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Robert T. Lehe

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A RESPONSE TO THE ARGUMENT FROM THE REASONABLENESS OF NONBELIEF

Robert T. Lehe

According to J. L. Schellenberg's argument from the reasonableness of non-belief, the fact that many people inculpably fail to find sufficient evidence for the existence of God constitutes evidence for atheism. Schellenberg argues that since a loving God would not withhold the benefits of belief, the lack of evidence for God's existence is incompatible with divine love. I argue that Schellenberg has not successfully defended his argument's two controversial premises, that God's love is incompatible with his allowing some to remain in doubt that he exists, and that the nonbelief of some agnostics is inculpable. From the standpoint of what Christians believe about God, there are plausible reasons, which Schellenberg has not succeeded in refuting, for thinking that all nonbelief is culpable. I argue also that a loving God could have reasons remaining hidden to some persons, which are consistent with his desire to draw all people to faith.

In his book, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*,¹ J. L. Schellenberg argues that the fact that it is possible to reasonably doubt the existence of God serves as a premise of a sound argument for the nonexistence of God. For if God existed and were perfectly loving, he would not allow anyone who was capable of and open to believing that God exists to fail to find sufficient grounds for belief. Schellenberg's argument from the reasonableness of nonbelief is interesting in that it purports to show that the lack of evidence for the existence of God is actually positive evidence for the nonexistence of God. In this paper I will argue that Schellenberg's argument does not succeed, in spite of the fact that the existence of God is not obvious enough to prevent there being many skeptics.

This is Schellenberg's formulation of the argument from the reasonableness of non-belief:

If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
Reasonable nonbelief does occur.
No perfectly loving God exists.
There is no God.²

Stated more informally, the argument says that a perfectly loving God would not allow anyone who is open to believing that God exists to lack

sufficient grounds for belief, and that since there are people who, through no fault of their own, find themselves without sufficient grounds for belief, it must be concluded that God does not exist. This argument is formally valid, but two of the premises are controversial. Theists will generally not object to the first premise, but premises 2 and 3 can be challenged. Although Schellenberg vigorously defends those two premises, I will argue that his defense of neither of them is successful.

Schellenberg's defense of premise 2 is based principally on the thought that if a perfectly good God exists, it would be a great benefit, morally and spiritually, for any person who is capable of it, to believe that God exists. Belief that God exists is a precondition of the possibility of salvation and of the benefits of the spiritual and moral transformation that theists in general, and Christians especially, associate with conversion. If God is perfectly loving, he would not, for any length of time, withhold these benefits from anyone who is capable of receiving them. Of course, if out of stubbornness, selfishness, or some other sinful motive, persons refuse to submit to the evidence for God's existence that God makes available to them, God will not force them to believe. A loving God would not present himself so forcefully and emphatically that the freedom to accept or reject God is overwhelmed. A loving God would respect the freedom of the individual to respond, or not, to God's overtures. However, a loving God would not make the evidence of his existence so ambiguous and inconclusive as to make it possible for intellectually honest, open-minded seekers to remain in doubt. A loving God would not allow anyone to remain, for any length of time, in a condition of reasonable, inculpable nonbelief.

Schellenberg devotes a chapter to the defense of premise 3, the proposition that reasonable nonbelief exists in the actual world. Schellenberg distinguishes disbelief, the belief that God does not exist, from nonbelief, the view that there is epistemic parity between the proposition that God does exist and the proposition that God does not exist. Reasonable nonbelief is characterized as "any instance of the failure to believe in the existence of God that is not the result of culpable actions or omissions on the part of the subject."³ For some people, doubt "arises through no fault of their own and so they are not in any sense to blame for it."⁴ Premises 2 and 3 are formulated in terms of reasonable nonbelief, but in the elaboration and defense of them, Schellenberg essentially equates reasonable nonbelief with inculpable nonbelief. Therefore, doubt is sometimes inculpable. The philosophical arguments for the existence of God are controversial, so it is possible for someone, after carefully examining them, to reasonably conclude that they do not establish the existence of God. The kind of religious experience that many believers claim to have is unavailable to nonbelievers, in spite of their openness to God. Schellenberg cites the fact that there are people who want to believe and who honestly search for God, but who come up empty. And there are numerous Christian theologians and philosophers who admit that the world is "religiously ambiguous" and claim that divine hiddenness is consistent with God's way of drawing people to faith. So Schellenberg finds support for 3 in the fact that even many Christians accept it.⁵

While it is true that some Christians accept the claim that inculpable non-

belief exists, there are passages of Scripture, such as *Romans* 1:19-22 that seem to explicitly teach that all nonbelief is culpable. I will argue that Schellenberg has not provided sufficient grounds for rejecting this claim. And although I believe that it is plausible that inculpable nonbelief does not exist, I will also argue that Schellenberg has not shown that a loving God could not be justified in allowing inculpable nonbelief to exist. Within the context of a Christian belief system it is possible to make sense of why God might allow his existence to remain hidden to some who seek him. What Christians believe about God may make the problem of divine hiddenness especially acute, but also provides resources for responding to the problem.

