

DOES REASONABLE NONBELIEF EXIST?

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J. L. Schellenberg's *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* claims that the existence of reflective persons who long to solve the problem of God's existence but cannot do so constitutes an evil rendering God's existence improbable. In this essay, I present Schellenberg's argument and argue that the kind of reasonable nonbelief Schellenberg needs for his argument to succeed is unlikely to exist. Since Schellenberg's argument is an inductive-style version of the problem of evil, the empirical improbability of the premise I challenge renders the conclusions derived from it empirically improbable as well.

I. Introduction

In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, J. L. Schellenberg presents a special version of the problem of evil, one that is an interesting, significant, and genuinely new contribution to the scholarship. Schellenberg's work identifies as problematic for the existence of God a variety of suffering experienced by persons who fail to believe in God, and whose failure to so believe occurs through no fault of their own. With such persons in mind, he opens *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* by claiming:

Surely a morally perfect being—good, just, loving—would show himself more clearly. Hence the weakness of our evidence for God is not a sign that God is hidden; it is a revelation that God does not exist.¹

On Schellenberg's view, a good God who could arrange it otherwise would not idly allow reflective persons who genuinely desire knowledge of God's existence to languish in uncertainty and misunderstanding. This, however, is precisely the circumstance in which many thoughtful persons find themselves: unable on the available evidence either to believe that God exists or that God does not exist. Thus, Schellenberg claims that the existence of scrupulously thoughtful

persons who long to solve the problem of God's existence but are unable to do so constitutes an evil rendering God's existence improbable.²

Schellenberg's argument is neither a mere recapitulation of worn-out claims nor a thinly veiled, unconvincing polemic. His book is an illuminating, careful work of scholarship.³ It is also subject to significant criticisms, one of which other readers of the book appear to have neglected. In what follows, I will present Schellenberg's formal argument and identify a weakness previously not exploited in the literature. Specifically, I will suggest that the kind of reasonable nonbelief Schellenberg needs for his argument to succeed does not exist.⁴

II. Schellenberg's Argument from the Reasonableness of Nonbelief

Schellenberg identifies his argument as a special instance of the empirical and not the logical problem of evil (pp. 6-9). Thus, his claim is not that the evil he identifies is logically incompatible with God's existence, but rather that it, in its degree and kind, is empirically problematic for God's existence.⁵ He offers three premises from which he derives an intermediate and a final conclusion:

- (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 occurs.
- (4) No perfectly loving God exists [(2) and (3)].
- (5) There is no God [(4) and (1)] (p. 81).

The argument is valid, and Schellenberg expresses particular satisfaction that no errors of fact arise in either the first or the third premise. It follows, he says, that the argument's soundness depends on premise two, and most of his book is devoted to defending this premise. Having identified the weakest premise, Schellenberg argues for the failure of all would-be defeaters of (2).

It seems natural to give special attention to (2), for a time-honored response to the problem of evil among theists consists in identifying goods not otherwise possible in the absence of evils. Thus, theists argue that the possibility of moral evil is outweighed by the good of genuine moral freedom, the natural evils of tornadoes and earthquakes are outweighed by the good of reliable laws of nature, etc. A predictable and perhaps successful response to Schellenberg's special instance of the problem of evil could follow this pattern, suggesting that God could not make the evidence for his existence clearer without sacrificing more important goods such as genuine cognitive and moral freedom, or an inwardness stimulated by genuine wondering about God.⁶ Schellenberg addresses the likely contenders at length, including overriding goods derived from the thought of John Hick, Richard Swinburne, Blaise Pascal, Soren Kierkegaard, and Joseph Butler, among others.⁷ I question whether he does ultimately defeat all of the relevant defeaters, especially the inscrutable goods response, which possesses strengths he appears to overlook.⁸ Nonetheless, he makes an admirable effort at defending his argument against the claim that there are goods for the sake of which God might remain hidden.

The attention devoted to (2), however, obscures the extent to which premise (3) presents problems more significant than either Schellenberg or his reviewers have supposed. To his credit, Schellenberg does not take for granted that reasonable nonbelief exists, even though he takes a position outside the vantage point of theism. Remarkably, however, both theistic and atheistic evaluators of Schellenberg's argument have devoted scant attention to questioning the existence of reasonable nonbelief, although the argument fundamentally depends upon the truth of (3). For example, J. D. Kiernan-Lewis, having summarized Schellenberg's argument that reasonable nonbelief exists, concludes "it can hardly be denied that, so construed, reasonable nonbelief in God abounds."⁹ Daniel Howard-Snyder, reflecting on Schellenberg's descriptive

characterization of reasonable nonbelief, proposes, “Each of us must consider whether we have met or reliably heard of people who fit this description. It would not be surprising if some do.”¹⁰ In a sympathetic review, Stephen Maitzen agrees that “Schellenberg quite sensibly spends most of his time arguing for [premise 2], since surely [premise 3] ought to be the far less controversial premise.”¹¹ Both Peter Byrne and Larry Lacy devote descriptive and critical attention to (2), scarcely mentioning (3) at all.

