Fall may play some part in explaining the hiddenness of God, the Judeo-Christian theist would be hard pressed to lay the full explanation for hiddenness here. The reason is simply that the Judeo-Christian Scriptures seem to teach that even prior to the Curse, there is a measure of divine hiddenness already. Even in Genesis 3, one finds that Adam and Eve think that they can somehow escape the presence of God by hiding from God in the garden (Genesis 3:8-10). Although it is Adam and Eve that do the hiding here, still the presence of God, while still obvious to them in a certain sense, is escapable in a way it seems not to be when one looks at descriptions of the beatified state as described, for example, in Revelation 22:1-5. In what follows I will offer an account of divine hiddenness that attempts to allay the two types of concerns raised above.

### **I. Divine Hiddenness and "Morally Significant Freedom"**

In an earlier essay I have argued that at least one of the reasons that God must remain hidden is that failing to do so would lead to a loss of morally significant freedom on the part of creatures.<sup>1</sup> The reason, in brief, is that making us powerfully aware of the truth of God's existence would suffice to coerce (at least many of) us into behaving in accordance with God's moral commands. Such awareness can lead to this simply because God's presence would provide us with overpowering incentives which would make choosing the good ineluctable for us.

I will flesh out this account in some detail below, but before doing so, let's take notice of the overall strategy being pursued here. Theists have often argued that morally significant

freedom is a good (indeed, a very good) thing. Thus, in creating the world, God would seek to establish conditions that would permit the existence of such freedom. A variety of such conditions are necessary, but among them is that there not be overwhelmingly powerful incentives present in the environment which consistently coerce or otherwise force creatures to follow a particular course of action.

Theists have, at least of late, lain a great deal of explanatory weight on the need to preserve creaturely freedom. Here I will attempt to lay the explanation of divine hiddenness there. Others have sought to lay the explanation for all (or at least much) of the evil that the world contains there as well. In such cases, the argument is roughly that morally significant freedom is an intrinsic good, and that though evil is a necessary consequence of allowing creatures to have freedom of such a sort, the intrinsic goodness of freedom outweighs evils liabilities.<sup>2</sup> The evil in question might not only be of the (moral) sort that we read about in the headlines of the newspaper, but of the (epistemic) sort in view in this essay, namely, the unbelief of great numbers of people due to the lack of evidence entailed by God's hiddenness.

But there is something odd about laying all this freight at freedoms doorstep; and it is an oddity that seems to be too little noticed by analytic Christian philosophers. We can begin to see what is odd by first noticing that it is not the intrinsic goodness of libertarian freedom *simpliciter* that is at issue here. For if it were, it seems that libertarian freedom simply could not do the work it has been given to do in these accounts. The reason for this is that there seems to be no reason why God could not create a world with libertarian free beings who are incapable of doing evil. If human minds were created in such a way that they were not, say, even capable of deliberating about evil courses of action, it might still be the case that multiple courses of action would be open to them given the history of the world and the laws of nature. No doubt, this would restrict the kinds of behavior that such creatures could engage in (assuming that it must be possible for one to deliberate about a course of action for one to be able to freely choose it). But God surely restricts the sorts of activities we can choose to undertake in all sorts of ways by not only limiting the kinds of things we can think about (by,

say, limiting the sorts of cognitive equipment we have), but even by limiting the kinds of things we are physically capable of accomplishing (by limiting the sorts of bodily equipment we have). It is hard to see why similar constraints could not simply preclude deliberation about evil courses of action, while stopping short of full blown determinism. If this is right, libertarian freedom *simpliciter* cannot explain or justify the existence of evil.

It is, then, libertarian freedom *to choose between good and evil courses of action* that is important here. And the theist might argue that this is just what was meant by "morally significant freedom" in the first place. Without the ability to choose freely between good and evil courses of action, freedom would have no moral significance and thus would not be an intrinsic good.<sup>3</sup> What is odd about this story however is just how rare this supposed intrinsic good is among rational beings on the Christian scheme of things. For if we consider the sorts of rational beings Christians admit to being aware of, it seems that only one type of being has freedom of this sort, and beings of this type possess it only for an infinitesimally small span of their existence. Traditional Christian theology holds that neither God, angels, nor demons have such freedom, and that of human beings, neither beatified nor damned have it either. Thus, freedom of this sort is found only among human beings during that narrow span of their existence spent in the earthly life.

All of this seems to argue that morally significant freedom of the sort described above might not be best regarded as the intrinsic good many have claimed it to be. If it is such a good, it would be odd, to say the least, that neither God, angels, nor the beatified possess it.

We might, however, look at the worth of morally significant freedom in creatures in another way. Reflecting on the rarity of such freedom as it is described above leads to the question: why does God allow creatures to pass through this earthly phase of existence in the first place? Since all rational creatures will end up either perfected in the beatific vision, choosing good forever, or separated from God, choosing evil forever, why have them pass through this prior stage during which they stand poised between these two extremes?