Critique of Premise 2

Premise 2 states that a loving God would not allow reasonable nonbelief to occur; if God existed, he would not be hidden, or at least would not be so well hidden that reasonable nonbelief would exist. Schellenberg devotes two chapters to responding to efforts of theists to explain the hiddenness of God. The first of these chapters deals with various attempts to argue that divine hiddenness is necessary in order to preserve moral or cognitive freedom. Schellenberg discusses at length the attempt by John Hick to show that if God's existence were too obvious, human beings would lack the freedom, which is essential to God's purposes for them, to resist compliance with God's will.

Hick argues that a certain epistemic distance between God and human beings is necessary if the latter are to retain their freedom to either accept or reject God.⁶ Such freedom is a prerequisite to the kind of personal relationship between God and human beings that Christians claim that God desires. Hick agrees with Pascal's view that God provides evidence that is sufficient to convince those who are open to the possibility that God exists, but not so powerful as to make it impossible for one to reject it.⁷ If God revealed himself too clearly, it would be impossible for human beings to resist believing that God exists, and thus their freedom would be overwhelmed. Schellenberg endorses the distinction, which he finds in Hick, between *belief that* God exists and *belief in* God.⁸ The former involves merely assent to the proposition that God exists, while the latter involves what Christians call 'conversion' and 'salvation'—a life of transforming commitment, obedience, and devotion to God. According to Hick, God requires of people that they *believe in* God and not merely that they assent to the proposition that God exists. But Hick argues that if the epistemic distance between God and human beings were removed, the possibility of rejecting *belief in* God would be eliminated, and with it also the freedom that is requisite to the kind of relationship with God that God desires.

Schellenberg agrees with Hick that a prerequisite of *belief in* God is *belief that* God exists but rejects the claim that God's providing evidence sufficient to make impossible inculpable nonbelief would overwhelm the freedom to reject *belief in* God. God's providing evidence sufficient for belief would not eliminate the freedom to self-deceptively deny its force and deny the existence of God.⁹ Even if one found it difficult to deny the existence of God, it would still be possible to resist the full commitment

implied by *belief in* God. *Belief that* God exists is not a sufficient condition of *belief in* God, and it is possible for a person to be a philosophical theist and avoid Christian commitment. Belief that an ontologically perfect being exists need not incline one toward believing that one owes anything to God, or can communicate with God.

Schellenberg's point could be supported by the example of Mortimer Adler, who attests in his autobiography that for decades he was a philosophical theist, believing that the cosmological argument establishes the existence of God beyond reasonable doubt.¹⁰ However, Adler states that he had no faith in God and was not religious. Adler understood God to be an ontologically perfect being that is the first cause of the universe, but not a personal, loving being with whom he could communicate or to whom he ought to commit himself. Although Adler eventually converted to Christianity, his example shows that it is possible to *believe that* God exists, and indeed, to believe that the existence of God can be established beyond reasonable doubt, and yet resist conversion or *belief in* God. Conversion involves a voluntary response that could not, in principle, be compelled by God. Now what God ultimately desires for humans is that they be converted, not merely that they believe that an ontologically perfect being exists, and there is no danger, indeed no possibility, that God's provision of evidence sufficient for *belief that* God exists could overwhelm the capacity of a person to freely choose whether or not to *believe in* God. Therefore, Schellenberg is right to reject Hick's explanation of divine hiddenness as necessary for the freedom to reject God. Human beings would be free to resist conversion even if it were impossible for them to deny the existence of God.

Unfortunately for Schellenberg, the point that he makes in his response to Hick concerning the gap between *belief that* God exists and *belief in* God can also be used against his own defense of premise 2. Although *belief that* God exists is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient condition of *belief in* God. Some persons may be unable or unwilling to come to *belief in* God because of their moral or spiritual deficiencies. J. D. Kiernan-Lewis points out that, since such persons are incapable of receiving the benefits of *belief in* God, their being denied evidence sufficient for *belief that* God exists would not deprive them of goods they would have otherwise enjoyed.¹¹ Therefore, being deprived of sufficient evidence for belief that God exists does not harm those who would not *believe in* God even if they came to *believe that* God exists.

Schellenberg emphasizes the importance of epistemic inculpability, but Christians see the main obstacles to *belief in* God to be moral and spiritual. Epistemically inculpable persons may suffer from spiritual deficiencies that prevent them from submitting to God's will. Given the complicated psychology of the process of moving toward religious commitment, it is by no means obvious that the most effective way for God to move a person to desire conversion involves the shortest possible path to *belief that* God exists. God's allowing people to struggle in their nonbelief for an extended time may be a better strategy for drawing them ultimately to conversion than providing evidence to make his existence more apparent from the start. Struggling with doubt may trigger a self-examination that will bring to light moral and spiritual deficiencies that hinder faith. The failure of a

purely intellectual quest for belief that God exists may lead to an awareness that one may need to seek spiritual healing and purification before one can be receptive to God's self-disclosure.