The single exception to this general approbation of (3) is Robert McKim, who approaches a critique when explaining:

Schellenberg’s view is not that God, if he existed, would announce this fact to us in a loud and unmistakable voice. A “still small voice” would do. But a lot of people report on hearing just such a voice: it is striking that the experiences he describes are just what many people claim to enjoy. More to the point, a “still small voice” could easily be ignored and could easily fail to be noticed. The more modest the nature of the experience that must be enjoyed if nonbelief is to be irrational and a personal relationship is to be possible, the more plausible it is to suggest that people actually are in this situation, even if they do not realize it: it becomes *intelligible* that they could be in such a situation, and yet not recognize it.¹²

McKim does not appropriate his observations on behalf of an argument against the truth of (3), though a case against (3) might use his analysis as a point of departure. The widespread dearth of attention to (3), in short, would suggest either that Schellenberg’s chapter-length defense of the existence of reasonable nonbelief is uncontroversial, or that resourceful criticisms of (3) remain to be developed. In what follows, I deny the former and make an initial effort to do the latter.¹³

The motivation for mounting a challenge to (3) derives from two sources. First, from the vantage point of Christian theism, well known scriptural texts have implications unfavorable to premise (3). For example, Romans 1:20 claims that:

since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

If what may be known about God is plain, how could nonbelief be reasonable? Related issues are raised by other texts, such as “I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me” (Proverbs 8:17), “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13), and Paul’s proclamation to the Athenian Greeks that God made all heaven and earth, and so constituted human beings “that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27)?¹⁴ If God in fact responds to those who earnestly seek him, then it seems that skepticism about the possibility of reasonable nonbelief is in order.¹⁵ As a consequence, understanding whether and in what ways nonbelievers may be culpable in their nonbelief presents an important problem for theists in general.

The importance of this problem holds *a fortiori* for thoughtful theists, giving rise to a second reason for deeper reflection about (3). Acquaintance with intelligent non-theistic colleagues who are earnestly committed to following the truth distresses thoughtful theists, for if (*pace* the texts above) their informed and fair reflection upon the evidence for God fails to convince them, how can we (or God) fault them? Appeals to doctrines regarding the Fall or to the noetic effects of sin seem to miss the point.¹⁶ If nonbelievers are to be faulted for their nonbelief, their failure to believe must be the result of factors for which they are somehow personally and immediately responsible.¹⁷ That colleagues of intellectual and moral integrity seem to arrive inculpably at nonbelief compounds the problem because they appear to have fulfilled *in excelsi* the condition identified above as sufficient for discovery of God. Not only have they sought God, they have conscientiously sought God, and thus appear to present troubling counterexamples to theists in a position to appreciate the sincerity and quality of their search. Understanding whether and in what ways such rationally exemplary nonbelievers may be culpable in their nonbelief represents a fundamentally important task for theists.¹⁸

III. An Argument for the Improbability of Reasonable Nonbelief

The class of persons not acknowledging that God exists is large and varied. In Schellenberg's estimation, the subclass most clearly supporting his claim in (3) is the one to which persons of the sort described above would belong. Such persons are distinguished in two ways from the general class of persons not believing in God's existence. First, showing convincingly that an individual has reasonably failed to believe in God's existence is easier if the individual has taken pains to think about the evidence. Thus, the subclass of *reflective* nonbelievers constitutes the one Schellenberg regards as illustrative of reasonable nonbelief (pp. 58-59). The subclass of reflective nonbelievers is also the one for which the evil Schellenberg identifies most clearly occurs. Reflective nonbelievers have looked sincerely and carefully, and a morally perfect God would not reward their honest seeking by continuing to hide. Second, showing convincingly that an individual has reasonably failed to believe in God's existence is easier if the individual's evaluation of the evidence seems evenhanded and fair. This is eminently true of those who modestly acknowledge significant evidence and well-developed arguments on both sides of the issue. Thus, the paradigmatic instance of reasonable nonbelief for Schellenberg arises within a subclass of those who, reflecting about the existence of God, do not acknowledge God's existence: they are not reflective disbelievers, but are reflective *nonbelievers*, neither acknowledging nor denying God's existence. While disbelievers regard the proposition "God exists" (G) as false, nonbelievers are in doubt regarding *both* its truth *and* its falsity.¹⁹ On the face of it, reflective nonbelievers, who have surveyed the evidence with exacting and impartial eyes, satisfy rigorous standards of epistemic responsibility.

Schellenberg endorses the standards of epistemic responsibility proposed by Richard Swinburne.²⁰ Inculpable nonbelief occurs if and only if the evidence, inductive standards, and beliefs regarding the probability of a proposition on the evidence have been, in the view of the subject at the time, adequately investigated. Moreover, adequate investigation depends on the subject's judgments at the time:

(a) about the importance of the issue, (b) about the closeness to 0 or 1 of the probability of his belief about the issue, (c) about the probability that investigation will achieve something, and (d) about whether he has other more important actions to do.²¹

It is within the context of this account of responsible belief-formation that Schellenberg holds that the nonbelief of at least some satisfies the conditions of adequate, and therefore inculpable, investigation.

The appearances seem to favor Schellenberg's judgment. He acknowledges that "it is perhaps not *impossible* that . . . all doubters have sinfully rejected belief, but given the circumstances, that claim is, to say the least, unlikely" (p. 82). Surely we have reason for thinking that at least one reflective nonbeliever in the history of the world adequately investigated the issue while avoiding culpable actions or omissions, especially since "adequately" is unpacked by way of individual, internal standards. What is needed, however, are examples unambiguously backing its validity. Such examples are far less easy to produce than expected. Two issues bear on the difficulty of identifying members of the class of reasonable nonbelievers: (1) the nature and scope of adequate investigation, and (2) the means of judging the adequacy of investigation. Appreciating the nature and scope of adequate investigation underscores how small the class of reflective nonbelievers is likely to be. Appreciating the difficulties of judging the adequacy of investigation highlights the difficulty of confirming claims of adequate investigation.

