

Divine openness and creaturely non-resistant non-belief

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Abstract. We might be tempted to think that, necessarily, if God unsurpassably loves such created persons as there may be, then for any capable created person S and time t , God is at t *open* to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with S at t , where one is open to relationship with another only if one never does anything (by commission or omission) that would have the result that the other was prevented from being able, just by trying, to participate in that relationship. I argue that we should resist the temptation.

Key words: love, divine hiddenness, non-resistant non-belief, God, atheism, Schellenberg

We can view divine hiddenness in at least two very different ways. On the one hand, we can view it as evidence against the existence of God and, on the other hand, we can view it as partly constitutive of our relationship with God, insofar as we assume that we are in a relationship with God. There are connections between viewing divine hiddenness in these two ways, connections we might systematically map. My aim here is much more modest. I aim to assess a version of the argument from divine hiddenness for atheism, as it is sometimes called. I hope, however, that what I have to say might provide some idea as to how at least some of us might understand and be at peace with the hiddenness of God, insofar as we assume that we are in a relationship with God. Before I turn to my task, some preliminary remarks are in order.

First, “divine hiddenness” misnames that to which the argument by that name appeals. It sounds as though it moves from the premise that there is a God who is hidden to the conclusion that there is no God. Nobody argues like that. Rather, the idea is that if there is a God, there are

no reasonable non-believers, or inculpable non-believers, or non-resistant non-believers (all of these terms have been used); but there are, and so there's no God.

Second, perfect-being theologians agree that God, whatever the details, is an unsurpassably good personal being. I am a perfect-being theologian. However, unlike many of my kind, I posit unsurpassable love as the most central feature of an unsurpassably good personal being, a feature that constrains all other features that an unsurpassably good personal being must have. Thus, for example, *if* God unsurpassably loves such created persons as there may be only if God is unable to do certain things, and *if* God is omnipotent only if God is able to do those things, I infer that God is not omnipotent. Does it follow that, on my view, God is a bit of a wimp? No, it only follows that omnipotence is not the best way to understand the power of God. Perhaps almightiness is a better way, where at a first approximation, what it is for a person to be unsurpassably almighty is for her to be the source of every power of every possible being other than herself. Fortunately, nothing in what follows hangs on my idiosyncratic theology. I mention it only to stress from the outset that, as will soon be evident, the argument I will discuss targets the heart of my view.

Third, I bring three assumptions to my task. (i) The argument from divine hiddenness is independent of other arguments for atheism, notably the argument from evil and the argument from suboptimality. If an adequate defense of the argument from divine hiddenness must appeal to the conclusion that God would not allow bad things of a certain sort, or if it must appeal to the conclusion God would never do less than the best God could do, then the success of the argument from divine hiddenness depends on the success of the arguments for these other conclusions, arguments that are failures, to my mind. I'm interested in an argument from divine hiddenness that isn't, by my lights, a failure from the outset. (ii) If there is a God, then each

created person will live forever. This implies that, for human creatures, and perhaps others too, their “earthly life,” as we sometimes call it, is just an infinitesimal portion of their existence. (iii) Each created person will at some time enter into, and from that time onwards maintain, a positively meaningful, reciprocal conscious relationship with God that will be evident to all concerned.

With these remarks in mind, let’s turn to the argument from divine hiddenness.

I will focus on a version of the argument recently put forward by J. L. Schellenberg, one that features non-resistant non-belief and a certain sort of openness to a certain sort of relationship. He puts it like this:

The Argument from Nonresistant Nonbelief

- (1) Necessarily, if God exists, then God unsurpassably loves such created persons as there may be.
- (2) Necessarily, if God unsurpassably loves such created persons as there may be, then for any capable created person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with S at t.
- (3) Necessarily, if for any capable created person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with S at t, then for any capable created person S and time t, it is not the case that S is at t in a state of non-resistant non-belief viz-a-viz the proposition that God exists.
- (4) There is at least one capable created person S and time t such that S is or was at t in a state of non-resistant non-belief viz-a-viz the proposition that God exists.
- (5) Therefore, God does not exist.¹

¹ Schellenberg 2015, xxx-xxx. I have deviated in one respect from Schellenberg’s statement of his argument. Where I have used “created persons” Schellenberg uses “finite persons”. Since I don’t understand “finite” as a predicate

What should we make of this argument?

