

Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief

Abstract: In this paper we argue that attention to the intricacies relating to belief illustrate crucial difficulties with Schellenberg's hiddenness argument. This issue has been only tangentially discussed in the literature to date. Yet we judge this aspect of Schellenberg's argument deeply significant. We claim that focus on the nature of belief manifests a central flaw in the hiddenness argument. Additionally, attention to doxastic subtleties provides important lessons about the nature of faith.

The problem of divine hiddenness is arguably the most troubling issue for theism. Consider: the problem of evil is usually thought to hold this title, but would evil cause a person to doubt the existence of God if God were vividly present to that individual? It seems not. The hiddenness of God in the midst of evil is manifest in such questions as "Where is God when it hurts?" Similarly, Christianity Today ran an editorial "Where was God on 9/11?" Just after the devastating tsunami columnist William Safire wrote an article in the New York Times called "Where was God?"¹ These questions are framed in a way that not only adverts to the evil itself, but the awful sense of God's absence in its midst. It seems to us that this sense of abandonment is perhaps worse than the physical suffering itself.

Furthermore, it has also been suggested that hiddenness is a serious philosophical problem for theism. J.L. Schellenberg has been the foremost proponent of this proposal. We think that Schellenberg's use of divine hiddenness actually distracts from bigger problems stemming from divine hiddenness, problems the investigation of which is likely to yield deep lessons about the nature of God and the human predicament. So, in this paper we wish to show that Schellenberg's argument is fatally flawed. Moving past his

¹ January 10, 2005, Late Edition - Final , Section A , Page 19 , Column 6

use of divine hiddenness will allow philosophers of religion to grapple with the bigger problems and communicate the deeper lessons contained in the problem of divine hiddenness.

In brief our argument runs as follows: we will show that Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness does not pay adequate attention to the subtleties in the nature of belief. When these subtleties are attended to, the hiddenness argument collapses. The two primary features of belief we will elaborate upon are the spectral nature of belief—that it comes in a continuum of degrees—and the *de re/de dicto* distinction. First, we summarize Schellenberg's argument.

J.L. Schellenberg has developed a clear, engaging, and significant argument that God does not exist.² His argument is as follows:³

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
- (3) Reasonable nonbelief does occur.

² There are many uses to which the argument could be put, but it seems to us that Schellenberg's own aim is to argue that the agnostic possesses sufficient evidence in virtue of being an agnostic to warrant atheism. That is, once the agnostic—who takes the state of the evidence to be roughly a wash—realizes that God would not allow such an evidential state to obtain, she thereby acquires new evidence against God's existence which is sufficient to tip the scales in favor of atheism. We think this is an ingenious strategy even though we think the argument ultimately fails.

³ J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 83. Schellenberg notes that this is just one formulation of the problem of hiddenness. In a recent article Schellenberg presents the Analogical argument from hiddenness. See "Does Divine Hiddenness Justify Atheism?" in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004): 30-41.

Thus,

(4) No perfectly loving God exists.

So,

(5) There is no God.

Much attention has focused on (2); our contribution will not differ from this growing tradition. We hope, however, to focus attention on some neglected issues concerning (2). In particular, we find readings of “reasonable nonbelief” on which both (2) and (3) are true but in a way that poses a dilemma. In order for (2) to be true the reading of “reasonable nonbelief” would have to be so strong that we have no reason to believe the reinterpreted (3). But any kind of reasonable nonbelief we have reason to think is exemplified is not incompatible with the will of a loving God, thus rendering (2) without warrant. Either way the argument fails.

Premise (2), as we said, is the crucial premise. The support for (2) depends on the idea that a perfectly loving God will provide sufficient evidence for belief that God exists to all willing and able⁴ persons. God will provide this evidence because a personal relationship with God is valuable and it is not possible unless a person believe that God exists.

The justification for (2) runs thus:

(6) If a perfectly loving God exists, he will provide access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing.

(7) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing, then reasonable⁵ nonbelief will not occur.

⁴ Since the primary issue is *nonculpable* unbelief, we will henceforth drop “and able” but it shall be understood to apply throughout.

⁵ It should be noted that “reasonable” also admits of multiple admissible precisifications. The reasonableness at stake could anywhere on a scale from purely subjective to purely objective. We think the

(8) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.

Our target is (7). We will argue that when we take a close look at the nature of belief (7) it is not rationally compelling. In fact, a stronger conclusion follows from our argument; there is good reason to think that (7) is false.

WHAT KIND OF BELIEF?

We begin with the following question: *What kind of belief is required for a personal relationship with God?* By reflecting on this question we are led to three considerations that militate against (7). The first consideration arises from distinguishing belief de dicto from belief de re.⁶ Belief de dicto (of the *dictum* or proposition) is endorsing some proposition that is preceded by a that-clause. For instance S believes that p indicates that S believes p de dicto. Belief de re (of the *res* or thing) is belief of a thing or individual that *it* has some feature even if the de re believer does not recognize the subject under some specific description. For instance, I believe de dicto that Mark Twain is a great author. But even if I did not realize that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens, I would also believe *of* Sam Clemens that he is a great author. Thus, one of the questions we address is whether (7) requires belief de dicto.

method of the paper works for any sensible account of reasonableness. The two main interpretations which seem to fit Schellenberg's use are (i) sufficiently probable on correct evidential standards or (ii) non-culpable in a robustly deontological sense. On either reading our argument remains unchanged. Thanks to Mike Thune for discussion on this.