How one characterizes the nature and scope of “investigation” constitutes a critical issue. Under even ordinary conditions, investigation generally involves not only armchair reflection, but a search for relevant resources and evidence not currently possessed. Reflective persons whose investigative procedures are exemplary do not usually assume that all evidence is at hand, the only thing needed being an occasion to sort through its implications. They search for additional evidence, its quantity and quality depending upon the importance of the issue for which the evidence is being sought.

However, understanding the nature and scope of adequate investigation in this manner also makes clear that the class of reasonable nonbelievers is not likely to be large. After all, the number of persons who, like Descartes, realize that they possess many uncritically examined beliefs is large, but the number of persons who, again like Descartes, search for evidence for these beliefs is small. Many persons pay lip service to Socrates’ praise of the examined life, but most of them live largely unexamined lives. Lamentably, this is true even of many members of the academy. When it comes to the issue of God’s existence, meaningful investigation is the exception rather than the rule.

Regardless of how large or small the number of persons who appear to adequately investigate the issue of God’s existence is, a more serious problem bears on whether reasonable nonbelief exists: how do we judge the adequacy of a given person’s investigation? Schellenberg is sensitive to the difficulty of judging the adequacy of investigation of persons who find the evidence for God’s existence inconclusive. Because adequate investigation depends upon standards internal to the agent, whether or not these standards are met is never a matter of simple observation either for the agent or for a neutral outsider. After all, we can certainly deceive

others about whether we have fulfilled our epistemic responsibilities properly, and worse yet, we can deceive ourselves through rationalizations, qualifications, and excuses.

Because the possibilities of deception and self-deception are ever present, Schellenberg suggests factors the absence or presence of which tend to make such possibilities more or less likely. Where G is the proposition that God exists, he maintains:

S is inculpably in doubt about the truth of G if (1) S believes that epistemic parity obtains between G and not-G, and (2) S has not knowingly (self-deceptively or non-self-deceptively) neglected to submit this belief to adequate investigation (p. 64).

Granted that we accept something like Swinburne's principle of testimony, Schellenberg believes we may assume (1) unproblematically if S reports this state of mind to us.²² However, in the case of (2), Schellenberg points out that the testimony of S requires supplementary, confirming evidence because of the possibilities of self-deception. He concludes that while doubt may prevail as regards (2) in some cases, "it seems equally clear that in certain circumstances a judgment in favor of the subject would be appropriate" (p. 65). What are these circumstances? Schellenberg suggests a combination of the following qualities: exemplary investigative procedure, great expenditure of time and energy, honesty in other situations, love for truth, rational self-control, and crucially, desire to have the issue responsibly settled. The bottom line for our ideal reasonable nonbeliever requires that "he will arrive at a parity belief only *reluctantly* and, therefore, only if careful attention to the matter seems to him to leave him with no other option" (p. 66).²³

In setting the bar so high, however, Schellenberg appears to have reduced to miniscule numbers the already small class of persons who appear to investigate adequately the issue of God's existence. Nonetheless, he might rightly claim that one instance of reasonable nonbelief is enough to make (3) true, and thus sufficient for the argument to work. Unfortunately, the

presence of exemplary investigative procedure, honesty in other situations, love for truth, etc., does not render a judgment about the adequacy of investigation straightforward and uncontroversial. After all, one can give the appearance of exemplary investigative procedure without the reality of it. One can seem a generally honest person without being one. One can speak about a love for truth without being committed to truth. In short, the presence of each of these qualities, whether individually or jointly, can be both deceptively and self-deceptively instantiated, i.e., not really instantiated at all.²⁴

To make matters worse, none of these qualities comes packaged as all-or-nothing attributes. One can devote more or less time and energy to an issue. One can more or less rationally control oneself. One's investigation can be more or less exemplary. If the presence of such qualities were to render possible a favorable judgment as to the adequacy of investigation, how much of each quality would be requisite? A general tendency to instantiate the quality? How often? With what exceptions? All the time? It seems that if the presence of these qualities were to make possible an affirmative judgment as to the trustworthiness and hence adequacy of investigation, they would have to be present to a very high degree. If this is so, though, the pool of verifiably reasonable nonbelievers will be small indeed, and I suspect nonexistent.

More importantly, a problem remains even if one were to grant the improbability of these qualities occurring to a sufficiently high degree in a person who nonetheless deceptively or self-deceptively failed to pursue an adequate investigation. The problem is that the very traits which give good cause for believing in the adequacy of one's investigation—passion for truth, anxiety when in doubt, intense desire for a well-justified belief, whatever it may be—make eminently improbable a commitment to evidential parity. The intensity and single-mindedness of Pascal is an example of the sort of person Schellenberg has in mind, and for such a person “the parity

view is to be arrived at *after all alternatives have been exhausted*' (p. 68, emphasis mine).

Would a person possessing the intellectual and character virtues to which Schellenberg appeals ever judge that all alternatives are exhausted and foreclose their inquiry?

Consideration of a few persons apparently possessing the attributes identified by Schellenberg suggests that foreclosure of inquiry constitutes an unthinkable option. Pascal bears this out: "My whole heart strains to know what the true good is in order to pursue it: no price would be too high to pay for eternity."²⁵ Socrates exemplifies a similar commitment in confessing: "While I have life and strength I shall never cease from practicing and teaching a passion for wisdom."²⁶ Someone with an abiding passion for the truth will not be deterred from persistent inquiry by an evidential impasse. Such persons will not be content with the position of evidential parity. In terms of Swinburne's criteria and the issue of God's existence, an individual who (a) believes that the issue of God's existence of highest importance, (b) perceives his present evidence as equally favoring belief or nonbelief, (c) feels compelled to leave no stone unturned in the search for decisive evidence, and (d) pursues no more important obligations could never give up.