If the Christian takes seriously the claim that God is loving and desires that all people be converted, then she has reason to believe that God would reveal himself in whatever ways would be most effective in facilitating the kind of belief and response that he desires. Perhaps, in some cases, God behaves like a suitor who woos his beloved by keeping his love for her secret until she is ready to respond to his advances, and until he can enable her to understand and appreciate his character. If his approach is too blatant, the suitor may frighten the beloved away, or cause her to take his love too much for granted and thus not reciprocate appropriately. Since God is loving, and also not a deceiver, he does not, as a secretive suitor might, make his existence known but pretend not to love. Rather, God may allow a person to wonder whether he exists in order to intensify that person's longing for God. Therefore, there may be reasons for God's allowing people to persist in their doubt that are consistent with God's love and desire for the salvation of all. It is not that God's revealing his existence too clearly would overpower the freedom to reject *belief in* God, but rather that his hiddenness and gradual revelation of himself may be the most effective way to obtain the response that he desires. This claim is consistent with what Christians believe about God and human nature.

Schellenberg responds to an argument similar to this in a section called "The Cognitive Benefits of Doubt."¹² He characterizes the argument as follows:

Inculpable doubt involves a careful probing of issues surrounding the proposition(s) over which one is in doubt. In the case of theism, doubt—if inculpable—will result in a deeper understanding of the claim that there is a God, and of the nature and proper conduct of the religious life. The reasonable doubter, through long thinking combined with deep religious concern, will clarify to herself (and perhaps to others) the meaning of such propositions as 'God is good,' 'God is loving,' and so forth, and as a result of her investigations, will grow to appreciate more fully the character and potential depth of the life of faith. There is consequently a sense in which, even in the midst of doubt, one may be coming to know God better.¹³

Schellenberg admits that there may be such benefits of doubt, but insists that for these benefits to justify God in permitting inculpable nonbelief, such doubt must be a *necessary* means to obtaining the benefits. Surely, Schellenberg argues, these benefits could be obtained without allowing the harm that comes from inculpable nonbelief.

Perhaps there are other ways that an omnipotent God could enable people to attain what Schellenberg calls the cognitive benefits of doubt. I would add that these benefits are spiritual as well as cognitive. For God to be justified in allowing inculpable doubt as a means of producing those cognitive and spiritual benefits, it need not be the case that inculpable doubt is *necessary* for them. Allowing inculpable doubt is incompatible

with divine love, in Schellenberg's view, because it deprives the doubter of the benefits of belief in God. Let us call this deprivation the spiritual cost of doubt. God would be justified in allowing a person to remain in doubt if the cognitive and spiritual benefits of doubt outweighed the spiritual cost, and if there were available no other means of obtaining the cognitive benefits of doubt that would have a lower spiritual cost than that of the inculpable nonbelief. I submit that it is not possible for us to know that or how God could provide the cognitive or spiritual benefits of doubt in a more cost effective way. Cost benefit analysis is difficult enough in human economic arrangements; it is immeasurably more difficult when it comes to God's dealings with humankind. Perhaps God, in his benevolence, sometimes allows persons to struggle with doubt for a time in order to help them to attain ultimately the highest level of spiritual maturity of which they are capable. This suggestion is consistent with the testimony of many Christians who have come to deep faith after long struggles with various sufferings, including doubt.

Schellenberg considers the claim that God might allow some people to remain temporarily in a condition of inculpable doubt when he foresees that without such doubt they would become complacent in their faith or "settle down into an undemanding and relatively shallow religious life..."¹⁴ Schellenberg finds this suggestion problematic. It seems to him that the inculpable doubter is the kind of person who earnestly and honestly seeks God, and thus would not become complacent and superficial in her religious life upon being permitted to have evidence sufficient for belief that God exists. Hence, the inculpable seeker need not be left in doubt. Furthermore, the kind of person who would become religiously complacent and superficial is not likely to become more zealous as a result of being allowed to remain in doubt. Schellenberg says that the defender of the cognitive benefits of doubt faces a dilemma: "either the individuals in question would not in fact benefit from the absence of clear evidence, because inclined to be apathetic and religiously unconcerned, or (if they *are* alert and concerned) they do not require an interval of doubt, because likely to be sufficiently motivated to inquiry by religious experience."¹⁵