The conclusion formally follows from the premises and, as I have already said, I think premise (1) is true. I will also grant premise (4). Before we can assess whether the remaining premises are true, we must understand them. Since I mean to engage Schellenberg, I will tend to what he has to say about its central concepts and I will do so as I summarize his reasons for believing premises 2 and 3.

So then: suppose God unsurpassably loves a created person, call her *Anna*. How might we characterize that love? At a minimum, it must involve *benevolence*, says Schellenberg, caring for Anna's well-being. But it involves much more. God unsurpassably loves Anna, says Schellenberg, only if God aims "at relationship—a conscious and reciprocal relationship that is positively meaningful, allowing for a deep sharing" between them. Moreover, if God unsurpassably loves Anna, God will value that relationship *for its own sake*, and not merely for the sake of something else. Furthermore, if God unsurpassably loves Anna, then God must *always* love her, and so God must always value, seek, desire, promote, or preserve personal relationship with her, although God will not force himself on her. At the very least, all this requires that God will always be *open* to personal relationship with her.²

This notion of openness to personal relationship with those who are *capable* of it—that is, with those who possess "the cognitive and affective properties required to [participate in such relationship]," which, in the case of God, "would involve such things as a capacity to feel the

applied to persons, I don't understand any premise that uses "finite persons," which means I don't understand any of Schellenberg's actual premises. But I do understand "created" as a predicate applied to persons; at least I understand it much better than "finite". So I have substituted the former for the latter. Also, where he uses "personal relationship," I substitute his more informative "positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship".

² Schellenberg 2015, xxxxx.

presence of God, recognizing it as such; a capacity to exhibit attitudes of trust, gratitude, and obedience to God, and so on”—is crucial. Here’s what Schellenberg says about it:

If one is always open in the sense I intend then, even if one does not actively seek or promote personal relationship with another person capable of participating in such relationship..., one makes sure that there is nothing one ever does (in a broad sense including omissions) that would have the result of making such relationship *unavailable* to the other, preventing her from being able to relate personally to one, even should she then try. So for God to always be open to personal relationship with a capable created person such as Anna in a manner expressing unsurpassable love is for God to ensure that there is never something *God* does that prevents her from being able, just by trying, to participate in personal relationship with God.... *She* may not want relationship or even to be reminded of her religious options, and so may through resistance of God, which would have to involve self-deception, herself produce a situation in which she is unable to relate personally to God just by trying. But unless she is resistant in this way at a time, she will find it possible to participate in personal relationship with God, and to do so then. Never will she find the door to such relationship closed. This, at the very minimum, is required if God unsurpassably loves Anna in a manner aimed at personal relationship with her.³

As for premise 3, Schellenberg says that Anna could not be in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God unless she believed that God exists. He writes:

a personal relationship is a conscious, reciprocal relationship, and a conscious relationship is a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in. Given these facts, one clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without *believing that the other*

³ Schellenberg 2015, xxxxx. For the sake of continuity with my discussion, I’ve replaced variables in Schellenberg’s text with the names of Anna and God.

party exists. Now belief, as most contemporary philosophers would agree, is involuntary in the sense that one cannot choose to believe something at a time just by trying to. So by God's not revealing God's existence, God is doing something that makes it impossible for Anna to participate in personal relationship with God at the relevant time just by trying, and this, according to our definition of openness, is precisely what is involved in God's not being open to having such a relationship with Anna then.

Upshot: if God is open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with Anna, then, if she is capable of such a relationship and she does not render herself unable to participate in it, God will reveal himself in such a way that Anna believes that God exists.

I have four things to say about this argument.

First, although we might question Schellenberg's understanding of what it is to be open to relationship, I will grant his meaning. Specifically, I will grant that one is open to relationship with another only if one never does anything (by commission or omission) that would have the result that the other was prevented from being able, just by trying, to participate in that relationship.

In that case, and this is the second thing I want to say, it is not clear to me that unsurpassable love requires openness, so understood; and so it is not clear to me that premise (2) is true. Let me explain.