When posed this way, I think an answer readily suggests itself, namely, that the function of this earthly life, a time during which we are capable of making free choices between morally good and evil courses of action, is to have the opportunity to develop morally significant characters. Developing characters which have moral significance requires that they be chosen and cultivated by their bearers. And this can only be done if creatures are first given the sort of morally significant freedom we have been discussing heretofore. Philosophers have taken to calling this sort of character development "soul-making," following the phrase coined by John Hick.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we might say that the function of the earthly life on this view is soul-making, and that a necessary condition for soul-making is morally significant libertarian freedom. Libertarian freedom alone simply will not do here since the point of character development is that one has the opportunity to choose to do *good* or *evil*, and by so choosing to become either a lover and imitator of God, or one who "worships and serves the creature rather than the creator."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, even if we have reason to doubt the *intrinsic* worth of morally significant freedom, there is good reason to think that it has significant *instrumental* value as a necessary condition for rational creatures engaging in soul-making. Of course, possessing the capacity for morally significant soul-making is not sufficient. In addition, external constraints on the agent must not preclude the possibility of the agent at least frequently being able to choose freely between good and evil courses of action. What I was claiming above is that among those conditions is the absence of circumstances which provide overwhelming incentives for creatures to choose only good or only evil. For if the moral environment contained such incentives, the creature with the capacity to choose freely would be precluded from exercising that ability and thus blocked from engaging in the sort of soul-making that makes freedom (and the earthly life) valuable in the first place.

The result of all this is that God must remain hidden to a certain extent to prevent precluding incentives from being introduced. Here then we find an answer to the first concern regarding hiddenness. At least one reason why we do not see God face to face from the

beginning is that to do so would be to lose the ability to develop morally significant characters. According to the Christian scriptures, God calls his creatures to be "imitators" of him.<sup>6</sup> But to do this in a way that yields moral significance requires that character be to some extent self-wrought.<sup>7</sup> And soul-making of this sort requires divine hiddenness, at least for a time.

As mentioned above, J. L. Schellenberg has offered an argument for atheism on the basis of divine hiddenness. Along the way, Schellenberg critiques a variety of accounts of hiddenness a theist might offer, including a soul-making account of the sort sketched above. In what follows I will develop this account in more detail against the background of and in response to this critique of Schellenberg's.

## **II. Schellenberg's Critique of the Soul-Making Response**

In his wonderfully provocative book, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, J.L. Schellenberg has presented an extended argument that the extent to which evidence for the existence God is not forthcoming, in conjunction with certain other plausible assumptions, entails the truth of atheism. This argument, which I will call "The Atheist Argument," is presented by Schellenberg as follows:

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur
- (3) Reasonable non-belief does occur.
- (4) No perfectly loving God exists.
- (5) There is no God.<sup>8</sup>

After an extended presentation and defense of the argument and its premises in the first half of the book, Schellenberg goes on, in the second half, to discuss various responses theists might lodge against its premises. Specifically, he focuses on theistic critiques of premise (2) since, he argues, only this premise of the argument is open to question. In this section I will examine Schellenberg's critique of the soul-making account and argue that his critique ultimately fails. As a result, the theist has plausible grounds for rejecting (2) and thus for rejecting The Atheist Argument.

## Preliminary Considerations

Because Schellenberg recognizes that most theists will want to take issue with (2), he begins his survey of potential theistic responses by discussing what it is that the theist must show in order to defeat the premise. He contends that,

(2) is false if and only if there is a state of affairs in the actual world which it would be logically impossible for God to bring about without permitting the occurrence of at least one instance of reasonable non-belief, for the sake of which God would be willing to sacrifice the good of belief and all it entails.<sup>9</sup>

As noted above, the second half of the book is devoted to explaining and critiquing various theistic attempts to provide accounts which attack (2) in just the way Schellenberg suggests. The first such attempt roughly mirrors the account described at the end of Section I. On this view, the state of affairs that God wants to actualize which logically requires him to permit some instances of reasonable unbelief consists of i) creatures who have the capacity for acting freely and ii) a world suitably constituted for the exercise of that freedom. On this view, if God were to make his existence evident to too great an extent, an extent that would rule out reasonable non-belief, we would all become powerfully aware of the importance of not only believing in His existence but also obeying His will. Yet such a powerful awareness of God's existence and moral will would suffice to overwhelm the freedom of the creature in a way that would preclude further morally significant free actions by the creature. Since it would be utterly obvious to us that God, the one responsible for temporal happiness as well as eternal bliss or damnation, exists and wills that we act in certain ways, we would be compelled to believe and act accordingly. As a result, God must keep His existence veiled to a certain extent in order to insure that this sort of overwhelming does not occur.

To know whether or not such a claim is plausible, we first need to know whether God's revealing himself in the way Schellenberg thinks he would (and in fact *must* given the fact that God is a perfectly loving being) could lead to such a result.

It is noteworthy that Schellenberg has only argued that God's loving nature entails that God would make his *existence* known to creatures in such a way that reasonable unbelief is

not possible. Schellenberg makes no claims about whether or not God's loving nature would also require that God make known the existence of other facts that might be necessary for human beings to be able to attain ultimate human fulfillment. In one sense, this minimalist strategy helps Schellenberg, since one might think that if God simply made his *existence* clearly known, there is no reason to think that this would introduce any incentives that might serve to derail human freedom. Bare knowledge that God exists simply doesn't seem to have any immediate practical import.

One might, of course, agree that God would make his existence plainly known, but might further argue that God's loving nature further entails that other facts would be made known as well. Many theists claim that ultimate human fulfillment requires not only belief in God, but a number of other beliefs about what it takes to be rightly related to God as well. If loving entails seeking the well-being of the beloved, God would surely seek to make the necessary information for human fulfillment available. As a result, I will assume for the moment (as I think all parties in the dispute must) that, all other things being equal, God's love would lead him to make us aware not merely of his bare existence, but also of all of the other truths needed to obtain our complete temporal and eternal happiness. Surely such a revelation would carry significant practical import. Nonetheless, for those who want to stick to Schellenberg's more minimalist strategy, I will return to address that view shortly.