⁶ Belief de se is not relevant to our argument; hence we ignore it.

A second distinction is between categorical belief and degrees of belief. Degrees of belief are common enough.⁷ I believe that $2+2=4$ more firmly than I believe that Juneau is the capital of Alaska. It is safe to say that I'd be more willing to bet the farm on the truth of the former than the truth of the latter.⁸ Think of it this way. Consider the property *having mass*. This is sometimes called a determinable property. It can become determinate by having a particular quantity of mass as in the determinate property *having a mass of $9.10938188 \times 10^{-31}$ kilograms* (the mass of an electron at rest relative to the observer). Likewise, *believing that p* is a determinable property which becomes determinate when the degree of belief is specified as in *believing p to degree .95*. Categorical belief is a matter of all-out belief. Sometimes we are interested in what people believe (full-stop) rather than just their degrees of belief. Do you believe the defendant is guilty or not? Other times we are sensitive to degrees of belief. Do you think he is holding a king of hearts? Thus a second question regarding (7) is whether it requires categorical belief or just some level of degree of belief?

A third consideration that arises with respect to belief is the synchronic/diachronic distinction. (7), recall, says *if God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing, then reasonable nonbelief will not occur*. Should we understand this as claiming that reasonable nonbelief *never* occurs or merely that at *some specific time* reasonable nonbelief will not to occur? That is, should we read (7) as

(7a) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing, then *at no time* will reasonable nonbelief occur,

⁷ If the reader prefers to think of a gradable property of beliefs—confidence—we have no objection. Also, we are not committed to there being precise degrees of belief.

⁸ Not that we think betting behavior defines belief: it is, rather, a defeasible evidence of it.

or

(7b) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing, then *at/by this time*⁹ reasonable nonbelief will not occur? [Where “this” ostends some special time the asserter thinks relevant.]

We begin by considering issues pertaining to the synchronic/diachronic distinction. (7a) is clearly the stronger claim,¹⁰ and we see little by way of recommendation for it. However, Schellenberg explicitly avows the stronger reading. In a recent article he writes, “[W]hat the hiddenness argument actually says is that if God exists, there is *never* a time when someone inculpably fails to believe (belief is made available as soon as there is a capacity for relationship with God).”¹¹

In a footnote to his survey on Jonathan Edwards and divine hiddenness William Wainwright offers a counterargument against (7a).¹² First he reconstructs Schellenberg’s reasoning as follows:

1. God wants humans to flourish.
2. If 1, then God would ensure that the necessary criteria for such are fulfilled.

⁹ This could be reasonably interpreted either as an interval during which reasonable nonbelief is not to occur or as some specific time—a sort of “deadline”—by which reasonable nonbelief must be overcome.

¹⁰ Naturally, the corresponding version of (3) will be weaker: (3a) There is some time at which reasonable nonbelief occurs. This is no help, however, since we think (7a) is wholly inadequate. This will reveal a general pattern: on each reading one premise comes out better, but another wholly implausible.

¹¹ J.L. Schellenberg, “The hiddenness argument revisited (I),” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 206.

¹² William J. Wainwright, “Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God,” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder & Paul Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 118.

3. For any time and human, a human flourishes at that time only if they have personal communication with God.
4. For any time and human, a human can have personal communication with God at that time only if they have explicit awareness of him at that time.
5. Thus, God would ensure that every human has explicit awareness of him at all times.

Then he constructs the following parallel argument.

1. God wants humans to flourish.
2. If 1, then God would ensure that the necessary criteria for such are fulfilled.
3. For any time and human, a human flourishes at that time only if they are as happy as they can be at that time.
4. Thus, God would ensure that every human is as happy as they can be at all times.

Wainwright says that since the latter argument isn't compelling, neither is the former. But it isn't clear that this is a good response to Schellenberg, for if you add "at all times" to premise 1 it still seems plausible and the reasoning is plausibly valid. If Schellenberg already accepts the first argument, he's likely to accept the second one.¹³ Why *wouldn't* God want his creatures to flourish at all times? It is not good enough to

¹³ This is an a fortiori argument, for notice that premise 3 in the second version has a maximality property which is lacking in the previous argument. Essentially this point is made by Schellenberg in his response in "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," p 208. Furthermore, the first argument just isn't Schellenberg's. Wainwright provides a good summary at the beginning of his article "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God" (see p. 98) which is equivalent to our own. In light of this it is strange that he would then offer the present pair of arguments.

point out what the argument requires; one must go on to argue that that requirement is too much. In particular we think one does in fact need to advert to some greater good to justify why God would allow times of unhappiness.

A plausible greater good is not far away. The temporary crisis of doubt or the gradual process of coming to realize that there is a personal agent responsible for your existence may have great advantages. This has been the testimony of many current theists, including the authors. There is just too much experiential evidence of the long-term value of various kinds of sub-optimal intervals of time to give (7a) much credence.

Schellenberg considers a related point in his recent article.¹⁴ Schellenberg claims that there's another form of hiddenness compatible with his argument. This form is "analogous to what has traditionally been called 'the dark night of the soul' – a state in which there is evidence for God's existence on which the believer may rely, but in which God is not felt as directly present to her experience, and may indeed feel absent."¹⁵ Schellenberg claims that this kind of darkness does not threaten the hiddenness argument.