Accordingly, Schellenberg's dilemma is that in order to make convincing his claim that inculpable, reasonable nonbelief actually occurs, he must show that it is instantiated in persons possessing these high virtues, persons for whom the possibility of deception or self-deception is negligible. However, the more such traits coincide, and the more clearly they are exemplified, the less tenable becomes the notion that evidential parity could appeal to such a person. As the virtues he identifies diminish in intensity, the acceptability of evidential parity for an individual becomes more likely, but the possibility of deception or self-deception also increases, problematizing claims to inculpable nonbelief. Thus, there appears to be an inverse relationship

between the factors providing evidence of honest seeking and one's willingness to be satisfied with the parity position.

In short, I maintain that adequate investigation is the exception rather than the rule, that claims of adequate investigation cannot be confirmed through the presence of the factors identified by Schellenberg, and that these factors, when genuinely present, would not result in the satisfaction with evidential parity characteristic of nonbelief. To the contrary, the presence of these factors would result in a persistent, continued seeking until one achieved resolution one way or the other. These arguments undermine Schellenberg's position in an important way. The standards established to ward off charges of insincere or shoddy investigation render improbable the parity position giving rise to (3), and since the argument as a whole constitutes an inductive-style version of the problem of evil, the empirical improbability of (3) renders the conclusions derived from it empirically improbable as well.

IV. Objections and Replies

One objection available to Schellenberg is that he did not intend his nuanced characterization of the parity view to suggest a static epistemic state. Qualifications such as “no other option” and “after all alternatives have been exhausted” do appear to express necessary conditions for the inculpable doubt he is attempting to describe. Further, these conditions do seem to imply the impossibility of searching for further evidence. Nevertheless, perhaps we could regard reasonable nonbelief as a more dynamic epistemic state than these qualifications imply. If reasonable nonbelief involved a kind of temporary reflective equilibrium respecting the affirmation and the denial of God’s existence, and yet the inquirer remained earnestly desirous of new evidence, would the argument be better off?

If this is what reasonable nonbelief means, one might avoid the final dilemma that I discussed above, but the intractable problems of judging the adequacy of investigation remain. In addition, if this is what reasonable nonbelief means, it becomes less than clear that it constitutes an evil preclusive of God’s existence. After all, if one really is not satisfied with the parity position, presumably one continues the search for new information that will break the evidential logjam in favor of an answer to the question of God’s existence. There is nothing problematic about looking for evidence to settle a question, and for obvious reasons, God, if he exists, might not foreclose someone’s ongoing and free inquiry.²⁷ This holds particularly if evidence sufficient to produce belief in God were already in principle available, the only thing lacking being the discovery or consideration of this evidence. So long as genuine seekers are likely to come into such evidence, morally justifiable reasons for allowing independent inquiry and evaluation of it seem available to God.

More significantly, according to the testimony of many believers, evidence from religious experience sufficient to produce belief in God does in fact exist. Indeed, Schellenberg claims that those who believe in God's existence believe not merely (if at all) because of the *public* evidence for God's existence, but because of *private* evidence gained through religious experience (p. 73).²⁸ Further, he is open to the evidential value of religious experience for those who have it. He defines "evidence" broadly as referring "not only to propositions that provide the basis for deductive and inductive inference but also to nonpropositional, experiential evidence in which belief may be directly (noninferentially) grounded" (p. 33). In making his case that a "stronger epistemic situation" regarding the existence of God is possible, he even seems to prefer the universality of private religious experience to clearer public evidence as an effective means of grounding belief in God (p. 48).

However, Schellenberg insists on the limitations of religious experience for producing belief in God as it presently occurs. Religious experience may provide (private) evidence sufficient for belief in God for the person having the requisite experience. Unfortunately, the (public) evidential value of a person's religious experience and its sufficiency for other persons' belief in God are not clear. Because Schellenberg believes the available public evidence is insufficient to justify God's existence, private religious experience appears not only to be sufficient but also necessary for evidentially justified belief in God. Thus, it seems that because some apparently sincere seekers do not have the religious experience requisite for belief, some apparently sincere seekers are barred from evidentially justified belief in God.²⁹

Worse yet, adding what Schellenberg regards as an uncontroversial claim to the foregoing creates a dilemma that makes denying the existence of reasonable nonbelief even more difficult. Persons who do not believe in the existence of God seem unlikely to have the kind of

religious experience generative of evidentially justified belief in God. This appears to follow from Schellenberg's assertion that

I cannot love God, be grateful to God, or contemplate God's goodness unless I believe that there is a God. . . . It is not as though someone who cannot be grateful to God or praise God because she does not believe there is a God could do so if only she *tried* a little harder. Such attitudes and actions are not just contingently difficult but *logically impossible* for one who does not believe that God exists (p. 30).

Thus, it would seem that I too face a dilemma: evidentially justified belief in God requires religious experience that can noninferentially ground one's belief, but susceptibility to religious experience generative of evidentially justified belief in God requires that one believe in God. Because Schellenberg maintains that "one cannot add to one's beliefs just by choosing to (since belief is involuntary)" (p. 30), the nonbelieving seeker seems barred from enjoying the private religious experience that believers claim resolves the ambiguity of the public evidence regarding God's existence. One cannot be held culpable for what one cannot do, and since one cannot believe in God in the absence of religious experience and one cannot have religious experience in the absence of belief in God, Schellenberg would appear justified in believing that reasonable nonbelief exists.