### **III. The Soul-Making Response to (2)**

Given my more robust notion of what divine love entails, we can see why there might be good reason for God to remain hidden on the soul-making account. At the end of section I I noted that introduction of powerful motives to choose either only good or only evil would preclude the possibility of soul-making. Instead, the environment needs to be such that there are, at least in a number of cases, incentives to choose to do good and incentives to choose to do evil, such that neither incentive induces desires that overwhelm all competing desires.

Yet, surely a clear and evident demonstration or revelation of God's existence and plan for human well-being as described above would introduce just such incentives. If God

were to reveal Himself and His will in the way required to eliminate reasonable non-belief, any desire that we might have to believe or act in ways contrary to that which has been revealed would be overwhelmed. Our fear of punishment, or at least our fear of the prospect of missing out on a very great good, would compel us to believe the things that God has revealed and to act in accordance with them. But in doing this, God would have removed the ability for self-determination since there are no longer good and evil courses of action between which creatures could freely and deliberately choose. Thus we would all be compelled to choose in accordance with the divine will and would all thereby become conformed to the divine image. However, a character wrought in this fashion would not be one for which we are responsible since it does not derive from morally significant choosing. It has instead been forced upon us. Richard Swinburne, defending a position regarding divine hiddenness summarizes these considerations in the following paragraph, also quoted by Schellenberg:

The existence of God would be for [human beings] an item of evident common knowledge. Knowing that there was a God, men would know that their most secret thoughts and actions were known to God; and knowing that he was just, they would expect for their bad actions and thoughts whatever punishment was just. . . . In such a world men would have little temptation to do wrong—it would be the mark of both prudence and reason to do what was virtuous. Yet a man only has a genuine choice of destiny if he has reasons for pursuing either good or evil courses of action.<sup>10</sup>

Schellenberg emphasizes that on this view, desires for evil would not cease to exist were we to be given such a revelation, it is just that powerful new desires would be introduced, e.g., the desire to avoid punishment, with a strength that overwhelms contrary desires and renders them “inefficacious.” He cites coercion as a similar case in which the introduction of a new desire renders all competing desires inefficacious. I may desire, says Schellenberg, to go to the university bookstore to buy a copy of a newly released book. Yet, if some crazy ideologue, bent on keeping scholars from being exposed to the ideas in the book, threatens me with serious physical harm if I go to the bookstore, I won't go. My desire to go is still present, but this desire has been overwhelmed by a newly introduced desire, the desire to avoid the serious physical harm.

Schellenberg thus summarizes the soul-making case against (2) of the Atheist Argument as follows:

- (16) In the situation in question [that is, where God reveals himself in such powerful fashion that reasonable unbelief is rendered impossible], persons would have strong prudential reasons for not doing wrong.  
 (17) Because of the strength of these reasons, it would require little in the way of an act of will to do what is right—there is little temptation to do wrong, contrary desires would be overcome.  
 (18) Where there is little temptation to do wrong, persons lack a genuine choice of destiny.  
 (19) Therefore, in the situation in question no one would have a choice of destiny.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. Incentives, Coercion, and “Soul-Making”

The remainder of this chapter in Schellenberg’s book is occupied with an assessment of (16) through (19). Here Schellenberg contends that there are good reasons to reject both (16) and (17). Before looking at his criticisms of these premises however, it will prove worthwhile to try to fill in a few more details in this argument. How exactly, one might wonder, would clear and evident knowledge of God’s existence and will for human creatures influence our desires? What does it take for desires to be sufficiently strong to overwhelm competing desires? How does this overwhelming prevent our ability to engage in self-determination exactly? Answering these questions will help us both to understand the force of Schellenberg’s critique of (16) and (17) and to see what, if anything, can be said in reply.

Recall that on the soul-making account the trouble that arises in a world in which God is not to some extent hidden is that incentives are introduced which serve to *coerce* otherwise free creatures, in ways which render them incapable of soul-making. Thus, if God were to make himself plainly evident to us in the ways described above, we would find ourselves confronted with what would amount to threats (if God were to reveal disobedience as subject to punishment) or offers (if God were to reveal obedience as a source of temporal and eternal well-being) that would suffice to coerce human behavior.<sup>12</sup> In what follows I will speak generally about the ways in which God’s revealing himself in perspicuous fashion can introduce “incentives” which can “overwhelm” competing desires. One can think of such

incentives as consisting of either threats or offers, though I will frequently use examples drawn from cases of coercion via threats.

It should be obvious that not just any incentives will suffice to overwhelm our desires for contrary courses of action. The incentive must be sufficiently strong that it outweighs the desires I have for those things which are inconsistent with acting in accordance with it. Let's say that a desired course of action,  $A_1$ , renders competing desired courses of action,  $A_2$ - $A_n$ , *ineligible* when  $A_1$  is sufficiently compelling that it makes it impossible for me reasonably to choose  $A_2$ - $A_n$  over  $A_1$ .<sup>13</sup> We can then say that an individual, P, is *coerced* to do some act, A, by a threat when a desire is induced by a threat, which desire is sufficiently compelling that it renders every other course of action except A ineligible for P.<sup>14</sup>

This next leads us to wonder what it is that makes desires induced by threats “sufficiently compelling.” One might think that the only relevant variable is the *strength* of the threat, i.e., the degree to which the state of affairs that the threatener is promising to bring about (if the conditions of the threat are not met) are disutile for the threatened in comparison with the disutility of performing the act commanded by the threatener. Thus if a stranger threatens to call me a ninny if I fail to hand over my money to her, this threat would not compel me in the least since I am not a bit concerned about being called a name by this stranger and I would like to keep my money. On the other hand, if someone threatens to shoot me in the leg if I fail to give them my money, I would surely give her the money since I care a great deal about my bodily integrity, far more than keeping the few dollars I carry with me.