This response is inadequate. The response requires that (a) non-belief that results from "darkness" is culpable non-belief and that (b) the cases of "darkness" really involve some sustaining belief. But whether non-belief is culpable in some of the cases depends on other relevant facts. For instance, it depends on the psychology of the individual, the period of "darkness", and the quality of positive evidence in the believer's possession. We judge that there are cases in which darkness results in inculpable non-belief and yet

¹⁴ "The hiddenness argument revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 299-300.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

that state is overall good for the individual (but remember we allow that belief comes in degrees—more on this later).

About the second claim (b)—that darkness really involves sustaining belief—we think this just false. Let’s distinguish between commitment and belief. Suppose Ron is running for governor. A sage tells me that he will win. As we near the elections Ron is trailing his opponent by 20% in the polls. Although I was confident that the sage was right, I now wholeheartedly disbelieve the sage’s report. Nevertheless I remain committed to Ron’s election. A similar point holds in some of the “darkness” cases. The subject remains committed to the Way while nevertheless lacking full-fledged belief that the Way is right. (Again, note the spectral nature of belief).

“Darkness” may achieve other goods. Swinburne has suggested a greater good defense of hiddenness based on human responsibility for discerning the ultimate truths about reality.¹⁶ In response Schellenberg likens Swinburne’s argument to that of Wainwright’s. The fact is that about the only similarity between the two is that they find it implausible that God would ensure communion *at all times* and we find his response a bit obscure. Schellenberg says that for such arguments to be successful “we must ignore the divine bias toward relationship (i.e. toward making relationship possible). We must suppose that God would have an indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward relationship with human beings – that observing certain good things which might flow from remaining withdrawn, God would readily be moved to withdraw.”¹⁷ This seems to miss the point of greater good arguments. Either it is necessary that a subject should

¹⁶ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 257-258.

¹⁷ Schellenberg “Hiddenness (II),” pp. 288ff.

forego some goods at some times so as to enjoy greater goods at some later time or it is not. Schellenberg spends considerable time arguing against the particulars of Swinburne's argument and some against responsibility arguments generally, but he provides little by way of warrant for thinking that the greater good move fails. The greater good to which we have adverted is something we know by experience. One author never saw the beauty of God when he was fully confident of His existence. It took a period of doubt to see that. It is entirely plausible that this author is essentially such that he would not have seen this truth without such an experience. It is also plausible that many others are in this same situation. Schellenberg's extensive arguments against various "accommodation strategies" are summed up thusly: "Infinite resourcefulness, as even we finite beings can see, would provide many ways for a perfectly loving God to make divine-human relationship a genuine possibility at all times without failing to meet the dominant concern of any of the reasons for God to remain withdrawn that have been advanced, or seem likely to be advanced."¹⁸ But the sort of reason we've suggested is tied to propositions which are typically taken to be outside of God's control. So even an infinite degree of resourcefulness can't solve this problem.¹⁹

(7b) is clearly the more plausible claim. Perhaps at some *specific* kind of time or some *particular* time in each individual's life, say when one deeply considers the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 298-299.

¹⁹ We wish to make it perfectly clear we think that most of Schellenberg's rebuttals fail in part or in whole. We offer the considerations we do because they differ from anything explicitly considered by Schellenberg (though they are closest to Robert McKim's *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 34-48) and we think they are some of the best reasons for hiddenness.

evidence, reasonable nonbelief should not occur. In the end, we don't find this any more plausible than (7a) and for the same reason. After all, what kind of crisis of faith would it be if it didn't persist through periods of reflection? We see no reason to think that there is some particular time or some specific type of time during which a loving God would *never* allow disbelief to persist.

The only exception to the above statement would be if there was some deadline after which an individual would be judged. We do not suggest there even is such a "judgement day" but if there were it would be after death and we think it reasonable that a loving God would not allow reasonable nonbelief to persist this far. However, we can only address what evidence people might have in this life and what beliefs they might have in the here and now. Thus hiddenness *cannot* constitute evidence against God's existence in the way Schellenberg suggests. We just have no access to the information which would be required to make such a determination.

WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIP?

We have just concluded discussing the results of applying the synchronic/diachronic distinction to the notion of reasonable belief. Next, we will consider the results of applying the de dicto/de re distinction and the partial/full distinction. But before we turn to our main argument we need to make some initial comments regarding the concept of a personal relationship. We doubt that an analysis of "personal relationship" is forthcoming. The concept has a wide variety of applications and our argument will rely on some of the less-central instances, instances that lie at the boundaries of the range of admissible cases. Typical instances of personal relationships

are husband/wife, brother/sister, friend/friend, teacher/student, lawyer/client, manager/worker, etc. A stronger kind of personal relationship is a “fulfilling personal relationship.” The conditions for this kind of stronger relationship vary with the type of personal relationship, e.g., a fulfilling personal relationship between a husband and wife is different than a fulfilling personal relationship between a lawyer and client. We will return to some issues surrounding our argument relating to the role of belief and personal relationships but for now noting the latitude inherent in the concept of personal relationship should forestall some initial objections. That is, it is no objection to our argument that the kinds of personal relationship afforded by weaker notions of belief are not central cases or cases of robustly fulfilling personal relationships. Our approach could justly be described as eschatological in that we think a robust personally fulfilling relationship with God is something which—for most people—is a post parousia event. In the meantime we must often be satisfied with less robust but still very meaningful relations to God. The beauty of it is that the low-level relationships we suggest are available to all persons who are willing and able. Moreover, these relationships are capable of growing and flowering into something completely fulfilling.