I begin with a more general question. Why couldn't preventing one whom we love from being able, just by trying, to participate in relationship with us sometimes be the loving thing for us to do? Why couldn't making ourselves unavailable be what love requires, or at least allows? If that's possible, then, presumably, we would have to have some good reason to make ourselves

unavailable. Gratuitous unavailability is not consonant with love aimed at personal relationship. Can we make sense of this suggestion?

Maybe.⁴ Let's approach it by first thinking about it in the context of a positively meaningful, reciprocal, conscious relationship that is already evident to all. Sometimes our attachments to others in such relationships can be hurtful to ourselves, as when we depend on them, intentionally or not, to sustain bad habits we've acquired. In such a case, the loving thing for them to do might be to make themselves unavailable to us, and perhaps even to shun our efforts to participate in the relationship. In this connection, think of the advice sometimes given to those who unwittingly enable self-destructive behavioural tendencies on the part of the addicts who are their spouses, children, or friends, by preventing those whom they love from experiencing the natural consequences of their addiction. Moreover, sometimes our attachments to others in such relationships have their source in motivations that, in effect at least, involve viewing them as instruments to our own ends, whether consciously or unconsciously. Once again, in such a case, the loving thing for them to do might be to make themselves unavailable to us, and perhaps even to shun our efforts to participate in the relationship. In this connection, think of the advice that you might well give to a woman who discovers that her partner was motivated, whether consciously or unconsciously, to enter into their relationship, and now stays in it, largely for the sake of the gratification of his own domestic and other needs, especially when he refuses to own these sources of his attachment to her when he is repeatedly confronted with the truth.

Of course, even if we can make sense of making ourselves unavailable in the context of such relationships, it does not follow that we can make sense of making ourselves unavailable

⁴ In what follows, I develop lines of thought in Howard-Snyder 1996.

before any such relationship begins, at least not when our love aims at such a personal relationship and the person whom we love is capable of such a relationship and is in no way resisting it. Our question, then, is whether such unavailability in such circumstances can make sense *before* any such relationship even begins.

Notice that when we make ourselves unavailable within the context of personal relationship, and when our doing so is no strike against our love or even flows from our love, we typically aim to reform the one we love, or at least make it more likely that he will be reformed, and we aim to do so not only for his sake but for our sake, and for the sake of the relationship itself, that it might be better than it otherwise would be. Might something like this guide us, in a loving way, *before* we even initiate personal relationship with those whom we love? More to the point, might something like this guide God, in a loving way, *before* God initiates personal relationship with such created persons as there may be?

To begin to look into this question, notice that some created persons, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally to God, might already be ill-disposed toward such a relationship.⁵ Through no fault of their own, they might have become ill-disposed toward anything having to do with God. Perhaps they were raised to be hostile or indifferent toward religion, whether by family members or the social groups in which they grew up. Religion is for the servile and spineless, the stupid and the unscientific, they were taught, day in and day out. God is a crutch, worse yet, a stretcher, for the weak and cowardly. And the teaching stuck; they are now ill-disposed. Or perhaps they had instilled in them an extreme self-centeredness or disrespect for proper authority. Or perhaps they were raised in abusively strict religious surroundings. Or perhaps there was some other cause. But, whatever the cause might be, they now find

⁵ I emphasize that here and below I am not describing non-believers “in the midst of life” (Schellenberg 2015a, 205-206).

themselves, through no fault of their own, *ill-disposed non-believers*. That is to say, if God were to reveal himself to them in such a way that they came to believe that God exists, they would or would very likely respond inappropriately; they would or would very likely either reject God's self-revelation or believe with anything from indifference to hostility.

