Schellenberg, THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT: PHILOSOPHY'S NEW CHALLENGE TO BELIEF IN GOD

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divine? Chalcedon holds that the Son does not abandon or lose His divine nature when Incarnate.

These three examples are representative of the philosophical analysis as a whole. There are many useful ideas, interesting connections, and provocative arguments, but all are presented too quickly, debatable assumptions are taken as settled, and alternative or opposing views are not given a careful hearing. The book is a good read as a step in the debate, but hardly—as Mullins’s tone throughout would suggest—the end of the debate. The timeless God is safe...at least for the present.


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John Schellenberg almost singlehandedly brought the problem of divine hiddenness, or the hiddenness argument, to the attention of academic philosophers. But why stop with that stodgy lot? His latest book *The Hiddenness Argument* aims “to provide an accessible, brief, but vigorous statement of the hiddenness argument and an explanation of the associated issues designed for wide consumption” (ix). Freshman philosophy students could understand and benefit from this book. It is ideal for introductions to philosophy or undergraduate courses in the philosophy of religion. I myself enjoyed reading it and recommend it to academic philosophers as an introduction to the issues.

The book has eight chapters, as well as a short coda and a relatively comprehensive list of recent work on the hiddenness argument (making it all the more helpful for philosophy students). Chapter 1 lays out the basic critical thinking tools and vocabulary needed to appreciate the hiddenness argument. This material, while presented well, is unavoidably dry. This book would have engaged an even wider audience had this material been saved until later, say, just before discussion of the argument’s first premise. Chapter 2 identifies the sort of theism at issue, but it isn’t crucial to a basic understanding of the argument. Chapter 3 is my favorite. Its main goal is to explain why the hiddenness argument was only discovered in the late twentieth century rather than centuries before. The most useful function of the chapter, however, is that it allows the reader to see, in engaging fashion, how Schellenberg’s argument is distinct from its predecessors.
Chapters 4–7 present and defend the argument (the full argument is given on 103). Chapters 4 and 5 concern the first two premises, respectively:

1. If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.

2. If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

From these two premises, it follows that:

3. If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

Chapter 6 defends the next premise:

4. Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

The conjunction of 3 and 4 entail that:

5. A perfectly loving God does not exist.

In chapter 7, Schellenberg defends:

6. If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.

The conjunction of 5 and 6 entail the final conclusion of the argument, namely:

7. God does not exist.

Schellenberg addresses many challenges for the argument as he develops it. Chapter 8 reminds us of some of these points, while addressing some new challenges that one might have only after having the argument fully in view.

The rest of the review will focus on 1–3, especially Schellenberg’s discussion of the first premise. Schellenberg gives the impression that the relevant notion of openness in the argument is “thin or minimal” (40, emphasis original) and that one can see the truth of the first premise by considering only “simple arguments.” What I want to show is that, while Schellenberg articulates a genuinely thin conception of openness, he relies on a far more demanding conception. If he wishes to avoid a familiar quagmire related to the intersection of ethics and action theory, he must jettison the minimal sense of openness from his argument. First, I explain how Schellenberg gets caught in the quagmire. Then I explain how he may be able to avoid it.

Schellenberg’s characterization of openness is contained in three successive sentences. As you read, notice how minimal A is and how demanding C is:
[A] Being open in the relevant sense at a certain time simply means not (then) being closed. [B] It means not through one’s own actions or omissions making it impossible for the other . . . to participate in personal relationship with one at that time should the other wish to do so. [C] Alternatively, and applying this now to God, it means that it will be possible for creatures who haven’t made it impossible themselves through their own God-obscuring resistance of the divine, to participate in a relationship with God; if they want to, they can do so simply by trying to do so (41, emphasis original).

In personal correspondence, Schellenberg tells me that A is supposed to be the minimal, intuitive idea of openness; B defines that intuitive idea; and C is the application of B to God. Schellenberg supposes that there is a single, minimal notion of openness at play in this passage. Not likely. I’ll show, first, that there is a big jump from A to C, and second, that there is no way for B to bridge the gap without incurring the need for substantial argumentation that Schellenberg hasn’t provided.

A-openness to X (i.e., openness to X according to A) just is not being closed to X. What is it to be closed to X? Here is an intuitive gloss. If I’m closed to X, then I’m inclined to take the necessary means of preventing X. If X is imminent, I will actively resist it. Suppose I’m closed to trying foie gras. Then I have some inclination to do whatever it takes to not try foie gras. I’m not going to order it. If someone puts it on my plate and asks me to have a taste, I’ll politely decline. If someone tries to feed me a bite, I will clamp my mouth shut like a stubborn child.