THE NATURE OF BELIEF

Having discussed the relative thinness of de re or low-grade belief in God and having indicated several reasons for giving it more consideration than Schellenberg welcomes, we now turn to our application of two additional distinctions regarding belief to the hiddenness argument: the de dicto/de re distinction and the full/partial distinction. It is clear that the argument requires belief as a condition on the possibility of a personal

relationship with God (premise 2). Schellenberg seems to require that the person believes de dicto that God exists, and also that a person has a quite high level of credence that God exists. We will argue that neither de dicto belief nor a very high level of credence is required to have a “personal” relationship with God.

Full or Partial Belief?

First, is complete belief required for a personal relationship with God? We think not. Consider a case in which a person is .9 confident that there is a God. This person performs her religious duties and sacrifices many goods for the sake of a higher calling. We see no reason to suppose that this person’s doxastic attitude toward God prevents her from being in a personal relationship with God.

We do not think, however, that very high credence that God exists is required for a personal relationship with God. Consider the following case involving a personal relationship between two people. Suppose that Jones—an unfortunate fellow—is locked in solitary confinement in a dark prison cell. Jones hears faint taps coming from the other side of his prison wall. The taps resemble the presence of another person willing to communicate, but it is not certain that there is another person in the other cell. Yet, Jones begins to tap back. Suppose this activity continues over a long period, and Jones can—with some effort—make sense of the taps as another person attempting to communicate with him. Suppose Jones’s credence (his degree of belief, rational confidence, or what have you) on the claim “there is another person in the cell beside me” is .5. He seems to be discerning messages, but he realizes that it could just be in his head since the signs are ambiguous. Yet, given that the two persons are tapping back and forth to each other, it

seems that they are in a personal relationship, one which in time could take on great significance (again, this latter part is of great importance). The interaction could be so meaningful and hope-inducing that it keeps Jones from going insane or perhaps even keeps him from dying or killing himself. Suppose also that in fact the tapping is coming from Smith who, many years later, meets up with Jones and they discover what was going on. We submit that this part of their relationship will take on newfound significance in their new relationship, something to look back on and cherish, and a surprisingly good foundation for deepening their relationship now that Jones's credence has been raised to moral certainty by actually meeting Smith.²⁰ We refer to this as the "tapping case."

We take the tapping case to illustrate that two persons may be in a personal relationship, even a fairly meaningful one, with each other even though the parties lack complete belief that the other exists, and, further, may in fact have a quite low degree of

²⁰ Note that Schellenberg explicitly affirms that it is acceptable for a relationship with God to vary through time. In another response to Wainwright's parallel argument Schellenberg writes,

But one only gets an analogue for the mentioned claim and the odd result in my argument if one supposes it to say that God should at all times provide us with a fully salvific life, or at all times make the deepest possible human–divine communion available, or something along those lines. And I have said nothing of the sort. All I have said is that we might expect at all times to be in possession of belief, and to have at all times the opportunity to be involved in some level of explicit relationship with God. Indeed, in DH I emphasize that 'the relationship I am thinking of is to be understood in developmental terms', that were it to obtain, 'it would admit of change, growth, progression, regression', that it might be 'shallow or deep, depending on the response of the human term of the relation'" (Schellenberg, "Revisited (I)", p. 208).

belief.²¹ If this result holds, we think it makes trouble for Schellenberg's (7). It may be that God is under some obligation to provide evidence sufficient for the kind of belief necessary for a personal relationship with him. But, given the tapping case, this may only be evidence that makes for partial belief.

Non-belief will, of course, be defined in terms of belief. A standard neo-Bayesian account of full belief is credence over some threshold.^{22, 23} The threshold could be fixed or it could vary with context. For the sake of simplicity of exposition, we will treat the argument using a fixed threshold of .5.²⁴ This will lead to the following interpretation of (7).

(7c) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing then reasonable nonbelief $_{\text{Con}(T)=n}$, where $0 < n < .5$ will not occur.

Our argument in this section indicates that (7c) is false. God can achieve access to the benefits of a relationship with him by partial belief.

²¹ In fact it may be the case that the parties are both more confident than not that the other does not exist but because of the utility of there being another person they act as if there was another person in the adjacent cell.

²² The Lottery Paradox raises issues about whether various forms of positive epistemic status transmit over various functions like known entailment or competent deduction. We do not think it raises a problem for threshold accounts of belief, especially if the threshold is context-sensitive. Further treatment of problems for Bayesian notions of belief is beyond the scope of this paper.

²³ There are other alternatives, but they make it difficult to evaluate the hiddenness argument and they have their own difficulties. See for example, as Mark Kaplan explicates it in *Decision Theory as Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 107-110.

²⁴ For a defense of this account, see Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.34-38.

Let us engage in a brief aside. Perhaps Schellenberg would wish to suggest that for some n low enough our argument will not work. In that case, we suspect it would be much harder to justify the corresponding (3)—at some specific time reasonable nonbelief_{con(T)=n} will not occur. We would agree that $\text{con}(T)=.001$ would have serious trouble supporting our arguments above, but then again we don't think that a reasonable assignment. The debate about that is a separate debate and we won't pursue it further. It is worth noting, however, that Schellenberg often seems willing to grant—if only for the sake of the argument—that $\text{con}(T)\approx.5$ is reasonable (before considering the consequences of that very assignment). We think it clear that on this assignment our arguments go through.