Let us grant that the inculpable doubter¹⁶ is zealous in her quest for belief that God exists. But given the gap between *belief that* God exists and *belief in* God, zeal for the former is no guarantee of openness to the latter. So God might know that her resistance to faith would be more effectively addressed if she were allowed to struggle with doubt for a time. A period of doubt while a person is earnestly seeking God may serve to intensify the longing for God and deepen the sense of need for God. Even if this inculpable doubter would, if given sufficient evidence to believe that God exists, quickly come to faith, and even if her zeal would later become a powerful hedge against complacency, it might still be true that such a person would eventually develop an even deeper, more mature relationship with God as a result of having struggled with nonbelief for an extended period of time. God would have good reason to allow the zealous seeker to struggle if, even though such a person would be unlikely to become religiously complacent, she would be able eventually to become even more spiritually advanced as a result of her struggles. The period of struggle with doubt

might enable the seeker to develop a more powerful sense of the implications of living without God and to explore more deeply the philosophical, moral, and existential dimensions of those implications. The struggle may help prepare the way for a faith that is intellectually richer and deeper than would otherwise be possible. As for persons likely to become spiritually complacent, whom Schellenberg says would not be capable of receiving the cognitive benefits of doubt, their case is irrelevant to the present issue, because their doubt would not be inculpable.

Another possible benefit of God's hiddenness is one that Schellenberg attributes to Pascal and discusses at length.¹⁷ Pascal argues that God withholds revelation of himself in order to help people become aware of their wretchedness and corruption. If God made his existence too obvious, people would be less likely to become aware of their wretchedness and corruption. Schellenberg's response to this is that "part of what God might communicate to us through religious experience is *the very message of wretchedness and corruption* that Pascal suggests a Divine disclosure would inhibit."¹⁸ God could, of course, along with making his own existence apparent, also inform people that they are sinful, need salvation, etc. These facts could be made more obvious than they already are. But it is not clear that God's causing a person to believe these facts by delivering a clear and unambiguous revelation is the most effective way for God to foster openness to *belief in God*. Again, *belief in God* is not merely a matter of accepting the truth of certain propositions, even the propositions that humans are wretched, in need of salvation, etc. *Belief in God* involves whole-hearted commitment to God, submission to God's will, and above all, the love for God "with all one's heart, soul, and mind." God's allowing a person to struggle with the question whether God exists may be an effective way of helping her not only to believe that she has a need for God, but to come to a deep, existential realization of that need—a realization that might lead to conversion, and to the love for God, who provides salvation. Perhaps the situation with respect to divine-human communication is such that the kind of personal knowledge and love that God desires for human beings could not be elicited by their simply being caused to believe that certain propositions are true, such as that God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, loving, and merciful, and that human beings are wretched and miserable and in need of God's grace. If human beings are free, they could come to believe these propositions to be true without thereby coming to a genuine love of God. What matters more than the acceptance of the truth of propositions about God is the process by which one arrives at such acceptance, the existential appropriation of them, and the spiritual relationship to the God who is the subject of those propositions. Similarly, if God had revealed himself so clearly that no one could reasonably deny his existence and planted in everyone's mind truths about God's nature and expectations, it would be like telling an alcoholic that he needs to stop drinking. The alcoholic might agree intellectually that he needs to change his life. But there is a kind of inner appropriation of this truth that is required in order for the alcoholic to be willing to take the steps necessary to get his life in order. And just telling the alcoholic that he needs to quit drinking might not be the best way to get him to love the bearer of this message. The alcoholic must not merely

assent to the proposition that he needs help. He must be whole-heartedly committed to that truth and committed to doing something about it. God's hiddenness may in some cases be necessary in order for God to most effectively get persons to respond with love and with a whole-hearted willingness to submit to the will of God.

Even if God could unilaterally cause a person to come to know of her "wretchedness and corruption" and the need for a loving relationship with God in such a way that the person did become genuinely open to entering into that relationship and eventually did actually enter into it, there may still be a benefit in letting that person, to some degree, "figure it out for herself." To borrow an idea from John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy, we may say that God and human beings work together cooperatively to create "children of God."¹⁹ God's allowing some persons to struggle with doubt may be one of the ways that God assigns to them part of the work required for becoming children of God. From the standpoint of Christian theology, it is a great blessing that God gives human beings a degree of autonomy and independence in participating in the process of being transformed into children of God. The value of the gift of allowing them a large role in this process is worth the risk that some might fail altogether.

One sometimes observes that recent converts who come to faith after a long struggle are more zealous in their faith than are lifelong adherents, and some people who seem never to have entertained the slightest doubt that God exists seem to have very shallow faith. The struggle with doubt is a feature of the religious life of even some of the most zealous devotees of the Christian faith, and some who have struggled with doubt attest to the fact that their struggles have deepened their faith and love of God. The period of doubt, in which a person seriously and conscientiously searches for God might lead ultimately to a deeper and better grounded faith. Perhaps the inculpable nonbeliever's long struggle to overcome doubt will result in a deeper understanding of the intellectual objections to faith and the possible responses to them, which will serve her well after she becomes a believer. Her faith will be stronger because of the depth of her reflections on the intellectual problems associated with it. From the standpoint of the Christian faith, it is plausible that the lack of compelling evidence for the existence of God, which provokes people to struggle with the question, makes possible a kind of training in faith at the level of the question whether God exists that facilitates the cultivation of the deeper, more authentically owned, and more intellectually grounded mode of faith at the level of *belief in God*.