How might an unsurpassably loving God respond to people like this, as their capacity to relate personally with him emerges? Well, first off, God might think that there is no point in revealing himself to them. For, even if such a revelation does result in their believing God exists, God doesn't care about mere belief; he cares about an appropriate response. But such a response would be at least very unlikely. Secondly, if God were to reveal himself in such a way that they came to believe, he would at the very least stand a good chance of contributing to their ill-disposition being confirmed in them by their actually rejecting his self-disclosure or their actually believing with indifference or hostility. That would be counter-productive to his purposes since he wants their ill-disposition toward him to be weakened, not strengthened. So God waits for a time, waits to reveal himself in such a way that they believe that he exists, giving them the opportunity to become more receptive to him and more apt to respond appropriately to his self-disclosure, and he influences them in subtle but respectful and loving ways toward this end, e.g. by placing religiously serious people in their lives who are neither stupid nor unscientific, neither servile nor spineless, and so on.

One might object. After all, we must remember the variety of ways in which God could reveal himself to ill-disposed non-believers; and "if we consider that this could occur...through a direct encounter with an omnipotent love capable of softening even the most self-centered or embittered soul, then it seems that this class of individuals must be empty".⁶ By way of reply,

⁶ Schellenberg 1996, 460.

three points need mentioning. First, this class of individuals could be empty in the envisioned circumstances only if the direct encounter with God at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally with him wipes out the dispositions toward him that are definitive of their being ill-disposed. That God would not do. For the actions, attitudes, and affections that would result from such a miraculous disposition-adjustment would arise from something over which ill-disposed non-believers had no say, in which case those actions, etc. would be a farce, a sham, and God would know it. Second, unsurpassable love does not force itself on created persons in the way envisioned; at least not when they have yet to be given an opportunity to contribute to the desired changes and to own them. Third, for non-believers to be ill-disposed toward God *just is* for them not to be capable of being “softened” by a direct experience of his love, or at the very least for them to be very unlikely to be “softened” by it, in which case we cannot infer that “this class of individuals must be empty”.

One might object again. For, on the suggestion put forward here, God aims in various ways to facilitate a better disposition in ill-disposed non-believers through subtle, respectful, and loving ways that are compatible with nonbelief. But “it is hard to see how God's task here would not be more effectively prosecuted by means of the many influences presupposing belief,” especially in light of the fact that they are resistant through no fault of their own.⁷ By way of reply, that all depends on what God's task is. If God's task is (i) to facilitate a better disposition in ill-disposed non-believers, one that they are in no small part responsible for, and (ii) to do so without running the risk that their ill-dispositions will become more deeply entrenched in them by their responding inappropriately to God's revealing himself to them in such a way that they

⁷ *Op. cit.*

believe that he exists, then it is false that God's task would be more effectively prosecuted by means that presuppose belief.

Of course, even if we can make sense of what has just been said about ill-disposed nonbelievers, it is irrelevant to the argument at hand. That's because the argument at hand appeals to *non-resistant* non-believers, and no ill-disposed non-believer is a non-resistant non-believer. Still, seeing what might be said about ill-disposed non-believers prepares us for what might be said about well-disposed non-believers, or as Schellenberg calls them, non-resistant nonbelievers. So let's consider non-resistant non-believers, non-believers who are well-disposed toward God as their capacity to relate to him personally emerges, those who would welcome entering into a personal relationship with God of the sort Schellenberg describes if God were to reveal himself at that time in such a way that they came to believe that he exists. And let's distinguish two cases: (i) well-disposed non-believers who are not responsible for being well-disposed and (ii) well-disposed non-believers who are responsible for being well-disposed.

As for the first sort of case—those who are *not* responsible for being well-disposed—examples might include created persons who have been virtually determined, say, by parental or other social training, to be well-disposed but who for one reason or another do not yet believe that God exists. In that case, as they become capable of relating personally to God, they are disposed to enter into such a relationship with him, alright; but they had no say in becoming so well-disposed. This is unfortunate because, all else being equal, a state of affairs in which one enters into a personal relationship with God but one had little if any say in being disposed to do so in the first place is not nearly as good as a state of affairs in which one enters into such a relationship with God and one had a significant say about becoming disposed to do so. Suppose God prefers the better state of affairs. In that case, God might well not reveal himself in such a

way that well-disposed nonbelievers who are not responsible for being so well-disposed believe that God exists. For, again, they are not responsible for being disposed to enter into such a relationship, and God prefers them to confirm their good disposition toward him, on their own, in the face of contrary desires and competing allegiances, before he reveals himself to them in such a way that they come to believe that he exists. In that way, God allows them to make their involuntarily acquired good dispositions toward him and relating to him personally genuinely their own.