Furthermore, even at lower degrees of confidence Pascalian wagering could lead one to adopt a lifestyle which could result in a similar kind of personal relationship as in the tapping case. There is a vast literature on Pascalian wagering and we don't intend to add anything new here but only to point out that it is one plausible way to have a relationship with God with quite low credence.

De re et De dicto

The second major question is whether de dicto belief is required for a personal relationship? In the final section of William Wainwright's "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God" he switches gears to consider "a related but very different position, namely, that even where the good of theistic belief doesn't exist, God has provided sufficient light to make salvation a real possibility for everyone."²⁵ This is indeed a very

²⁵ In Snyder and Moser, eds. *Divine Hiddenness* (2002), 113.

different approach than the Edwardsian response that we sinners are in the hands of an angry God, who fail to believe not because there's not enough evidence but because we culpably ignore it. God makes salvation a real possibility by accepting people who lack de dicto belief.

It would be a mistake to think that to suggest de dicto belief is not necessary for a meaningful relationship with God is to suggest that de re belief is sufficient for all God wants for us. De re belief could be the basis for some further kind of belief still short of de dicto belief. This seems to be what Wainwright has in mind, for he quotes Robert Holyer saying that he “contends that it is reasonable to attribute an unconscious belief that *p* to *A* if *A* ‘displays some of the dispositions constitutive of a belief *p* [acting in terms of it, experiencing emotions appropriate to it, drawing inferences from it or holding beliefs from which it can be inferred] without giving assent to it.’”²⁶ We find the notion of an unconscious belief unhelpful. It's unhelpful for several reasons. First, those whom Wainwright seems to want to include will not in fact manifest the dispositions mentioned. Also, the concept of de re belief is sufficiently clear and powerful enough to do the work of “unconscious belief” whatever that might turn out to be.

Nevertheless, we do find the suggestion that de dicto belief is not necessary a fruitful one. As our opening remarks on the *relative* thinness of de re belief indicate we firmly agree with Wainwright that “implicit belief may be second best but it can be very good indeed.” In what follows we hope to go some way in backing up that claim.

First, we present a case when you do not have de dicto belief, but you are in a meaningful personal relationship. Suppose in a moment of need some extra money

²⁶ *Ibid.*

shows up in your bank account. You ask the bank if it is a mistake and they say that an anonymous donor has wired you the money. You think to yourself, “Thank you, whoever you are.” Now in this case you lack *de dicto* belief, but—especially if the other person can read your mind—it is fair to say that the two of you have a meaningful relationship.

Now we tell the story for low degree of belief. Again in a moment of need some extra money shows up in your account. The bank tells the same story as before, but this time you suspect who has done it, though you have around .5 confidence (perhaps less) that you are right. So you have a *de dicto* belief to the effect of “so-and-so did it” but you have a low degree of confidence in this proposition. Just in case, you send an anonymous thank you note to the individual. That way, if it is him, he will know who sent it and if it is not, you will not have to explain yourself. Now suppose you are right, it is in fact whom you suspected. It is fair to say you have a meaningful relationship. You have successfully expressed your gratitude to the individual and they have received it.

Now combine the two distinctions and consider a case in which you have neither a high degree of confidence nor *de dicto* belief. Again in a moment of need some extra money shows up in your account. You do not know if this is a mistake or if someone has given you this money. For whatever reason, it just doesn’t occur to you to ask the bank to figure it out. You suspect, though, that someone has in fact transferred this money to you and you think to yourself, “Thank you, whoever you are.” Now in this case you have neither *de dicto* belief nor a very high degree of belief, but—especially if the other person can read your mind—it is fair to say that the two of you have a meaningful relationship. And as we noted above, this relationship can take on a new level of retrospective

significance if in the future you meet the person. We refer to this as the “unknown benefactor case.”

We all receive some benefits in this life, and if we are ever grateful for them it seems that we are grateful for their source, so to speak. God is in fact the benefactor of all, so whoever expresses gratitude to the Benefactor in fact expresses gratitude to God and is to that extent in a relationship with Him. This can serve as the basis of a more meaningful relationship later.

As before we distinguish between two renderings of (7):

(7d) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing then reasonable nonbelief_{de dicto} will not occur.

(7e) If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing then reasonable nonbelief_{de re} will not occur.

The above argument shows that (7d) is false. Schellenberg, however, cannot utilize (7e) in his argument. For this would require the corresponding claim that reasonable nonbelief_{de re} occurs, and this is tantamount to the claim that God does not exist.

Richard Swinburne has addressed both these points in his writings. With regard to the de dicto/de re belief issue Swinburne says that de re belief is enough. He refers to “implicit faith” in the section “The Future of Good Pagans” in *Responsibility and Atonement*.²⁷ Moreover, he notes that this is official Catholic teaching since the Second Vatican Council.²⁸ Bruce Reichenbach expands on Swinburne’s thoughts in “Inclusivism

²⁷ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 191.