There may also be benefits of divine hiddenness that go beyond those enjoyed eventually by the individual nonbeliever. The Church has been enriched by the theological and philosophical reflection that has characterized its intellectual life throughout much of its history. The intellectual debates between believers and skeptics have contributed much to the Church's understanding of the issues raised by belief in a loving God. The arguments of skeptics have challenged Christians to think more deeply about the objections to their beliefs and have stimulated great intellectual energy to respond to them. Intellectually honest skeptics have contributed much to the vitality of the debate. The sensitivity and effectiveness of the

apologetic writings of such converts as C. S. Lewis and Malcolm Muggeridge were no doubt enhanced by reflection on their previous experience as thoughtful atheists.²⁰ Schellenberg's book itself has stimulated Christian philosophers to reflect more deeply on the problem of divine hiddenness. Schellenberg himself, in the last chapter of the book offers a challenge to theists to try to answer his argument and to provide reasons, other than those he considers and rejects, for God's remaining hidden to some persons. Several Christian theists have responded to this challenge. So ironically, the effect that Schellenberg's book has had in stimulating reflection and discussion concerning the problem of divine hiddenness, itself constitutes a clue to one reason that a loving God might have for making himself hidden to some persons. Christian doctrine emphasizes the communal nature of God's project of saving humanity, and it teaches that God sometimes allows individuals to suffer for the good of the community of God's people. The suffering that results from the temporary loss of the benefits of faith to those who struggle with nonbelief is offset by the great good that comes from the contribution that vigorous intellectual debate makes to the Church's theological understanding. Divine hiddenness can result ultimately in a person's having deeper, more grounded faith and the possibility of being blessed with the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the intellectual life of the Church. The opportunity to make such a contribution is a great benefit both to the individual who makes it and the Church as a whole.

Schellenberg might insist that these benefits could be obtained by God's simply bestowing them, causing people to gain the knowledge and understanding without painful struggle. But the God in whom Christians believe has chosen to allow people to obtain some of the benefits they enjoy as a result of their own striving and cooperation with each other rather than by simply dishing them out so that not much effort is required. It is a great benefit to human beings to be allowed to play a role in striving and working to obtain some of the goods that God wants them to enjoy, and in collaborating with God in the building of his Kingdom, even though this policy increases their suffering. The benefit that persons enjoy in being allowed the privilege of contributing to the building of the Kingdom of God is not one that God can unilaterally bestow. It requires that persons willingly act to make their contribution. The suffering of temporary deprivation of the benefits of belief that God exists may be more than outweighed by the goods that result from God's allowing human beings to struggle with the question of the existence of God in the absence of evidence that is clear enough to make inculpable nonbelief impossible.

Of course, for many, the doubts are not temporary, and they never come to belief in God. But premise 2 says that God could not be justified in allowing anyone, for any length of time, to remain in a condition of inculpable nonbelief. I have shown that God could have reasons for allowing some persons to be in a condition of inculpable nonbelief, and this is sufficient to undermine premise 2. There are a variety of considerations that make it plausible that a loving God might have reason to reveal himself in ways that make the fact of his existence less than obvious to some people. Therefore, Schellenberg's defense of premise 2 fails.

Critique of Premise 3

In his defense of premise 3, Schellenberg argues that there are many people who fail, despite their best efforts, to find evidence that is sufficient to convince them that God exists. Such people possess reasonable, inculpable nonbelief. Schellenberg insists that for God to eliminate reasonable nonbelief would not require that he "provide us with some incontrovertible proof or overwhelm us with a display of Divine glory. Rather, what a loving God has reason to do is provide us with evidence sufficient for belief."²¹

Schellenberg points out that many theologians agree that there exists inculpable nonbelief. As Douglas Henry²² points out, most of the commentators on Schellenberg's book have conceded premise 3. But as Henry also indicates, there are numerous passages throughout the Bible that attest to God's promise that whoever whole-heartedly seeks will find God.²³ One passage from the *New Testament*, *Romans* 1:19-22, as mentioned earlier, seems to deny premise 3 rather emphatically:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...²⁴

This passage seems to claim that God has indeed provided evidence that is sufficient for belief. Of course, there are those who fail to find the evidence available to them sufficient, and it is crucial to Schellenberg's case that in at least some instances the failure to believe is not due to any intellectual or spiritual failings of the doubter.