One might respond to this dilemma by again invoking the problems of deception and self-deception raised above. If one may be deceiving and self-deceiving in judging the adequacy of one's investigation, might not one also be deceiving and self-deceiving about the nature of one's beliefs and the character of one's experiences? In fact, one may be deceiving and self-deceiving both in one's claim of nonbelief in God and in one's claim to lack an awareness of God noninferentially grounded in religious experience.³⁰ Although I do not see how one can escape this problem, a further response seems appropriate.

Schellenberg's argument on behalf of reasonable nonbelief depends in part upon an assumption he explicitly adopts. This is the assumption that belief is involuntary. He believes belief cannot be voluntary because:

If we could decide to "believe" where formerly we had not, and our decisions were immediately efficacious, we would know that our "beliefs" were the result of decisions and not determined by how things are. But in that case we would not have any reason to suppose that what we "believed" was true and so would not really believe (pp. 9-10).

He further asserts that a "majority of contemporary philosophers" would concede the involuntary nature of belief (p. 9), and thus regards his assumption as appropriate. I believe, however, that arguments favoring the involuntary nature of belief only succeed with qualifications, and these qualifications mitigate the problem of religious experience requiring belief in God and belief in God requiring religious experience.

For one thing, even supposing belief is largely involuntary, one's actions surely are not. But if one has voluntary control over one's actions, one has voluntary control over some of the conditions that give rise to belief. Even if one's beliefs are outside of one's direct control, one can nevertheless control such things as looking for new evidence, attending more or less carefully to one's evidence, and associating with persons or environments committed to intellectual virtue. Thus, even if one cannot be faulted for holding particular beliefs, one can be faulted for the actions giving rise to one's beliefs. If this were not so, all talk of culpably or inculpably held belief would be out of place. Since Schellenberg plainly regards epistemic responsibility as a meaningful subject of consideration, he must accept an account of the relation between belief and action along these lines.³¹

When discussing participation in the kinds of actions presumably generative of religious experience, however, he appears to extend the scope of what is involuntary beyond beliefs to

include actions and attitudes as well. In particular, he regards actions and attitudes expressive of gratitude toward, love for, and praise of God as impossible without belief in God. These “attitudes and actions are not just contingently difficult but *logically impossible* for one who does not believe that God exists” (p. 30). If this were so, though, since one’s belief cannot be controlled, and one’s actions and attitudes depend on one’s beliefs, one’s actions and attitudes could not be controlled either. However, given the rejection of a thoroughgoing determinism, one’s actions and attitudes can be controlled (though naturally control comes in degrees and may be either direct or indirect). By *modus tollens*, therefore, either one’s belief can be controlled (and thus one’s actions and attitudes can be controlled as well), or if one’s belief cannot be controlled, the relation between belief, action, and attitude is other than Schellenberg appears to imply.

A promising alternative means of relating belief and action arises within the pragmatic tradition, though similar accounts are also found among virtue ethicists. On this view, belief involves a disposition to act in accordance with one’s belief, and action involves a disposition to believe in accordance with one’s action. However, because dispositions involve tendencies rather than necessities, one can act in ways different from those to which one’s beliefs dispositionally tend, and one can form beliefs different from those to which one’s actions dispositionally tend.³² If this is so, it is possible to explain how one might engage in actions expressive of gratitude toward, love for, and praise of God in the absence of belief that God exists. Actions of this sort might include doing the sorts of things typical of persons whose sincerity of belief in and commitment to God are widely acknowledged among the community of believers, such as meditating on scripture, receiving communion, forgiving others, practicing

humility, admiring creation and so forth. Whether or not one believes in God, one can engage in these actions, and actions of this sort express love, worship, and praise of God.

One could object that no one would have reason to engage in these actions unless one believed in God. However, the nonbelieving seeker who desires religious experience appears to have good reasons to engage in these actions, because they represent actions that, on the testimony of those having religious experience, foster religious experience. After all, consider the manner in which belief in God is typically instantiated. Christians do not usually believe in God through simple armchair consideration of the intellectual evidence for God's existence. (Nor do most persons come to any of their beliefs through simple armchair reflection.) Neither do Christians usually come to believe in God through powerful religious experiences that strike them out the blue. What has proven fruitful in developing a relationship with God is an interested and ongoing participation in the kerygmatic and didactic life of the Church. Knowing God indeed comes through experiencing God, but in general, Christian experiences of God are mediated through the Church and the collective life of the people of God. If it is experience of God that is needed, a genuine and patient willingness to enter into relation with and learn from those who claim both experience and knowledge of God is also needed.³³ Dismissing participation in actions conducive to belief in God reflects an untenable conception of the relation between action and belief, and fails to appreciate the cooperative, communal, and experiential dimensions of ecclesial life in particular, and of belief-formation in general.

One could further object that engaging in these actions constitutes a nonrational and nonevidential effort to self-induce belief in God. Richard Gale, lumping both James and Pascal together, writes:

Although James and Pascal have radically different conceptions of God, they agree that in principle we cannot have an adequate epistemic justification for

belief in God. Therefore, the methods that our causal recipes for self-inducing faith prescribe are nonrational ones, for instance, “taking the holy water, having masses said,” and the like, as opposed to examination of arguments and evidence.³⁴

Schellenberg is sympathetic to this, offering a summary response to nonevidentialism near the end of his book:

On this view, one is pragmatically (as opposed to evidentially) justified in believing that there is a God if one has legitimate ends the pursuit of which is facilitated by such belief, and if the question of God’s existence cannot be settled on evidential grounds. Now it will be apparent that if the argument we have considered succeeds, nonevidentialism is, if not false, irrelevant. For if that argument is correct, “the question of God’s existence cannot be settled on evidential grounds” represents an impossible state of affairs, and so what is according to nonevidentialism a necessary condition of justifiably believing in God on pragmatic grounds can never be realized. Any apparent inconclusiveness in the evidence must, if that argument succeeds, itself be taken as a consideration (evidentially) justifying the conclusion that God does not exist (pp. 211-212).