²⁸ Lumen Gentium 16.

and The Atonement.”²⁹ This is also the view of popular Christian author C.S. Lewis who writes in *Mere Christianity*, “We do know that no man be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know him can be saved through him.”³⁰ He illustrated this imaginatively at the end of *The Last Battle* where the non-Narnian Calormen Emeth finds it puzzling that he should be accepted into Aslan's kingdom without even having recognized Aslan. Indeed, he has served Tash all his life. Aslan comments, "All the service thou hast done to [Tash] I account as service done to me....For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not."³¹

That Christians take de re belief to be sufficient for a personal relationship with God should not be surprising since it has always been a majority view that the Old Testament Patriarchs were incorporated into Christ without de dicto belief. What goes for the Son here can clearly go for the Father.

Swinburne also addresses the second point about degrees of belief. He notes that according to Catholic doctrine it's not belief in the sense of assent that is Christian faith; rather it is what Aquinas called “meritorious faith” which is an act of the will to follow the religious path in light of the value of religious enlightenment (which is usually progressive, like all other human development). He says in the Epilogue to *Faith and*

²⁹ *Faith and Philosophy* 16:1, pp. 43-54.

³⁰ *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 65.

³¹ *The Last Battle* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 205.

Reason, “For the pursuit of a religious way a man needs to seek certain goals with certain weak beliefs.”³² How weak? Swinburne answers, “A man who prized salvation far above everything else, would pursue it despite having a belief that it was very unlikely that pursuit of any religious way would attain it.” Like Kierkegaard and Pascal, Swinburne understands “saving faith” not as mental assent, but as a way of life, a journey. The rationality of that way of life is quite compatible with degrees of belief less than half, so long as one’s heart is in the right place.

Given the preceding discussion it is compatible with the existence of a perfectly loving God that reasonable nonbelief occurs in sense we have specified above. A perfectly loving God can be expected to bring about states of affairs necessary for achieving other good states of affairs. It is good that persons enter into a personal relationship with God. But we have shown that it is possible to have a personal relationship with God and yet lack a sufficiently high *de dicto* belief that God exists.

IS IT ENOUGH?

We have tried to make good on Wainwright’s suggestion that *de dicto* belief is not necessary for a substantive relationship with God by arguing that *de re* belief is sufficient and by noting how significant such belief can be. After considering Wainwright’s point—which we think stood in need of considerable clarification and defense—

Schellenberg has merely this to say:

But Wainwright has substituted his own notion of relationship between God and human beings for mine here. Given what... I have said I mean by this notion (explicit, reciprocal interaction), it would be a mistake for me *not* to affirm that relationship with God entails theistic belief on the

³² *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 198-199.

part of human beings! *If there is a mistake, then, it is in supposing that God would want us always to be in a position to participate in such explicit relation.*³³

Schellenberg then complains that Wainwright's argument that this is a mistake (which we considered above)³⁴ is not compelling.³⁵ We have aimed to strengthen the key idea in Wainwright's suggestive criticism in a fashion that bypasses Schellenberg's criticisms of Wainwright's point. Schellenberg continues his critique, saying that, "All I have said is that we might expect at all times to be in possession of belief, and to have at all times the opportunity to be involved in some level of explicit relationship with God."³⁶ We have argued that this move can be undercut by showing how one can have the *benefits* of a relationship with God without have explicit belief *now*. Since the central intuitions driving Schellenberg's argument focuses on the *benefits* of the relationship, we think our claim is a key undercutting move. Nevertheless, Schellenberg rightfully presses that we need some additional reasons to think that God will not bring about this sort of relationship *now*. We turn to address this point.

As Schellenberg has indicated the kind of relationship intended to support (7) is a fulfilling personal relationship similar to a loving relationship among mature adults—a relationship in which each partner is aware of the presence of the other. This kind of relationship requires reciprocal feelings of some sort, where this involves one person having certain feelings towards another person, and vice versa; and, plausibly, such

³³ "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," 208. Italics added.

³⁴ See pp. 6-8.

³⁵ Schellenberg "Hiddenness (I)", 208.

³⁶ Ibid.

feelings cannot be had unless each person is aware of the existence of the other person in a way more robust than we've been describing. A fulfilling personal relationship is better than a mere personal relationship. Hence God can be expected to bring about the necessary conditions for a fulfilling personal relationship, one of which is sufficiently high de dicto belief.

This response strengthens the kind of relationship at issue in (7). It is not just that a perfectly loving God will bring about the conditions for a mere personal relationship with him or even a meaningful one, but he will bring about the conditions for a certain kind of fulfilling personal relationship. Our response to this strengthened premise is twofold: first, we observe that, plausibly, God has brought about the conditions required for *access* to the benefits of a relationship with Him to be realized at a later time based on what occurs now; second, we employ the greater good defense to explain *why* God has not presently brought about this kind of relationship for everyone.³⁷ We concede, however, that sufficiently high credence is required for a certain kind of fulfilling personal relationship. In outline we claim that it is plausible to suppose that there may be certain goods that require—or at least are best accomplished by—some epistemic distance from God.

Before we press our rejoinder to this objection, it needs be observed that a certain strain of Christian revivalism has stressed a model of divine-human relationship that may not hold up to scrutiny if taken as the paradigm of this-worldly faith. We find evidence

³⁷ Note that some mystics—and some grandmothers—claim presently to have this kind of relationship with God.

of this sort of relationship in popular revivalist songs for example.³⁸ This kind of relationship is complex to spell out but it involves two components: (a) a relationship with the divine involves an immediacy that is analogous to the immediacy between two human persons in a close relationship: in some sense God is tangible; (b) the only hindrance to experiencing this immediacy with God is one's own sin. This model of divine-human relationships is theologically suspect as a description of normal divine-human relationships. Furthermore, it may be that the hiddenness argument succeeds if this is the kind of relationship envisioned. This illustrates an important phenomenon when assessing anti-theistic arguments. Sometimes such arguments lead us to a more accurate understanding of God by focusing on some false—and hitherto unrecognized—assumption. It seems to us that Schellenberg's argument may exhibit this virtue.