However, a moments reflection should make it clear that threat strength alone does not determine whether or not a desire induced by a threat is sufficiently compelling to coerce me. To see why this is so, compare the following two cases. In the first case, a maximum security prison assigns one guard to each prisoner and gives the guards orders to shoot all who attempt to escape. Here the threat strength is very high. Thus, one can suppose that prisoners in such a situation would find all courses of action which include an attempted escape ineligible. In the second case, prisoners are again being watched by guards who have orders

to shoot any who attempt to escape. However, in this case, there are only two guards on duty for the entire prison at any one time, and they are perched high in a tower. While the threat strength is identical for prisoners in both prisons, it seems clear that prisoners in the latter case might find an escape attempt eligible. The reason for this difference, presumably, is that the prisoners in the second case might believe that the probability that the threat could be successfully carried out is quite low. The guards, the prisoner might reason, might be too busy watching other prisoners to notice an attempted escape, or they might miss when shooting from such a great distance. In any case, the prisoner's belief that the threat cannot be successfully carried out significantly mitigates the compelling force of the desire induced by the threat. Thus, in addition to threat strength, another factor, which I call *threat imminence*, is relevant. We can define threat imminence as the degree to which the threatened believes the consequences of the threat will be successfully carried out if the terms of the threat are not met.

But notice that there is more than one way that threats can be imminent or distant as I have characterized imminence. While the sort of imminence described above, which I will call *probabilistic imminence*, is one species of imminence, there are at least two others. First, there is *temporal imminence*. When the threatened understands that there will be a significant lapse between the time that he fails to meet the conditions of the threat and the time that the threat is carried out, the desire induced by the threat is less compelling than when the consequences will follow immediately upon the failure to meet the conditions. Thus, if someone was to threaten to give me a powerful shock that would hospitalize me for two weeks if I failed to hand over my money immediately, this situation would be more compelling than one in which a threatener threatened to poke me with a delayed-reaction cattle prod which would cause me to receive the same shocking sensation fifty years hence, if I failed to hand over my money now. Even though the threat strength is the same, and even though I might have an equal degree of certainty that the threat will be carried out in both cases, I am less compelled by the threat in the latter case than I am in the former.

The final species of threat imminence is *epistemic imminence*. We might say that epistemic imminence is the degree to which the disutility of the threatened consequence is *epistemically forceful* to the threatened. To illustrate the role of epistemic imminence consider the fact that massive advertising campaigns against smoking, drug use, and drinking and driving have been successful in reducing the incidence of these behaviors. In all three cases, no one believes that the purpose of such advertisements is to convey information to the target audience that members of that audience do not already have. Instead, the goal is to make the disutility of engaging in that behavior more epistemically powerful. By repeatedly showing accident scenes strewn with dead or mangled bodies, people become more powerfully aware of how dangerous drinking and driving is.

Yet even these two factors, threat strength and threat imminence, are not sufficient to determine the degree to which threat-induced desires are compelling. This should be clear from the fact that two individuals, in circumstances where threat strength and threat imminence are identical for each, might feel differently about the eligibility of their alternatives. Two prisoners might find themselves under threats of identical strength and imminence and yet one might feel that an escape attempt is still eligible while another may not. One might simply feel that a probability of .5 that he will be shot is a risk too great to bear, whereas the other might think that the same probability makes for a “good bet.” This factor, which I will call *threat-indifference*, is the third factor determining the strength of the compelling force of a threat. Some individuals are simply more threat-indifferent than others. Threat-indifference can be described in two ways. One might say that threat-indifference is the degree to which one finds pleasure in taking the risks posed by failing to abide by conditions of a threat. It might also be described as a sense of indifference to one's own well-being in the face of a threat. However we characterize this trait, it is surely relevant since something like it is needed to explain why, when two individuals are in the same circumstances, one is coerced while the other is not.

In sum, there are at least three factors which determine the degree to which a threat-induced desire is compelling: threat strength, threat imminence, and threat-indifference. The degree to which the desire compels me to act in accordance with the threat is directly proportional to the first two and inversely proportional to the third.

#### V. An Assessment of Schellenberg's Critique of (16) and (17)

With this in mind, let us return to Schellenberg's critique of (16) and (17) and see to what extent they are successful. Schellenberg raises two problems for (16) and I will treat each in turn. First, he charges that the only way in which clear and evident revelations of God's existence and moral will could provide strong prudential reasons for not doing wrong, is if the knowledge acquired as a result of this revelation were *certain*.

The situation referred to [by Swinburne] is . . . one in which humans know for *certain* that there is a God and in which whatever reasons humans take themselves to have for doing good actions they consider themselves *certainly* to have. A situation in which the evidence is [merely] sufficient for belief . . . is, however, not of this sort. . . . In any case, given evidence [merely] sufficient for belief instead of proof, one who is under desires for what is "correctly believed to be evil" is likely to seize upon the margin of possible error: believing, but not certain of God's existence, or of punishment, she may well move, through self-deception, from the belief that God exists and will punish bad actions to [other beliefs which deny at least one of the two conjuncts]. . . . If self-deception *is* still open to individuals, then clearly they are still in a position to yield to bad desires and to retain a genuine choice of destiny.<sup>15</sup>

Schellenberg holds here that unless we know with *certainty* that a threatener (God in this case) exists and will carry out the threat, we cannot be coerced, since it is always open to us deceive ourselves about the truth of propositions we know less than certainly. As a result, it is false that these clear and evident revelations would suffice to provide the recipient of the revelation with strong prudential reasons for not doing evil (and correspondingly, with overwhelming incentives), since one can always reappropriate ones beliefs in such a way as to eliminate these strong prudential reasons.