However, both Gale and Schellenberg fail to do justice to genuine issues lingering in the area.

Most crucially, they fail to see that participating in the kinds of actions that on the testimony of believers are conducive to experientially grounded belief in God may well be neither nonrational nor nonevidential. For example, such actions need not be nonrational given affirmative judgments about the apparent trustworthiness of the believers enjoining them, the ability to engage in them without contradicting other beliefs or commitments, etc. Additionally such actions need not be nonevidential if they are engaged in precisely because of their conduciveness to religious experience, which is clearly a form of private evidence for belief. Thus, engaging in these actions can be both rationally and evidentially motivated.

Consequently, two responses appear available to the objection that evidentially justified belief in God requires religious experience, but religious experience requires belief in God. First, the problems of deception and self-deception also apply to the nature of one’s beliefs and the character of one’s experiences. Second, the involuntariness of belief does not preclude

voluntarily engaging in actions likely to produce religious experiences according to the testimony of those whose evidentially justified belief in God was so produced. It follows that nonbelief in God does not necessarily preclude the possibility of actions conducive to experientially grounded belief in God, and hence the possibility of belief in God.

V. Conclusion

In an illuminating passage cited by Schellenberg, Pascal identifies a fundamental issue underlying the question of the existence of reasonable nonbelief:

The obscurity in which they [i.e., religious skeptics] find themselves, and which they use as an objection against the Church, simply establishes one of the things the Church maintains [viz., that God has hidden himself so only those who seek with all their heart will find him] without affecting the other [viz., that those who *do* genuinely seek will be satisfied], and far from proving his teaching false, confirms it.

In order really to attack the truth they would have to protest that they had made *every effort* to seek it *everywhere*, even in what the Church offers by way of instruction, but without any satisfaction. *If they talked like that*, they would indeed be attacking one of Christianity's claims.³⁵

Pascal was confident that anyone who genuinely sought God would find Him well before they reached the end of their search, and I am inclined to agree. I believe the difficulties I raise for Schellenberg's claim that reasonable nonbelief exists provide good reason for questioning the soundness of his argument. Nonetheless, Schellenberg succeeds in what he expresses as his primary aim: "to show the importance of the argument from the reasonableness of nonbelief for the philosophy of religion" (p. 213).³⁶

NOTES

1. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 1. References to this work will henceforth be made parenthetically.
2. Schellenberg is concerned with the condition of nonbelief which one should distinguish from disbelief, discussed in further detail below.
3. See, for example, the following uniformly appreciative reviews: Peter Byrne, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 570-571, “the definitive study to date of its subject”; Daniel Howard-Snyder, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *Mind* 104 (1995): 430-35, a “tightly argued, superbly crafted and religiously sensitive book”; Larry Lacy, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40 (1996), 121-124, “a very important [work], one which theists must take seriously and to which they must seek to respond”; Stephen Maitzen, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *The Philosophical Review* 104 (1995): 153-156, a “painstaking, well-argued, and sympathetic treatment”; and Robert McKim, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 269-277, a “carefully argued, well constructed, clearly written, and original book.”
4. On Schellenberg’s account, “reasonable nonbelief” is defined by way of the fulfillment of epistemic responsibilities, and thus “reasonable nonbelief” and “inculpable nonbelief” are synonyms. He writes, “Nonbelief is reasonable . . . if and only if it is not the result of culpable actions or omissions on the part of the subject” (p. 3, n. 2). It is worth noting at the outset that the sort of reasonable nonbelief Schellenberg describes emerges out of an internalist epistemology, and I will address the issue in those terms. Whether the answer to my title would differ given an

externalist epistemology is a provocative question. On this matter, Michael Czapkay Sudduth answers the title of his recent essay positively. See “Can Religious Unbelief Be Proper Function Rational?” *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 297-314. Also see David Reiter, “Calvin’s ‘Sense of Divinity’ and Externalist Knowledge of God,” *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 253-270.

5. He charitably concludes *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* by conceding, “it may be that new evidence will turn up” (p. 214). However, in the absence of new evidence, Schellenberg believes that the kind and degree of evil he identifies is sufficient to imply “that individuals who doubt or weakly believe must, if they accept this argument, come to believe that there is no God, and that even those who consider themselves to be in possession of strong independent grounds for belief in the existence of God ought to take it seriously, and seek to answer it or to acquire additional grounds for belief” (p. 213).

6. John Hick argues that cognitive freedom is a necessary condition for moral freedom. On this view, if God were to make the evidence for his existence indubitable, humans could not *choose* to pursue a personal relationship with God. The power of God’s full presence to us would compel us to submit to him. Thus, our morally free response to God requires that we are free cognitively to believe or not believe, and such cognitive freedom is possible only with some measure of divine hiddenness. Schellenberg quotes Hick (p. 106):

To know God is to know oneself as standing in a subordinate relationship to a higher Being and to acknowledge the claims of that being upon the whole range of one’s life. The act of will or the state of willingness and consent by which one adopts the religious mode of apperception is accordingly also an act of obedience or a willingness to obey. Thus although belief in the reality of God, and a practical trust and obedience toward him, must be distinguished in thought, they occur together and depend closely upon one another: *fides* and *fiducia* are two elements in a single whole, which is man’s awareness of the divine (John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1988], pp. 143-144).