Recall that (7) reads "If God provides access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing, then reasonable nonbelief will not occur." Our argument above implies that God has provided *access* to the benefits of such a relationship. All that is required for access to those benefits is that one now can do something that *will* result in having those benefits. Thus, our argument is perfectly consonant with this stronger reading of a personal relationship. This point falls naturally out of our first distinction between reasonable disbelief at some time and reasonable disbelief at any time. We reiterate that it is not to be expected that at no time will there be disbelief:

³⁸ One song that indicates this sense of divine-human relationships is "In the Garden" (Baptist Hymnal song # 428). The chorus is as follows: "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, And he tells me I am his own, And the joy we share as we tarry there, None other has ever known." In our experience this song is taken to indicate a type of relationship one may presently experience with the divine. The advocate of such a view may not be able to avail themselves of the sort of reply we make here to Schellenberg.

temporary disbelief may serve good purposes. And the fulfillment of our relationship with God has always been held by Christians to occur only at the eschaton.

Note how relevant the role of the afterlife in Christian theism is here. We think that one neglected aspect of divine hiddenness is assessing the theoretical role of afterlife in theism. The afterlife plays an important role in a full-bodied Christian worldview. For there will come a time when God's existence is evident to all. This puts a lot of pressure on the defender of the argument from hiddenness to defend the implausibly strong claim that it is wrong that anyone ever not fully believe in God. For one author a crisis of faith has been one of the most influential and formative experiences of his life.

Moreover, for the Catholic at least, there is the prospect of Purgatory of some sort for people who don't come to explicit categorical belief in God in this life.³⁹ Their journey can continue in some way. So Schellenberg really has to argue for a very strong claim indeed: There exist people such that at no time do they have adequate evidence for a fulfilling personal relationship with God.⁴⁰ That would constitute a really good objection to theism, but we find it hard to imagine supporting such a proposition in light of the fact that the theory being objected to includes everlasting existence.

It might be replied that stressing the role of the afterlife is dialectically odd because the response does not help the agnostic about the afterlife. We have this to say in reply. Schellenberg's argument is against theism. Thus the theist should be allowed to appeal to the theoretical resources of theism. Consequently if the agnostic is inquiring

³⁹ Jerry Walls has argued that even Protestants can coherently avail themselves of the doctrine of purgatory though we doubt that many will. "Purgatory for Everyone" *First Things* 122 (April 2002): 26-30.

⁴⁰ Or alternatively, that if a loving God exists, there will be *no time* at which people have reasonable nonbelief.

into the truth of theism he should be open to the theoretical role an afterlife plays for theism. We argue that Schellenberg's argument fails because belief (as qualified above) is not necessary for a meaningful personal relationship with God. The reply comes that it is necessary for a certain sort of robustly fulfilling relationship with God. At this point in the dialectic it becomes imperative to think about the theoretical resources of theism. Perhaps God best achieves all his *current-stage* goals for us—character formation and some sense of a personal relationship with him—by putting some epistemic distance between him and us *for now*. We think a robustly fulfilling personal relationship with God is a very great good and that it requires belief that God exists. But traditional theism explains *when* this fulfilling personal relationship will obtain, viz., much later. In so far as Schellenberg's argument is an argument against theism we don't see why the agnostic should resist an appeal to the afterlife. It does not function as an added assumption but as an integral part of the Christian theistic hypothesis to which Schellenberg has brought his objection.⁴¹

⁴¹ To see that there is nothing amiss to appealing to the afterlife in the defense of theism against the problem of hiddenness, consider that Schellenberg's argument appeals to a hypothetical premise: (6) If a perfectly loving God exists, he will provide access to the benefits of a relationship with Him to all who are willing. Presumably he thinks this is a matter of necessity so we have a necessary consequence (and if God is a logically necessary being, a necessary consequent). We are simply replying here by way of indicating a possibility in which the antecedent and consequent are realized consistent with current evidence. Since Schellenberg's objection is framed in terms of what would be true if Christian theism were true, our response can do so as well.

Now it may be objected that this response still leaves it unexplained as to why God did not bring about such a relationship now. We agree and we offer the greater good defense in reply. Since this kind of reply is sufficiently attested to in the literature, we will be brief.⁴² First, it is a greater good that persons trust God than that persons merely believe that God exists.⁴³ It may be that human freedom (which is valuable itself) is not compatible with God bringing it about that everyone trust in Him. Furthermore, given this, it is plausible that it is best that God not induce belief-that he is there. Second, it may be that there are certain goods of character formation that require some epistemic distance from God. For one thing, there is the issue of authenticity in moral choices. If it were completely evident that the Supreme Moral Judge was watching everything we did, it could damage the authenticity of moral choices and arguable make certain kinds of moral virtue impossible. For another, it might make altruism impossible, since one would always know for sure that they were going to be better off in the end. Third, given the result of our argument, God can accomplish the goods pertaining to a fulfilling personal relationship with him at a later time. Consequently, we see no reason to suppose that God must bring about this kind of relationship now. Fourth, we do not want to deny that there are goods of clarity if God's existence were evident. But we also think that there are goods of mystery, goods that are more likely to be realized if God's existence is

⁴² See, for example, Swinburne *The Existence of God* 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 240-5. Also see papers in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) and *Divine Hiddenness* ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴³ This belief-that/belief-in distinction is another subtlety of belief.

not evident to everyone at all times.⁴⁴ All our argument needs at this point is that one should suspend judgment regarding the claim that God is morally obligated to bring about a fulfilling personal relationship with him now. We think there is wisdom in the worlds of Pascal here:

God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will (*Pensees* 234).