But is this true? We might recast Schellenberg's point as the claim that probabilistic threat imminence must be maximal if a threat is to be sufficient to coerce. But clearly that is false. Consider a case in which someone comes up behind me late at night in Manhattan, sticks a small cylindrical object in my back, and demands that I hand over my money or be

shot. I do not know with *certainty* that this threat can be carried out. There is some non-zero probability that, even if this mugger has a gun, he also has an overridingly strong aversion to shooting people. Furthermore, there is some non-zero probability that the cylinder I feel in my back is not a gun but a carrot. One might suppose there is even some non-zero probability that someone has surgically inserted a bullet-proof vest under my skin in my infancy that would, in this case, prevent me from being harmed by this mugger. And yet, while all of these things have some non-zero probability, none of these things matter in the least. Even if I thought there was only a .5 probability that the mugger would carry through on his threat, *I* would be coerced into handing over the money.

And something similar holds in the case under discussion here. Even if I do not know with certainty that God exists or that He will bring temporal and/or eternal punishments on me if I fail to believe or act in certain ways, I can still be coerced into acting or believing in those ways. This is not to deny that if probabilistic threat imminence falls below a certain point that I will not be coerced by the threat. Still, the sort of “clear and evident” revelation that critics of theism such as Schellenberg have in mind would insure that probabilistic threat imminence would remain above this threshold.

However, Schellenberg has one further problem with (16), a problem which also amounts to his only substantive critique of (17). He seems to think that even if the probabilistic imminence problem is soluble, there is an additional problem concerning temporal imminence that is not. The recipient of the clear and evident revelation will believe, he claims, that the punishments attending failure to believe or act in a certain way will be either temporal, eternal, or both. That is, the divine retribution may be meted out immediately, or it may be postponed to the after-life (in hell, say), or both. However, if punishments are *only* eternal, and, he claims, our experience surely teaches us that this, if anything, is the case,<sup>16</sup> we again find that threats of such punishment would fail to produce strong prudential reasons for not doing wrong, against (16). Furthermore, Schellenberg contends, in his only significant argument against (17), that even if such strong prudential

reasons were to arise, they could easily be ignored or shoved willfully into the background of our deliberation. As a result, it is false that the desires to do evil would be overwhelmed:

Human beings, it seems, might very well conceive of God as justly lenient in the moment of desire, and of punishment as, at worst, an afterlife affair, and hence find themselves in a situation of temptation [to engage in evil] after all. . . . As soon as punishment is pushed off into the future, rendered less immediate and concrete, the force of any desires I may have to *avoid* punishment is reduced. . . . If punishment is seen as something in the future, its deterrent effect must be greatly reduced. . . I suggest therefore, that it is only if an individual believes that God's policy of punishment implies that a failure to do good actions will in the *here and now* result in bodily harm or loss of life, that the motivating effect of his belief can plausibly be viewed as great.<sup>17</sup>

No doubt what Schellenberg is pointing to here is the role of temporal imminence in coercion. Greater temporal imminence translates into greater compelling force of the threat.

The adequacy of this criticism depends on how we answer two questions. First, is Schellenberg correct in his contention that the recipient of these clear and evident revelations would come to believe that the punishment for wrongdoing was ultimately to be meted out in eternity alone? If not, then his argument that one would not be coerced by such revelation due to the great temporal distance between performing the evil action and the punishment inflicted for it fails. Second, is it true that if punishment were to be meted out solely in eternity the temporal distance between performing the bad action and receiving the punishment would be great enough to mitigate the force of the threat and leave the creature free for soul-making? If not, then despite the fact that the "threat" will not be carried out until later, the creature will still be left with multiple eligible courses of action, and these will be sufficient to allow him or her to engage in soul-making.

It seems to me that the answer to the first question is certainly no and the answer to the second question is probably also no. Schellenberg argues that even if we were to believe, initially, that punishments for wrongdoing would be forthcoming immediately after an evil act is committed, experience would cure us of this error. Looking at others, or ourselves, it is obvious that there are a number of evils that we "get away with." And this may seem enough to make his point. But is it? Even if there are some evil acts for which we receive no

temporal punishment (that we know of), all the theist must hold is that *on some occasions* we believe that evil-doing is met with temporal punishments. That alone can provide sufficient probabilistic imminence to yield coercion. Consider again the case of the mugger discussed above. Let's say that I know that during the recent rise in muggings, police have determined that only half of the muggers in fact have guns, guns which they inevitably use if the victim resists. The other half try to mug victims using mere water pistols. It does not at all seem implausible that this knowledge would make me any less coerced when a mugger approaches me and asks for my money. What this shows is that even if we agree with Schellenberg that experience shows us that negative temporal consequences do not *inevitably* follow our evil acts, our belief that such negative consequences *sometimes* follow evil acts can suffice for coercion.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, while it is admittedly true that reducing temporal imminence reduces the compelling force of a threat, it seems unlikely that pushing the threat of punishment for wrong-doing off into the after-life in this case will suffice for mitigating its coercive force. The first reason for this is that, at least on the traditional Christian view, the punishment described in eternity is so great in magnitude and duration, viz., maximal and eternal, that the temporal distance suggested by the average human life span seems unlikely to mitigate the coercive force of the threat to any great degree. This reply gains even more force when one realizes that, while one's life span may be some seventy or so years, a given life might continue only for a few more minutes or hours. As a result, it is unreasonable to assume that the coercive force of the threat is mitigated by the fact that the punishment will not be realized for some number of years since, for all we know, it might be realized in the twinkling of an eye. We might liken the recipient of this clear and evident revelation to a victim of an extortion attempt who is told, "If you fail to carry out the plan, we will kill you. You never know when--maybe when you least expect it. But sometime, one of us will hunt you down and finish you off." The victim here might assume that it will take them a long time to track him down and so he might refuse to comply. But since the recipient of this threat is unsure