In a more literary vein, C. S. Lewis has Uncle Screwtape explain to his apprentice devil

Wormwood:

You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses and at any moment. But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will (as His felt presence in any but the faintest and most mitigated degree would certainly do) would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve (C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* [New York: Macmillan, 1948], p. 46).

Likewise, scientist-theologian John Polkinghorne writes:

If there is a God he is a hidden God. He does not make himself known unambiguously in acts of transparent significance, invariably preserving those who trust him from every misfortune and regularly restraining and punishing the acts of transgressors. . . . If man has been given independence so that he may freely choose his response to God, then this elusive character seems necessary in One whose infinite presence, totally disclosed, would overwhelm our finite being (John Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986], p. 26).

7. Schellenberg's perspicuous, extended consideration of would-be defeaters of (2) is in Howard-Snyder's words a "treasure-trove. Nowhere is there a comparable systematic, rigorous, intricate, rich, and sensitive examination of a plethora of such reasons" why God, if existing, might remain hidden (p. 433).

8. Howard-Snyder (p. 432) and Lacy (pp. 123-124) offer critical analyses of Schellenberg's treatment of the inscrutable goods response developed by Stephen Wykstra.

9. J. D. Kiernan-Lewis, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *The Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 295.

10. Howard-Snyder, p. 431. Howard-Snyder also offers a marginally longer treatment of this

issue, reaching the same conclusion, in “The Argument from Divine Hiddenness,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 437-438.

11. Maitzen, p. 154.

12. McKim, pp. 275-276.

13. Schellenberg does anticipate at some length the Calvinian response that “a form of private evidence *has* been made available to *everyone*, and that where it has not brought about belief in God’s existence, this is because of the sinful resistance of the nonbeliever” (pp. 73-74). He devotes his attention briefly to quotes from John Calvin and Alvin Plantinga, and more extensively to Mark Talbot’s essay “Is It Natural to Believe in God?” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 155-171. I suspect some solid responses to Schellenberg’s rejection of Talbot’s position could be developed, though it is not my intention to do so here. It may be that an awareness of God’s reality is universal due to something like Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*, and that those who doubt God’s existence culpably doubt. Whether or not this is true, my claim in what follows is that (taking Schellenberg on his own terms) we have no good reason to think that reasonable nonbelief of the sort relevant for Schellenberg’s argument occurs, because the high standards he is forced to endorse to make nonbelief inculpable render a commitment to nonbelief improbable.

14. One finds promises of responsiveness to seekers of God throughout scripture. An initial catalogue includes Deuteronomy 4:29; 1 Chronicles 28:9; 2 Chronicles 7:14; 2 Chronicles 15:2, 12; Psalm 9:10; Psalm 14:12; Psalm 34:10; Psalm 53:2; Proverbs 8:17; Proverbs 28:5; Jeremiah 29:13; Hosea 10:12; Amos 5:14; Matthew 6:33; Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9; Luke 12:31; Acts 17:27; and Hebrews 11:6. Very few texts qualify God’s responsiveness to seekers in any significant way. Texts which do qualify God’s responsiveness include Isaiah 55:6 and Hosea 5:6,

15; in these cases God's responsiveness is potentially limited because of conspicuous deficiencies in the sincerity of the seekers.

15. I take the logical implication of these claims to be something like the conditional, "If one earnestly seeks God, then one will find God." It would be easy, but inappropriately dismissive, to claim by *modus tollens* that the negation of the consequent implies the negation of the antecedent—that one's not finding God implies that one did not seek God in the requisite way. While ultimately I accept a form of this conclusion, it is not obviously or unqualifiedly true precisely because some apparently sincere seekers do not find God. Thus, theists need an account satisfactorily reconciling the logical implications of these texts with the counter-evidential status of apparently reasonable nonbelievers.

16. See Stephen K. Moroney, "How Sin Affects Scholarship: A New Model," *Christian Scholar's Review* 28 (1999): 432-451 for an excellent analysis of the much neglected issue of the noetic effects of sin. A fuller treatment appears in his *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

17. Aristotle's remarks about praise and blame's dependence upon voluntary control ring true: "Virtue, then, is about feelings and actions. These receive praise or blame when they are voluntary, but pardon, sometimes pity, when they are involuntary" (*Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985], 1109b30). I recognize that Aristotle here speaks only of feelings and actions and not of beliefs. I will comment below on the extent to which voluntary factors may impinge upon belief-formation.

18. Further compounding the importance of this problem for theistic scholars is the notoriously

unpersuasive nature of the various theological arguments, even for many believers favorably inclined toward them. Whether or not in fact any of these arguments are sound and should persuade (which I leave open), they clearly have the reputation of unpersuasiveness. Such a reputation undermines their *prima facie* credibility. In this vein, Schellenberg cites several Christian theologians and philosophers willing to concede the epistemic ambiguity of the arguments for and against God's existence, including William Alston, Stephen Davis, John Hick, Eberhart Jüngel, George Lindbeck, John Macquarrie, George Mavrodes, James McClendon, Thomas Morris, Alvin Plantinga, and Karl Rahner (pp. 69-74).

19. As Schellenberg describes them, "Individuals who are in doubt . . . are uncertain about the truth of this proposition, believing neither G nor not-G, typically as a consequence of believing that epistemic parity obtains between G and its denial" (p. 59).