If there were no obscurity man would not feel his corruption. If there were no light man could not hope for a cure. This it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God (*Pensees* 446).

IS THIS *REALLY* FAITH?

We need to briefly treat an objection that is already in the literature. We have argued that Christian faith requires neither de dicto belief nor degree of belief greater than half (perhaps less). Louis Pojman has also advocated the thesis that Christian faith does not entail degree of belief greater than half.⁴⁵ Alexander Pruss has taken exception to this thesis, recently arguing against it.⁴⁶ We will briefly reply to his objections. He repeatedly employs a number of assumptions which we reject; so we will not argue at length, but rather state the assumptions we reject and gesture toward why.

⁴⁴ The goods of clarity/goods of mystery distinction comes from Robert McKim. He has an excellent review of Schellenberg's book in *Faith and Philosophy* 12:2 (1995): 269-277.

⁴⁵ *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), pp. 155-176.

⁴⁶ *Faith and Philosophy* 19:3 (2002), pp. 291-303.

Pruss's central thesis is that "being both fully a Christian and a moral person does require that one accept Christianity...with an epistemic probability of at least 50%."⁴⁷ A crucial lemma in defending this thesis is the claim that "sometimes there is moral conflict between Christian ethics and non-Christian ethics."⁴⁸ We find his employment of the distinction between Christian and non-Christian ethics puzzling. He does not defend this lemma other than by supposing that "[t]he Christian might think that if Christianity is false, then it is very likely that utilitarianism is true."⁴⁹ We don't accept it as obvious that what moral theory is true depends on whether there is a God, thus we don't accept it as obvious that what moral truths there are depends on whether there is a God (other than those which refer to God explicitly). We also find it plausible that moral truths are necessary truths. His first example illustrates this point. He says that a number of Christians will believe that abortion is a grave moral evil if Christianity is true, but obligatory if it is not. We are at a loss to see why this would be the case. For our own part we don't think the fundamental moral status of abortion changes even if you take God out of the picture. At any rate, without giving some reason why there not being a God would entail utilitarianism we find his lemma wanting.

Another assumption which Pruss makes which we reject is as follows: "the Christian believes that the moral weight which is had by the prohibition against φing

⁴⁷ Ibid., 292. Pruss restricts the focus to "people in fairly common contemporary epistemic predicaments." He uses the term "epistemic probability" in a non-standard way to refer to what we refer to as "subjective probability." "Epistemic probability" usually carries notions of objectivity and normativity absent in mere subjective probability.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 292-293.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 293.

under circumstances C if Christianity is false is at least as great as the moral weight which is had by the obligation to ϕ if Christianity is true.”⁵⁰ In other words, being wrong in the no-God case is just as grave as being wrong in the God case. We think this grossly underestimates the difference between obligations concerning God and obligations concerning others. We believe that obligations concerning God are of much greater weight than obligations concerning other individuals.⁵¹ We expect we are not out of the ordinary in this regard. In conclusion, we think Pruss has made implausible and undefended assumptions which he foists upon his Christian reader.⁵²

Summary/Conclusion

In the final analysis Schellenberg’s argument fails because it envisions God as requiring too much: explicit, highly confident belief. Fortunately, God is more generous. The Christian tradition attests that God will accept far less, he will “meet us where we

⁵⁰ Ibid. 294. Technically, Pruss may assume anything he wants and there may be some person that satisfies all those assumptions, but his results will not be very interesting under this interpretation. At best, it would prove that persons who hold a precise combination of implausible views are in a predicament. We find Pruss’s estimates of how many people think what to be highly speculative and probably very wide of the mark.

⁵¹ We are not obligated to say what we mean by moral weight because we inherit the intuitive notion from Pruss.

⁵² For a full-length response to Pruss, see Himma, K. “Christian Faith without Belief: A Defense of Pojman” *Faith and Philosophy*, forthcoming.

are”. “And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”⁵³ If God exists and is creator of the world, then anyone can have de re belief in him. If one values religious goods, then there is enough evidence to support rational religious faith, which does not entail high degrees of confidence. Neither de dicto belief, nor highly confident belief is necessary for one to receive the benefits of a relationship with God, a relationship which grows and develops, and benefits which will be all the sweeter for having longed for them. “And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”⁵⁴

We take divine hiddenness seriously and we think that exploring problems associated with hiddenness will yield important truths. One of those important truths is that God is gracious and the benefits he has to offer human beings can be obtained through many routes. Styles of Christianity which fail to acknowledge this will have a much harder time with Schellenberg’s argument. Another important truth brought into focus in this discussion is the importance of remembering the dynamic nature of human moral and spiritual development. We are beings which exist in time and go through many stages of development. Things will not always be as they are now. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Mark 9:24, AV

⁵⁴ Jeremiah 29:13, NKJV

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12, AV