how long it will take for the threateners to find him, it is likely that a threat of this sort would nonetheless be coercive, and that is all we really need here. If many people, or even some people, would find a threat of this sort coercive, and the threat implied by the “clear and evident revelation” Schellenberg describes is of this sort, this seems to provide God with good reason for remaining hidden.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of Section II I noted that Schellenberg's official line of argument is that God's love entails that God would make his existence known to creatures. There I argued further that similar considerations should lead us to think that God's love equally entails that God would also reveal to creatures facts relevant to their achieving human flourishing, especially when those facts are accessible only via revelation. Let's call these two positions respectively the weaker and the stronger positions (weaker not being used pejoratively here, but merely to indicate that Schellenberg makes weaker claims concerning what God's love entails about what God would reveal about himself).

Note that while Schellenberg commits himself only to the weaker position, he is, as the discussion in this section makes clear, more than willing to dispute with those who hold the stronger view. Throughout this section we have seen that Schellenberg is willing to make the case that even if the stronger view is correct, the problem of divine hiddenness is no less severe. None of this is a problem for his own position of course, quite the contrary. For if he can show that the divine hiddenness entails atheism on the stronger view, it would *afortiori* do so on the weaker view as well.

Here I have tried to show that Schellenberg's critique of the stronger view fails. But one can imagine Schellenberg nonetheless feeling unscathed here, since he doesn't endorse the stronger view in the first place. Even if the case against the stronger view fails, that doesn't undermine the original argument, an argument committed only to the weaker view. Can Schellenberg rest comfortably with this response?

I think not, for two reasons. The first reason is that I think that the stronger view is true (even *obviously* so). But even if one disagrees on that score, there is a second reason for

thinking the weaker view problematic. To see the trouble, recall that the soul-making response to the problem of hiddenness holds that two bits of information serve to coerce creatures. The first is that God exists, and the second is that he is a rewarder of those who seek him (or that he punishes those who turn from him). Note that the greater the uncertainty about either of these facts, the lower the probabilistic imminence and thus, correspondingly, the lower the coercive pressure. But more importantly, insofar as one of these facts becomes more obvious, the greater the probabilistic imminence and thus the greater the coercive pressure. The result is that if God were to make his bare existence *more obvious* to creatures, he would have to make the corresponding facts about human fulfillment (or misery) based on a relationship with God *more hidden*. The problem here is that it is hard to see how such a scenario is one that could be favored by a loving God at all. Surely it would not be an act of love of God towards creatures to keep facts about human flourishing tucked safely behind the counter simply in order to make his existence clearly known. As a result, the soul-making response carries with it grounds for thinking the stronger view preferable to the weaker one.

#### VI. "Two Final Points"

Before closing, Schellenberg raises two final problems for the soul-making account. While both of these points are interesting, I will speak mostly to the first, with just a few words reserved for the second. Schellenberg points out that while the discussion up to this point has focused on what might happen if God were to reveal Himself to creatures in a certain clear and evident way, our inquiry need not be limited to merely hypothetical examples:

[My] claims may be tested by reference to real life situations in which people consider themselves to have experienced God and are convinced of his existence and sustaining presence, and of his moral demands. . . . Now such people seem quite capable of doing what they believe to be wrong. . . . [which] provides my response to [the soul-making account] with additional support.<sup>20</sup>

Here Schellenberg points out that we have concrete examples of cases where, even though one sincerely believes that God has revealed Himself in a forceful way, that believer still struggles with wrongdoing. He cites the example of the apostle Paul who claims to have been

converted through a powerful theophany and yet still struggled with his desires to do evil. Schellenberg seems to understate himself when he claims that this provides his case with “additional support.” One might be inclined to think that this is the trump card. If one can cite cases from a theist’s own scriptures in which these grand theophanies are given, and yet the recipients are not coerced into believing or acting in accord with the divine will, would this not show the theist decisively that divine hiddenness is not required to maintain the integrity of the human freedom, contrary to the claims of the soul-making account?

The answer is yes and no. It does show that *some* individuals can be the recipients of strong, epistemically imminent threats and yet still remain uncoerced by those threats. But it does not show that all, or even very many, people would be able to receive such revelations without being coerced. Recall that the theist is arguing here that God would not reveal Himself in such a way that this revelation would overwhelm His free creatures and preclude them from engaging in “soul-making.” And it seems reasonable to further hold that God would want such self-determination to be available to *all* free creatures, not merely some. As a result, while some creatures might be able to receive clear and evident revelations, and still remain free to engage in soul-making, others may not. Thus, the theist ought to argue that God *will* provide such revelations to those who can receive them and still remain free in the required way. As a result, rather than shy away from such examples Biblical examples as Saul on the road to Damascus or the Israelites at Meribah, the theist might actually *expect* that there would be such cases. What the theist can deny, however, is that such powerful revelations would be *common*.