Schellenberg offers the following criterion of inculpable religious doubt, where G is the proposition that God exists:

S is inculpably in doubt about the truth of G if (1) S believes that epistemic parity obtains between G and non-G, and (2) S has not knowingly (self-deceptively or non-self-deceptively) neglected to submit this belief to adequate investigation.²⁵

Of crucial importance is the question of what constitutes adequate investigation. Schellenberg suggests that the judgment that a subject's investigation is adequate would be appropriate in instances where we see that the subject's investigation is exemplary, that the subject has devoted much time and energy to the investigation, that the subject has been responsible in other endeavors, that the subject herself attests to the thoroughness of the investigation, etc.²⁶ Of particular interest is the case of individuals who arrive at epistemic parity in spite of a genuine desire to believe in God. If the investigation of such individuals were biased, it would surely be in favor of belief that God exists. The fact that some people yearn to believe

but cannot is surely powerful evidence that their nonbelief is inculpable.

Douglas Henry offers an ingenious objection to premise 3.²⁷ His argument is that Schellenberg has set so high the standard for adequate investigation that the more likely it is to be met, the less likely that a subject who meets it will be content with epistemic parity. The very qualities that would lead to the judgment that an investigation has been adequately pursued—commitment to inquiry, zeal for truth, willingness to pursue every avenue to find the truth, etc.—would make it highly unlikely that the subject would settle for epistemic parity. The more fierce the competitor, the less likely she will settle for a draw.

In response to Henry one might argue that Schellenberg need not say that the inculpable investigator is content to stop with epistemic parity. The point of Schellenberg's argument from the reasonableness of nonbelief is to show that the situation of epistemic parity with respect to the question of the existence of God itself constitutes evidence against theism. The investigator may decide, after devoting years to diligent investigation of the issue, that the lack of sufficient evidence for the existence of God and being stuck in a condition of epistemic parity for years is itself grounds for tipping the balance in favor of atheism. She may conclude that if there were a loving God, sufficient evidence for this would have been available by now. So perhaps inculpable disbelief is possible, even if Henry is right that permanent inculpable nonbelief is not. I will argue, however, that the move from agnosticism to atheism will not salvage the claim to inculpability.

Schellenberg's criterion of inculpable doubt includes the submission of belief to adequate investigation, but his discussion of the criterion is notably short on specifics concerning how the investigation should be conducted or how religious experience should be sought and evaluated. It has been noted that the criterion of inculpable doubt takes into account only the cognitive dimension of the investigation concerning the existence of God. As we have seen, *belief that* God exists does not guarantee *belief in* God, and there may be moral and spiritual hindrances to *belief in* God that go beyond the purely intellectual difficulties associated with arriving at *belief that* God exists. Given the gap between *belief that* God exists and *belief in* God, it is possible to insulate oneself from the unattractive aspects of religious commitment, even while pursuing honestly and vigorously, according to Schellenberg's criteria of inculpability, the question of the existence of God. One could be genuinely open to the possibility of the existence of a loving, gracious God who bestows great benefits, including eternal life, and at the same time resist commitment to a righteous and demanding God, who commands us to "take up the cross" and follow Christ. I have argued God could have good reason to withhold from such a person evidence sufficient to make the fact of God's existence undeniable. My point here, however, is that from a Christian standpoint, doubt that results from God's withholding evidence of himself in order to deal with spiritual obstacles to conversion, should not be regarded as inculpable doubt, no matter how diligent the doubter is on a purely intellectual level in the investigation of the existence of God. As we have seen, Schellenberg seems to equate reasonable and inculpable nonbelief, but in fact, nonbelief that results from investigation that satisfies merely intellectual criteria of

adequacy may indeed be culpable in a broader sense. Therefore, the claim that there is inculpable doubt must be based on grounds that take into account more than the merely intellectual dimension of inquiry. So the marks of adequate investigation to which Schellenberg appeals do not settle the question whether one's disbelief is inculpable. The very possibility that one's lack of sufficient evidence to affirm God's existence, despite intellectual diligence, may be due to one's own spiritual and moral deficiencies, should make one reluctant to insist upon one's own inculpability and argue for atheism on the basis of it.

Nor does the fact that some agnostics are apparently very morally virtuous justify the claim that their inability to believe is not due to spiritual deficiencies. Of course, nonbelievers can be as morally virtuous as believers. But moral virtue is a matter of degree, and no one is virtuous enough to be immune to the kinds of spiritual deficiencies that can prevent one from surrendering to the will of God. Confidence in one's moral virtue can be a stumbling block to the willingness to admit one's unworthiness and need of redemption before a righteous and holy God.

To be justified in believing that one's doubt is inculpable would require being justified in believing that there is no self-deception or subconscious bias against religious commitment involved in the investigation. The greater one's intellectual honesty, the more reluctant one is to claim complete freedom from bias and self-deception. This reluctance is especially appropriate with regard to the issue of the truth of Christianity, which is so emphatic about the deceptiveness of sin and the inadequacy of the "wisdom of the world" to penetrate the mysteries of the divine. The intellectual virtues that are requisite to epistemic inculpability militate against confidence of one's freedom from bias and self-deception. Those who come closest to inculpability would be the least likely to claim it. Therefore, it is difficult for the nonbeliever to be justified in asserting her own epistemic inculpability and especially difficult to be sufficiently confident of it to infer that there is no God.