Now consider the second sort of case—those well-disposed nonbelievers who were responsible for becoming so disposed. They constitute the most difficult case for the suggestion I'm exploring. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we can say something plausible about them.

But let me first register a worry, a significant worry, to my mind. There are no such created persons. Character formation is not under the voluntary control of a child. Thus, by the time a non-believer becomes capable of a relationship with God, she won't be responsible for being well-disposed toward God, assuming she is well-disposed. If that's right, then what I've said about the first sort of case will suffice since there will be no members in the second sort of case.

I've put this worry rather starkly. Why should I suppose that there are no such created persons, no created persons who, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally with God, are both well-disposed toward God and responsible for being so well-disposed?

That's a good question. A more measured claim is that it's pretty likely that there are no such persons. We know enough about the sources of character formation in children to say that's it's not likely that, on the assumption that a child is well-disposed toward God at the dawn of her capacity to relate personally to God, she is responsible for being so well-disposed. Still, the point

of the question stands. Why couldn't there be exceptions? And my answer is that there can be—for all I can tell. So I should not categorically state that there are no such created persons.

Nevertheless, it strikes me as pretty unlikely.

Those who think that there are some created persons who, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally with God, are well-disposed toward God and were responsible for becoming so well-disposed need to tell us why they think this. Do they know of a particular person who satisfied this description? Who is it? And why do they think that this person, at the time in question, is or was well-disposed and responsible for being well-disposed? What's their evidence? To the extent that we are really in the dark about whether there are such persons, we should be reticent to affirm that there are non-resistant non-believers of this sort.

Still, what if there are? What might be said about created persons who, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally to God, are well-disposed non-believers and responsible for being well-disposed? Well, as is well-known, one's motivations for entering into a personal relationship can be significantly less than they otherwise might be, and one might not even be aware of it. For example, sometimes what motivates one to enter into a personal relationship is a desire to extend one's power or influence, to increase one's pleasure, or to satisfy one's curiosity. Other times its source is insecurity or fear, e.g. fear of being alone or unprotected. Or a desire to please one's peers, parents, or social group. And there are other lesser sources of motivation as well.

Likewise in the sort of case we are currently considering. Well-disposed non-believers may well be disposed to welcome a personal relationship with God upon coming to believe that he exists, but they might be so disposed for reasons that are not as fitting as they might be. For example, it is arguably most fitting to want to relate to God personally mainly for God's

moral beauty, his holiness. Relatedly, perhaps no disposition to enter into a personal relationship with God is properly motivated unless its source is a strong desire to surrender to God's will, to unite one's own will with God's will. In that case, the possibility arises that if God were to reveal himself in such a way that such people believed that he exists, they would welcome entering into a personal relationship with him, alright; but their *initial* welcome would not be properly motivated.

This is unfortunate. For, all else being equal, a state of affairs in which one enters into a personal relationship with God as a result of a good disposition grounded in unfitting motivations is not nearly as good as a state of affairs in which one enters into such a relationship with God as a result of a good disposition grounded in fitting motivations. Suppose God prefers the better state of affairs. In that case, God might well not reveal himself in such a way that well-disposed non-resistant nonbelievers who are responsible for being so well-disposed believe that God exists. For, again, although they are responsible for being disposed to enter into a personal relationship with God, God prefers that, right from the start of their relationship, the sources of their good dispositions toward being in a relationship with him are better than they in fact are. And why shouldn't God want this for people such as this, people he loves? After all, what's the hurry: There's an eternity of love ahead of them. So why shouldn't God want those whom he loves to have a shot at the better state of affairs? Consequently, before God reveals himself to them in such a way that they come to believe that he exists, he allows them to change the source of their good dispositions toward him and to confirm that change over time before he reveals himself to them in such a way that they come to believe that he exists. Indeed, it may well be *imperfectly* loving of God to *not* to want this for them.