20. Though arguing on behalf of another, more stringent theory of rational responsibility might further problematize Schellenberg's position, I do not do so here for two reasons. First, Swinburne's account is widely accepted, and as far as accounts of epistemological duties go, seems compelling. Second, I have reasons for doubting the existence of nonbelievers fulfilling the Swinburnian account of responsibility adopted by Schellenberg. Rather than further complicating the issues by appealing to a different standard, I aim to show the culpability of nonbelievers on the account Schellenberg accepts.

21. Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 53; quoted in Schellenberg, p. 61.

22. Schellenberg presents Swinburne's principle of testimony as the position "that (in the absence of special considerations) the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them"

(Swinburne, *The Existence of God* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], p. 272); quoted in Schellenberg, p. 64, n. 13. Of course there very well may be special circumstances involved in reports about belief in the epistemic parity of G and not-G, such as those suggested in note 13, that would challenge Schellenberg's claim that such reports should be accepted at face value.

23. Howard-Snyder concurs with this analysis, writing that "it seems reasonable to believe that it is likely that some or perhaps even a great many people . . . fail to believe [God] exists through no fault of their own. How could we be reasonably sure of this? Because some people seem to have investigated the matter in an inculpable fashion, and yet remain agnostic. How do we know this? Well, we may have been privy to their investigation, or they may tell us of it, and we may judge that it is exemplary. But how can we be reasonably sure that they are not self-deceived . . . or culpable in some hidden way? Such questions are difficult to answer, but we are not completely in the dark" ("The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," pp. 437-438). Whether they are generally honest, interested in truth even when to their detriment, determined to resolve the issue, and desirous to achieve belief in God all factor significantly in Howard-Snyder's judgment of such persons. As what follows makes clear, I believe the difficulty of answering these questions really does leave us in the dark.

In addition, another question further complicates such judgments: how can we be reasonably sure that *we* are not self-deceived or culpable in some hidden way when judging the adequacy of another's investigation? Bas van Fraassen addresses this last question when observing, "Beside the problems we have now about the very possibility of defining the conditions under which 'He deceives himself' is true, there are also strong doubts about whether (if there are such conditions) we could ever have adequate reason for thinking they obtain. . . .

Once the possibility of self-deception is taken seriously it undermines all stories (about oneself, but also one's own stories about others), including those that attribute self-deception. We are in a quandary, personal as well as philosophical" ("The Peculiar Effects of Love and Desire," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, eds. Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988], p. 135).

24. The extent to which we have the capacity to deceive ourselves constitutes a worry we too often (self-deceptively) dismiss. Friedrich Nietzsche bookends the first section of his preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals* by writing, "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. . . . So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law 'Each is furthest from himself' applies to all eternity—we are not 'men of knowledge' with respect to ourselves" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale [New York: Random House, 1967], p. 15). The Christian tradition frequently expresses an intensified concern with the same problem. Augustine, for example, writes, "For though no one can know a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him, there are some things in man which even his own spirit within him does not know" (*Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin [New York: Penguin, 1961], X.5).

25. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, A. J. Krailsheimer, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), fragment 429, p. 163; quoted in Schellenberg, p. 141.

26. Plato, *Apology* 29d.

27. Schellenberg addresses some of these reasons in connection with (2). Rather than pushing evaluation of the argument's success back to (2), I only intend to suggest here that redefining the

nature of reasonable nonbelief might get Schellenberg out of one difficulty I raise for (3) but at the cost of potentially weakening his position with respect to (2).

28. Public evidence is “evidence which is in principle available to everyone equally, (typically) reported in the premises of the various theistic and atheistic arguments” (p. 71). Personal religious experience is private evidence because while personal religious experience of some kind might be available in principle to everyone equally, no person’s subjective religious experience is available in principle to anyone else. Of course even with respect to evidence generally regarded as “public,” it remains true that no person’s subjective experience of the evidence is available to anyone else. I cannot “see” a grove of trees in the same subjectively experienced way that anyone else does, but as long as we all see the grove, we regard it as a public experience. As a result, I have some suspicion about the neat compartmentalization of public and private evidence for God’s existence.

29. This is a claim about the actual world. Religious experience need not be necessarily connected to evidentially justified belief in God in other possible worlds.

30. See notes 22 and 13 above.

31. Louis P. Pojman offers a well-developed account in “Believing, Willing, and the Ethics of Belief” in Pojman, ed., *The Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wadsworth, 1999), pp. 573-592.

32. My description of the non-necessitarian relation between belief and action is important, for as Richard M. Gale observes, William James wrongly commits “himself at a minimum to the doctrine that there is a one-to-one correspondence between belief and sets of actions” because “it is obvious that there is no one-to-one correspondence between beliefs and actions” (*On the*

Nature and Existence of God [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991], pp. 366-367).

33. For an instructive essay related to this discussion, see Terrence W. Tilley, "The Institutional Element in Religious Experience," *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 185-213.

34. Gale, p. 369.

35. Pascal, fragment 427, p. 155; quoted in Schellenberg, p. 143 (Schellenberg's emphases).

36. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the biennial meeting of the Baptist Association of Philosophy Teachers, September 25-27, 1998 in New Orleans, Louisiana, and at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, April 22-24, 1999 in Birmingham, Alabama. I appreciate the helpful suggestions of participants of these meetings. I have benefited especially from the comments of Shawn Floyd, Manning Garrett, Jim Helpers, Larry Lacy, Caleb Miller, Steve Moroney, Jeff Polet, John Post, Jeff Tiel, William Wainwright, and anonymous referees for the journal.