Suppose Fay is A-open, i.e., not closed, to trying foie gras. All that follows is that she’s not inclined to take the necessary means of not trying foie gras. She’s not going to actively resist it; however, it does not follow that she will actively pursue foie gras. If someone puts some on her plate and encourages her to try it, she will. Yet if there is any cost at all—if it would require something as trivial as getting up and putting it on her plate—Fay may never try foie gras. The key point is this: if all we know is that one is not closed to X, then there’s little to no presumption that X will obtain or that certain conditions necessary for X will obtain.

C-openness to X, in contrast, carries a guarantee that certain necessary conditions for X will obtain, at least when it is applied to God. God’s being open to personal relationship with person P guarantees that, if P wants to, P is able to have personal relationship with God just by trying. Now, why would God’s being open to personal relationship guarantee that this condition obtains? Presumably, it is not an accident or a complete stroke of luck that, if God exists, every finite person who wants can have a personal relationship with God just by trying. For C-openness to come with such a guarantee, presumably C-openness entails both that

(i.) God actively pursues the goal of ensuring that if a finite person wants to, she is always able to have personal relationship with God just by trying

and that
(2) if God actively pursues that goal, then the goal is obtained.

Schellenberg confirms this reading during his defense of the second premise:

To put it in the terms we used in chapter 4 [i.e., the chapter defending premise 1], a loving God’s openness to meaningful, conscious relationship with us means that such a God will ensure that we always are in a position to participate in it—unless of course we’ve disqualified ourselves through self-deceptive resistance toward God (60, emphasis is mine; cf. 45).

A God that is C-open to personal relationship doesn’t merely lack active resistance to personal relationship; such a God actively pursues it. Such a God ensures that a certain necessary condition for relationship always obtains.

There is, then, a significant shift from A-openness to C-openness. The former is minimal, the latter is demanding. A-openness to X requires only the absence of resistance (or the absence of an inclination to resist). There’s little to no presumption that (necessary conditions of) X obtain. C-openness, when applied to God, requires that God actively pursue relationship. It guarantees that certain necessary conditions of relationship obtain. Can B close the gap?

B-openness to X requires that, through one’s actions or omissions, one not make it impossible for X to obtain. B-openness appears to be more demanding than A insofar as B-openness requires that my omissions—my failures to act—not make it impossible for X to obtain. According to A, one can be open to X even if one doesn’t actively pursue it. So Fay can be open to trying foie gras right now even though she doesn’t right now go to the kitchen and put some on her plate. But her failure to act, her failure to get up and put it on her plate, is an omission that makes it impossible (given the circumstances) for her to try foie gras right now. So B is, at first glance, a more demanding conception of openness than A.

Yet B doesn’t take us anywhere close to C unless we make substantial assumptions concerning the metaphysics and ethics of omissions. Consider a familiar example. Doctor is open to Patient not dying, but Patient declines life support. Thus, Doctor omits life support—Doctor fails to supply it—and so the patient dies. Did Doctor’s omission make it the case that the patient died? Did the doctor kill the patient or merely let him die? And should it matter to a perfectly loving Doctor whether the patient’s death involved killing the patient or merely letting him die? These questions raise difficult and controversial issues.

If Schellenberg is to argue that A-openness ultimately entails C-openness, these difficult and controversial issues cannot be avoided. Consider this conjunction:

(a) there is a metaphysical difference between (i) God, through an omission, letting a nonresistant person fail to be able to have relationship with God simply by trying, and (ii) God, through an omission, making a nonresistant person unable to have relationship with God simply by trying; and
(b) a perfectly loving God would have substantially less reason to avoid a(i) than to avoid a(ii).

If this conjunction obtains, then to bridge the gap between B- and C-openness, we’d need further argumentation to show that God can’t merely let a person fail to have relationship with God simply by trying. If the conjunction doesn’t obtain, we need some argumentation to show that it does not. Either way, I predict that he will be forced to endorse some controversial theses concerning the metaphysics and/or ethics of doing versus letting. (As Schellenberg’s argument is actually formulated, I think he assumes that there is no difference between letting a nonresistant person non-believe and making a nonresistant person non-believe. See, for example, the discussion of Not Open on 57.)