Above I noted that Schellenberg’s critique of (16) and (17) amounts to an appeal to the role of probabilistic and temporal imminence in producing coerced behavior. What he raises in this first of his two final remarks is an objection based on the balance between the two remaining factors, epistemic imminence and threat-indifference. The fact is that some individuals are more threat-indifferent than others. Those who have a high degree of threat-indifference can tolerate a revelation implying a threat which has greater epistemic

imminence, and still remain free in the way required for soul-making. But since not everyone will have this high degree of threat-indifference, we should not expect revelations of high epistemic imminence to be the norm. This gives the theist good reason for denying that God would produce grand scale theophanies complete with parting clouds, lightening bolts and thunder claps, where God proclaims His existence, etc. to all of the worlds inhabitants. The variability of threat indifference across human beings just would not permit *this* sort of business. Still God might make His existence evident to everyone in more subtle ways, ways that mitigate the *epistemic imminence* of the threat involved and thus mitigate the coercive force of the attending threat.

There is, however, an important response available to the defender of the argument from hiddenness at this point.<sup>21</sup> At most, the argument I give above shows that we should not expect grand public theophanies to be common. But that does not prevent God from making his existence known to creatures by way of private religious experience. In fact, a glance at the recent literature in philosophy of religion would lead one to think that this is the way religious believers in fact come into cognitive contact with God in the first place. Wouldn't it at least be reasonable to expect that God would make his existence as evident to each creature as it could be via religious experience, tailoring the epistemic imminence to the threat indifference of each creature so as not to coerce him or her? Nothing said above seems to preclude this. And yet, the defender of the argument from hiddenness could claim, this expectation is frustrated as well. For surely, each individual is not the recipient of this sort of religious experience.

This is an interesting and important response, one that deserves a more extensive treatment than I can give it here. A complete response would require a separate essay, I will only attempt to sketch an outline of a response here.<sup>22</sup>

To respond to the "private revelation" view in detail, we would first have to know a bit more about how its advocate understands religious experience. While much of this is contested territory, I propose that we regard religious experience, like sensory experience, as

beginning with a perceiver coming to be in a state of directly perceiving some state of affairs, a state which provides the perceiver with *grounds* for coming to hold certain dispositional or occurrent beliefs. But being in possession of the grounds and forming beliefs on those grounds are two distinct perceptual moments. Even in ordinary cases of sensory experience, we are in possession of grounds which are sufficient to lead suitably disposed perceivers to form a variety of beliefs. The process of forming beliefs upon being in possession of certain perceptual grounds is one which is in turn dependent on other dispositions had by the perceiver. And there is little doubt that at least some of these dispositions are under the perceivers direct or indirect voluntary control.

Thus, I can train myself to form true beliefs about the species of plant I am perceiving by forming dispositions that lead me to have certain beliefs when I come to be in possession of certain grounds (these might be visual, tactile, or olfactory sensory grounds). In doing so I have indirect voluntary control over my belief-forming capacities. Likewise I can exercise direct voluntary control over belief-forming dispositions when I, for example, will myself to be more attentive to my surroundings. When I am told that I need to be careful of poisonous snakes in an area where I am hiking, I can voluntarily heighten my awareness making me more apt to form beliefs about the presence of snakes than I would be if I were oblivious to the danger.

In the case of religious experience, God can provide the perceiver with certain religious experiential grounds, but whether those grounds will suffice to form true beliefs, or any beliefs at all, will depend in at least some measure on whether or not the perceiver has disposed himself to rightly forming beliefs on the basis of those grounds. It is a significant part of the Christian story of the fall that one place where we would expect creatures to be especially self-deceived is with respect to whether or not one is properly disposed to form beliefs on the basis of religious experiential grounds. As a result, one should be especially wary when advocates of the "private revelation" view contend that it is obvious that not everyone is the recipient of clear religious experiences.

Schellenberg's final point is an attack on (18). This premise holds that "where there is little temptation to do wrong, persons lack a genuine choice of destiny." Schellenberg points out this is false since even in a world in which there is no temptation to do evil, one is still able to choose between merely doing the obligatory and doing the supererogatory. And this alone should be sufficient for soul-making.

Schellenberg argues here, as others have against this sort of theodicy, that evil is not in fact a necessary condition for soul-making. Is Schellenberg right that the distinction between obligatory and supererogatory acts pulls the rug out from under (18) and, by extension, we might assume, soul-making theodicies in general. I hold that it does not, at least for the Christian theist, because I am inclined to think that the Christian should not endorse the distinction between obligatory and supererogatory acts. One might reasonably hold that the ethical import of Christ's teaching had as a consequence that the supererogatory is, for the Christian, obligatory!

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.<sup>23</sup>

While this view has some strange consequences, they are not as many such consequences as one might think. However, further discussion or defense of this view would require a separate treatment.

## **VII. Conclusions**

From this we can conclude that the argument set forth in (16) - (19) stands. Schellenberg's attacks on (16) through (18) seem to fail once we take into account those factors that determine the way in which incentives give rise to coercion. I have argued that the coercive force of a threat is determined by three factors: threat strength, threat imminence, and threat indifference. Further, threat imminence comes in three species, probabilistic, temporal, and epistemic. Schellenberg has set forth two serious challenges to the argument proposed by the soul-making account. First, he has argued that the probabilistic and temporal imminence of a threat attending a clear and evident revelation of God's existence and moral

will for His creatures would sufficiently mitigate the force of the induced desire that it allows freedom of a sort sufficient to engage in soul-making. I have argued that by looking at parallel cases of coercion we have good reason to deny this claim. Second, Schellenberg attempts to show that there are actual cases in which free creatures who believe they have been the recipients of clear and evident revelation are still free in the sense required for soul-making. I have argued that the theist should expect that there would be some such clear and evident revelations but that, given the wide variability of threat-indifference across individuals, such revelations would be and are rare.