Schellenberg admits the possibility of self-deception, but insists that since there are some agnostics who genuinely desire faith, it is difficult to believe that they are deceiving themselves. Since these honest agnostics genuinely want to believe, if they were subject to self-deception, the result would more likely favor belief than nonbelief.

It seems that the psychology of religious belief is much more complicated than Schellenberg acknowledges. Whether or not to convert to Christianity is a momentous decision, and there may be ambivalence in a person's attitude toward it. Even people who honestly profess a strong desire to believe may also have fears and apprehensions about submitting to the rigors of a religious life. St. Augustine *believed* that God exists and desired faith for a long time before he was willing to commit to *belief* in God. But after his conversion he was acutely aware that it was his pride and lust that hindered him from surrendering himself wholly to God. How can we ever know of someone, or how can one know of oneself, that one is not subconsciously resisting belief in God because of a culpable unwillingness to submit completely to God's will? Both Scripture and experience attest to the difficulty of surrendering one's desire for personal autonomy and sub-

ordinating one's own will to God's. One might want to believe that God exists so that one will enjoy eternal happiness after death and at the same time be repulsed by the prospect of involvement in religious institutions that are not well respected by one's cultural peers. Given what we have learned in the last two centuries about the subjective factors involved in human cognition, it is rather difficult to believe that anyone is purely objective in her examination of the grounds of belief, especially in matters as momentous as religion. With the possibility of bias and self-deception ever present, especially when religious beliefs are under consideration, it is very difficult for anyone to be justified in asserting her own epistemic inculpability. And the more intellectually honest one is, the less likely it is that she will insist that she is completely free from bias or self-deception.

Interestingly, Schellenberg emphasizes that since culpability requires voluntariness, it is only when one knowingly (self-deceptively or non-self-deceptively) neglects to submit a belief to adequate investigation that one is culpable.²⁸ But to connect "self-deceptively" with "knowingly neglect" seems problematic. The possibility must be admitted that when one has neglected to submit a belief to adequate investigation because of self-deception, if the deception has been successful, then one probably would not be aware of the neglect. Since nonbelief that results from self-deception is clearly not inculpable, and since one who fails to submit a belief to adequate investigation as a result of self-deception will not be aware of the failure, Schellenberg's requirement that nonbelief is culpable only if the subject *knowingly* neglects to submit the belief to adequate investigation is too stringent. Therefore, we should not infer from the fact that a person is unaware of any negligence that the investigation was adequate or that the nonbelief is inculpable.

The move to atheism on the basis of Schellenberg's argument also requires being justified in accepting premise 2. The atheist would have to be justified in believing that it is more probable that a loving God would not allow her to fail to find evidence sufficient for believing that God exists, than it is that God might have good reasons for allowing her to remain for a time in doubt, perhaps for the purpose of testing her perseverance or helping her to become aware of her need for God. We have seen that from a Christian standpoint premise 2 can be challenged. Given that within a Christian framework it is plausible that God could have reasons for making himself hidden that are consistent with his love for all people, an intellectually virtuous inquirer should be very reluctant to insist that God could not have such reasons. The more intellectually virtuous the investigator is, the less likely it is that she will insist that her acceptance of premise 2 is justified. The agnostic investigator should be the first to admit that she has no direct experience of God, so she is not an expert on the subject of what God might do. The Christian tradition emphatically insists that "God's ways are not man's [sic] ways" and that his ways are often inscrutable or surprising. The agnostic is, therefore, hardly in a good position to be certain that God could not have reasons for remaining hidden. The agnostic's inference to atheism, if based in part on premise 2, would not be warranted.

Although, as we have seen, Schellenberg's discussion of inculpable non-belief focuses on the intellectual dimension of investigation, he does discuss

one Calvinian defense of the view that all nonbelief is the result of sin. Mark Talbot argues that it is rational for a Christian to believe that all human beings have a natural disposition to believe that God exists, and were it not for sin, all would believe.²⁹ Part of Schellenberg's defense of premise 3 involves a critique of Talbot's argument that a Christian convert can, from her own realization that before her conversion she unwittingly, but culpably, resisted belief that God exists, justifiably infer that all nonbelievers similarly resist belief.³⁰ Schellenberg accuses Talbot of begging the question when he asserts that the convert is justified in not taking into account the testimony of atheists who claim that they do not irrationally resist belief that God exists. The claim that all atheists resist belief because of sin cannot be inferred from one's reflection on one's own resistance prior to conversion without the assumption that all human beings have a natural disposition to believe, and to make that assumption begs the question.