One might object. After all, can't God's reasons as I have described them for not revealing himself be "accommodated" in the context of a positively meaningful, reciprocal, conscious relationship that is accompanied by self-revelation that produces belief? Well, in a word, no; for what God prefers as I have just described it can only be realized *before* any such relationship gets started. In the case of well-disposed non-believers who were not responsible for being well-disposed, God prefers this state of affairs:

- that they make their good disposition toward entering into a relationship with God their own, and confirm it as such, before God reveals himself to them in such a way that they come to belief and begin a personal relationship with him.

And, in the case of well-disposed non-believers who were responsible for being well-disposed, God prefers this state of affairs:

- that they modify, or at least aim to modify, the unfitting sources of their good disposition toward entering into a relationship with God, and confirm this modification or aim, before God reveals himself to them in such a way that they come to belief and begin a personal relationship with him.

It's absolutely impossible for either of these states of affairs to obtain after the persons in question come to belief. So the "accommodationist strategy," as Schellenberg calls it, won't work with respect to the suggestion I'm exploring.⁸ Of course, God's preferences might go unsatisfied, in which case he'll have to adopt another strategy if he aims to bring about relationship with such people. But the suggestion on offer is that it is no strike against God's love if God holds out—for a time, not for an eternity—for the preferable state of affairs.

⁸ Schellenberg 2005b.

One might object again. Have I really described a preferable state of affairs? After all, consider the alternatives. In the case of well-disposed non-believers who were *not* responsible for being well-disposed, the alternative is this:

- that God reveals himself to them in such a way that they believe, they begin a personal relationship with him, and then they make their good disposition toward God their own and confirm it.

And, in the case of well-disposed non-believers who were responsible for being well-disposed, the alternative is this:

- that God reveals himself to them in such a way that they believe, they begin a personal relationship with him, and then they modify the unfitting sources of their good disposition toward God and confirm this modification.

Surely, the objection goes, this latter pair of state of affairs is better than the former, and so God would prefer them.⁹

I'm not so sure about that. Consider an analogy. Suppose that over several months Nancy describes her friend Joe to Mary, in glittering detail. He is intelligent, kind-hearted, witty, athletic, responsible, and just plain fun to hang out with; moreover, as the photos reveal, he's handsome as heck. To make a long story short, Mary finds herself attracted to Joe. She wants to meet him. Then she learns that Nancy has been talking her up to Joe as well, and he's attracted to her and wants to meet her too. Excellent! She has those first pangs of love for Joe, to get to know him, and him her. And the same goes for Joe. Now suppose that Mary (somehow!) learns that some trait of character that makes for a long-term relationship has never been tested in Joe, e.g. faithfulness through difficulty. Or suppose that she (somehow!) learns that Joe's budding love of

⁹ Schellenberg 1996, 461.

her is in no small part motivated by an unconscious desire to benefit from her connections to people that can advance his interests.

Would we count it against Mary's budding love if she were to pause, mull it over, give it some time, *before* she connected with Joe? I would not. After all, his capacity for faithfulness is untested; the source of his budding love isn't what it should be, or at least it could be significantly better. Would we count it a strike against her love if she prefers a state of affairs in which Joe's faithfulness in relationships is tested *before* she connected with him, if she prefers a state of affairs in which there is a more admirable source of his attraction to her before she connected with him? Again, I would not.

What would be the point of Mary's waiting? Well, it would be better for both of them if, right from the start, his good disposition toward her was fashioned by a faithfulness that had some mettle to it, and it would be better for both of them if, right from the start, his budding love of her had a more admirable source; moreover, it would be a better relationship as well, right at the start. Furthermore, in the waiting she might discover something else about Joe: that he's the sort of guy who does have some mettle, or at least a tendency in that direction, and that he's the sort of guy who is willing to let others close enough to help him to become a better person.

On the suggestion that I'm exploring, that's what it's like with God and the well-disposed nonbeliever. He's giving it a couple of days or weeks, so to speak, to see whether they can get the relationship off to a better start. That's a preferable state of affairs, by my lights.