Notice then that this response to Schellenberg makes for a strong case that divine hiddenness is, in most cases, the only way to go if God hopes to preserve the ability of free creatures to engage in soul-making. On the traditional Christian view, at any rate, the strength of the threat for failure to believe and/or obey is fixed: there will be severe negative consequences—some temporal, others eternal. I have argued furthermore that probabilistic and temporal imminence cannot be attenuated in such a way as to eliminate the coerciveness of such a clear and evident revelation. Finally, a good case can be made that creaturely threat-indifference also cannot be mitigated, by God anyway, since it appears to be a character trait that we, in some measure, freely cultivate. To fix this feature of our character would be to interfere in our self-determination in just the way this account argues God ought not. As a result, the only remaining factor that can be attenuated is epistemic imminence, i.e., divine hiddenness, and this, it seems, is what God has done.

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<sup>1</sup> "Coercion and the Hiddenness of God," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 30, Number 1, pp.27-38.

<sup>2</sup>Although such evil is necessary here only in the sense that there is no world God can actualize which contains free creatures who do not go wrong (at least without a significant loss of overall goodness in the created world).

<sup>3</sup>Nothing I have said here actually sustains such a strong conclusion. However, those theists who propose libertarian freedom as an intrinsic good often cite its relation to moral good to ground its worth. Here I am arguing that there is no such intrinsic relation.

<sup>4</sup>See his *Evil and the God of Love*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1966 and 1977, pp.255-61 and 318-36.

<sup>5</sup>One might argue that this view on the purpose of the earthly life is summed up in the following passage from the second epistle of St. Peter: "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness,

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through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. (II Pet. 1::2-4)

<sup>6</sup>Ephesians.5:1

<sup>7</sup>Some Christian readers might fear that an account of this sort positively precludes the role of grace in salvation and sanctification, making it Pelagian *in excelsis*. I have responded to this charge in more detail in my "Heaven and Hell," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, Michael Murray (ed.), Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, pp.298-9. But there is no reason on the view developed here for denying that grace is a necessary condition for soul-making. It cannot, however, be the case that such grace is intrinsically sufficient.

<sup>8</sup>J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p.83.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.85-6.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p.121.

<sup>12</sup>The question of whether or not offers can be coercive is widely disputed in the literature and cannot be addressed here. I have elsewhere argued that offers can be coercive, see, "Are Coerced Acts Free," David Dudrick and Michael Murray, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 32, no. 2, p.116.

<sup>13</sup>One must, of course, define exactly what it means to be unable rationally to choose some course of action. I discuss this in detail in "Are Coerced Acts Free?" pp.116-19. Roughly, the idea is this. Each of us has a certain threshold such that if i) a threat carries a grave enough consequence and ii) the act required of the threatened by the threatener, P, is not, relative to the threat, sufficiently grave, then I am unable to deliberately choose to do anything other than P. So, for example, if one threatens to shoot me if I fail to touch my nose, I *cannot*, all other things being equal, choose to do other than touch my nose. Surely other factors might be added to the case that *would* make it possible for me to choose to do something other than touch my nose. For example, we might add that if I touch my nose I will suffer excruciating pain for eternity. Or we might add that I believe I have a bullet-proof vest on. But barring such additions to the case, I contend that I simply cannot choose to do other than touch my nose. To put it more strongly, no possible world continuous with a world segment up to that time, as described, contains me performing any free and deliberate action other than touching my nose.

<sup>14</sup>The account of coercion here is vastly oversimplified. Unless a good deal is built into the notion of what counts as a threat, this definition will entail that I am coerced any time one course of action is vastly preferred by me over its competitors. Surely such an account fails to capture what is distinctive about coercion. A fully fleshed out account of coercion can be found in "Are Coerced Acts Free?" *Op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup>*Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, pp.121-4,

<sup>16</sup>Schellenberg says this explicitly, "Even if the expectation of [temporal] punishment . . . were prevalent in some quarters at first, upon further experience and reflection the understanding of humans might be expected to mature and deepen . . . to the point where such views were universally rejected. Further, those who (unreasonably) expected severe punishment to follow each bad action would soon note that those who did not have this expectation, and so occasionally fell into temptation and did bad actions, were not immediately severely punished." *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, p.125.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p.124.

<sup>18</sup>Of course, inevitable negative consequences alone are not sufficient for coercion. High threat strength, probabilistic and epistemic imminence, and low threat-indifference must be present as well.

<sup>19</sup> Schellenberg next presents a fall back position that the theist might retreat to in light of his criticisms discussed above. However, since I have argued these earlier criticisms fail, there seems little reason to discuss this weaker attempt to defend (16) and (17) which he proposes. His discussion of this fall back position is found at, *Ibid.*, pp.126-8.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.129-30.

<sup>21</sup>In conversation, Schellenberg has indicated to me that he thinks this is the the right response, and the one that gets to the heart of the argument from hiddenness. He also discusses this sort of position briefly at the close of section I in the essay in this volume,

<sup>22</sup>I provide another response to this view in my "Coercion and the Hiddenness of God" section V.

<sup>23</sup>Matthew 5:39-41.