According to Schellenberg, the problem with Talbot's argument is that it commits "epistemic isolationism," by attempting to justify the claim that all atheists resist belief by appealing merely to reflection on her own conversion experience. On the basis only of one's own individual experience, it is impossible to justify a claim about all people who consider the question of the existence of God. But the Christian theist need not confine herself to a consideration of only her own private reflections on her former resistance to theism. It is a central tenet of the Christian faith that all human beings are sinful, and that their sin causes them to resist commitment to God. Within the context of a Christian belief system, it is reasonable to believe the teachings of the Bible concerning the stubbornness of human beings in resisting commitment to God. It is unfair to accuse the hypothetical convert of begging the question for assuming the truth of Christianity in arguing against the agnostic's denial that she is irrationally resisting belief. The Christian is under no obligation to do the impossible—to argue for the truth of Christianity on non-question-begging grounds. Affirming the truth of Christianity is admittedly a matter of faith. But Talbot's hypothetical convert is not guilty of "epistemic isolationism" when she finds her own reflection on her past resistance to faith to be consistent with and supported by Christian doctrine and comes to believe that all nonbelievers are culpable. Against premise 3 stands, not merely the reflections of an individual convert to Christianity, but a rich and robust belief system with a long history. Given that culpability is not an empirical concept, there will be no philosophically or theologically neutral way of assessing culpability. And the kind of evidence that Schellenberg cites for premise 3 is rather weak from the point of view of Christian theism, which is rather skeptical of claims of human beings to know the condition of their souls. The claim to epistemic inculpability seems to be a thin thread from which to hang such a momentous proposition as the denial of the existence of God.

Conclusion

Given what Christianity says about God, we should expect that God would be mysterious, that evidence for his existence would be ambiguous, that some people should find it difficult to believe that he exists, that some

who believe that he exists should find it difficult to submit to his demands, and that some who do not believe would also be convinced of their own inculpability. Contrary to Schellenberg's argument that the hiddenness of God is evidence for atheism, it is indeed exactly what we should expect to find about God if what the Christian tradition says of God is true. Within the resources of that tradition we can find reasons why God would not make his existence more obvious than it is and reasons for denying that anyone is completely inculpable in failing to find sufficient evidence to believe that God exists. The Christian has ample grounds for rejecting both of the premises of the argument, which Schellenberg prefers to call the 'Argument from the Reasonableness of Nonbelief,' but which we can now see is better called the 'Argument from Divine Hiddenness.' Whatever the argument is called, it seems that it fails to show that God does not exist or that intellectually sophisticated Christians cannot be justified in believing that God exists.

North Central College

NOTES

1. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

2. *Ibid*, p. 83.

3. *Ibid*, p. 59.

4. *Ibid*.

5. Schellenberg mentions Karl Rahner, John Macquarrie, James McClendon, and George Lindbeck. See Schellenberg, p. 70.

6. Hick develops this idea in several works. Schellenberg's discussion is based on *Arguments for the Existence of God* (London: Macmillan, 1970), *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1983), *The Second Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1983), and *Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

7. John Hick, *Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 159, cited in Schellenberg, p. 101.

8. Schellenberg, p. 40, 98.

9. *Ibid*. p. 110.

10. Mortimer J. Adler, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* (New York: Macmillan, 1992) pp. 265-276.

11. J. D. Kiernan-Lewis, review of Schellenberg, J. L., *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, in *The Journal of Religion* 75 (1995), 295-296.

12. Schellenberg, pp. 199-204.

13. *Ibid*, p. 200.

14. *Ibid*, p. 201f.

15. *Ibid*, p. 202.

16. Although I do not believe that inculpable doubt exists, arguing against premise 2 commits me to the proposition that God would be justified in allowing inculpable nonbelief to exist. So I grant, for the sake of the argument, the possibility of inculpable nonbelief.

17. *Ibid*, pp. 132-152.

18. *Ibid*, p. 148.

19. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1985).

20. See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), and

Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1969).

21. *Ibid*, p. 212f.

22. Douglas V. Henry, "Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 18, no. 1 (2001) pp.75-94.

23. Henry offers the following list of texts in which one finds promises of God's responsiveness to those who seek him: *Deuteronomy* 4:29, *I Chronicles* 28:9; *II Chronicles* 7:14; *II Chronicles* 15:2, 12; *Psalms* 9:10; *Psalms* 14:12; *Psalms* 34:10; *Psalms* 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. Henry lists two other passages, *Isaiah* 55:6 and *Hosea* 5:6, 15, in which the responsiveness of God is "potentially limited because of conspicuous deficiencies in the sincerity of the seekers." *Ibid*. p. 90.

24. *The New Oxford Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

25. Schellenberg, p. 64.

26. *Ibid*, p. 65

27. Henry, p.81

28. Schellenberg, p. 64.

29. Mark R. Talbot, "Is It Natural to Believe in God?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), 155-171.

30. Schellenberg, pp. 74-82.