Perhaps there are other goods we know of for the sake of which God, by virtue of being unsurpassably loving, might be temporarily unavailable to people at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally to God. And, of course—and this is the third point I want to make—there is always the possibility that there are goods we do not know of for the sake of which God might

temporarily refrain from making himself available to such people. Regarding this suggestion, Schellenberg writes:

Opponents of the hiddenness argument sometimes also develop the objection that there might very well be goods *unknown* to us that require hiddenness, for the sake of which God would permit it, but if one has been led to accept the hiddenness argument's premises, then this move fails. That's because from what some of those premises allow us to conclude, namely, that a loving God *would not* permit nonresistant nonbelief, it deductively follows that there are no goods, known or unknown, such that for their sake God *might* do so. So *that* becomes acceptable too—after all, it evidently follows from what one views thus – and the present objection is shown to beg the question.¹⁰

I find these words perplexing. For, although it is true that, *if* a loving God would not permit non-resistant non-belief, then there are no goods such that for their sake a loving God would permit non-resistant non-belief, any open-minded inquirer with a modicum of intellectual humility will refuse to accept that a loving God would not permit non-resistant non-belief until she had first satisfied her natural curiosity about whether there are any goods, known or unknown, such that for their sake a loving God would permit non-resistant non-belief. To satisfy such curiosity requires two things. First, it requires that she consider known goods such as, in my opinion, those I have mentioned, and others mentioned in the literature as well. Second, it requires that she consider whether she is in a position to tell whether there are any goods unknown to her that might figure in a loving God's purposes in permitting non-resistant non-belief. This second requirement is crucial. For suppose that she were to discover that, even if there is no good basis for thinking there is a God, and even if she does not know of any good that might figure in a

¹⁰ Schellenberg 2015, xxxxx.

loving God's purposes in permitting non-resistant non-belief, she should be in doubt about whether she is in a position to tell whether there are any unknown goods of the sort in question. In that case, I would think, we would expect her open-mindedness and intellectual humility to lead her to refrain from accepting that a loving God would not permit non-resistant non-belief.

In refraining from accepting that a loving God would not permit non-resistant non-belief, she would refrain from accepting Schellenberg's premise (2). Would she thereby deserve to be derided as an "opponent of the hiddenness argument"? Would she thereby deserve the charge of "begging the question"? I don't see why. Perhaps she is simply attentive to, and owns, her intellectual limitations; and perhaps she does so out of a love for truth, knowledge, and understanding. In that case, any such derision and accusation would be wholly out of place.¹¹

A fourth, and final, point has to do with premise (3). As Schellenberg makes clear, the thought that is driving this premise is that one cannot even "get started" in a personal relationship—a conscious, reciprocal, positively meaningful relationship—without *believing that the other party exists*. And that's because, as Schellenberg puts it, one can "get started" in such a relationship only if one is consciously aware of the other party, and one is consciously aware of the other party only if one "recognizes" oneself to be in such a relationship, and one recognizes oneself to be in such a relationship only if one believes that the other party exists.

Let's look into this line of thought briefly.

First, we need to distinguish *de re* awareness from *de dicto* awareness. You can be aware of something without being aware *that* it, under a certain description, is what you are aware of. You can be aware of Jimmy Carter without being aware that Jimmy Carter is the person you are looking at. And Anna can be aware of God without being aware that God is the one whom she is

¹¹ For more on intellectual humility conceived as being properly attentive to, and owning, one's intellectual limitations, see Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder unpublished.

aware of. Second, one can be in a reciprocal, positively meaningful relationship with another person without believing that the other person exists, as when, unbeknownst to you, a benefactor has been looking after your interests in various ways. So a lot seems to be riding on the qualification that an unsurpassably loving person would seek a relationship with the beloved in which he was *consciously* aware of her. But is it *de re* or *de dicto* conscious awareness that is required, or both?

I'm not really sure. But if only *de re* conscious awareness is required, then it seems much more plausible that we can at least "get started" in a conscious, reciprocal, personal relationship with God even if we lack belief that God exists, perhaps even if we believe that God does not exist. Would that be ideal? Well, no. But hopefully we've gotten past identifying the real with the ideal. That is, presumably we can have a real conscious, reciprocal, personal relationship with God that is not ideal, and perhaps that relationship can commence with *de re* conscious awareness of God instead of *de dicto* conscious awareness.¹²

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