Schellenberg’s argument, in its current form, leads to a familiar quagmire concerning the ethics and metaphysics of doing versus letting. It gets stuck in this quagmire insofar as Schellenberg uses the claim that God is A-open to relationship to establish that God is C-open to relationship. In closing, let me explain why he may be able to avoid the quagmire altogether by jettisoning A-openness from the argument.

Recall the first sub-conclusion of the hiddenness argument, which I’ve given an additional name:

**Love Guarantees No Nonresistant Nonbelief [i.e., 3]**: If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

Schellenberg reconstructs his argument for this sub-conclusion as relying on two premises, namely 1 and 2; however, his reconstruction obscures the role of C-openness in his argument. We can faithfully track Schellenberg’s reasoning while also illuminating the role that C-openness plays in the argument by providing an alternative reconstruction of Schellenberg’s argument for the sub-conclusion. This alternative uses three premises rather than two. The first premise of my reconstruction is the same as the first premise of Schellenberg’s reconstruction:

**Love Guarantees Openness [i.e., 1]**: If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person. (44–45)

The second premise guarantees that God is C-open to relationship:

**Openness Guarantees Ensuring**: If there exists a perfectly loving God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then God ensures that, if a finite person wants to, she is always in position to have a personal relationship with God just by trying. (41; cf. 60)

Together these two premises establish that divine love guarantees that God is C-open, that God ensures that every nonresistant finite person is able to have personal relationship just by trying. By guaranteeing that God is C-open to relationship, Schellenberg makes it easy to take the final step to the desired sub-conclusion. Once Schellenberg points out that belief in
God now is required to now be able to have relationship with God just by trying (60), he secures:

**Ensuring Guarantees No Nonresistant Nonbelief**: If God ensures that, if a finite person wants to, she is always in position to have personal relationship with God just by trying, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. (60)

These three premises (Love Guarantees Openness, Openness Guarantees Ensuring, and Ensuring Guarantees No Nonresistant Nonbelief) entail the desired sub-conclusion, namely Love Guarantees No Nonresistant Nonbelief.

I’ve claimed that what gets Schellenberg in the quagmire is his reasoning from A-openness to C-openness. This suggests at least two strategies for avoiding the quagmire: don’t rely on A-openness or don’t rely on C-openness. The latter option doesn’t seem promising. If he refuses to rely on C-openness, he thereby refuses to rely on Openness Guarantees Ensuring. The problem with this approach is that it becomes mysterious how Schellenberg can derive the guarantee that, if God exists, then there is no nonresistant belief. In other words, I don’t know how Schellenberg can get to 3 (i.e., Love Guarantees No Resistant Nonbelief) without asserting that God is always C-open to relationship.

Since C-openness seems essential to Schellenberg’s argument, the vulnerability to the quagmire is to be blamed on A-openness. The closer the notion of openness in 1 (i.e., Love Guarantees Openness) is to requiring mere absence of active prevention, the more minimal the notion of openness and the easier it will be to establish Love Guarantees Openness; however, the more minimal the notion of openness, the bigger the gap between openness and active pursuit. Consequently, it will be harder to establish Love Guarantees Ensuring. Schellenberg will have to find some way of bridging the gap, for God, between mere absence of active prevention and the presence of (successful) pursuit. This option will weaken his argument by making it depend on controversial assumptions concerning the putative distinction between doing versus letting.

Suppose Schellenberg jettisons A-openness from his argument and insists that by “open” he always intends C-openness. This move would make Openness Guarantees Ensuring trivial and so very easy to defend. Would this move make it harder to establish that Love Guarantees Openness? Not sure, but I think the main disadvantages will be rhetorical. Schellenberg will no longer be able to claim that he’s working with a minimal notion of openness. It also puts pressure on the aptness of the term “open,” as being “open to relationship” does not call to mind the sort of active pursuit involved in C-openness. Yet I don’t think this third option will introduce any new substantive problems into his hiddenness argument that aren’t already there. And, crucially, this option gets Schellenberg out of the quagmire. For he would no longer be trying to use the claim that God is not actively avoiding relationship to establish that God is actively (and
successfully) pursuing relationship. Hence, I suggest that Schellenberg drop the misleading claim that his argument relies on a minimal or thin notion of openness to relationship.

Whether the above criticism is apt or not, Schellenberg’s *The Hiddenness Argument* achieves its primary goal: it makes an important version of the hiddenness argument accessible to a wide audience.