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REASONABLE DOUBTS ABOUT REASONABLE NONBELIEF

Douglas V. Henry

In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, J. L. Schellenberg argues that the phenomenon of “reasonable nonbelief” constitutes sufficient reason to doubt the existence of God. In this essay I assert the reasonableness of entertaining doubts about the kind of reasonable nonbelief that Schellenberg needs for a cogent argument. Treating his latest set of arguments in this journal, I dispute his claims about the scope and status of “unreflective nonbelief,” his assertion that God would prevent reasonable nonbelief “of any kind and duration,” and his confidence that we can know that some doubters are not self-deceived.

In “Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?” (DRNE)¹ I described John Schellenberg’s atheological argument in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (DH)² as a worthy effort. Yet while I admire DH, I remain unconvinced that its argument is sound. Indeed, Schellenberg’s recent reply, “On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love” (ORN),³ demonstrates anew some of his argument’s deficiencies. To see how this is so I will review his argument and my initial critique, and then offer an appraisal of his latest set of responses.

I

Schellenberg’s argument is deceptively simple. At DH, p. 81 he argues:

- (P1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (P2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
- (P3) Reasonable nonbelief occurs.⁴
- (P4) No perfectly loving God exists.
- (P5) There is no God.

In DRNE I argued that the kind of reasonable nonbelief needed for a cogent argument is unlikely to exist. To preclude shoddy investigation or self-deception, Schellenberg looks to persons of high intellectual and moral virtue who have adequately investigated God’s existence. They combine “exemplary investigative procedure, great expenditure of time and energy, honesty in other situations, love for truth, rational self-control, and . . . desire to have the issue responsibly settled” (DRNE, p. 80). Given the ambiguity of the evidence, they are not swayed either way. They apparently



cannot be faulted for their doubt since they have done their best to settle the issue. Yet on closer analysis, I argued, persons such as Schellenberg stipulates are rare. Further, the factors he identifies do not guarantee adequate investigation. Even if they did, the result would be “persistent, continued seeking” (DRNE, p. 82), and if one remains on a quest to discern God’s existence, it is hard to see the evil that worries Schellenberg. After all, the determined will to find God is a step toward the “ultimate and perfect happiness” that lies in the divine vision, insofar as “rectitude of will is required for happiness both antecedently and concomitantly.”⁵ Far from bereft, such persons are near the God who assures, “those who seek me diligently find me” (Prv 8:17).

In his latest essay, Schellenberg offers three complaints about my critique.⁶ First, I “assume that reasonable nonbelief is reasonable doubt,” limiting my attention to reflective forms of reasonable nonbelief (ORN, p. 330). Since reasonable nonbelief includes both reflective and nonreflective instances, even if my critique succeeded, “nothing follows for nonbelief in general, since plenty of instances of nonbelief do not presuppose reflection” (ORN, p. 331). Second, I overlook his “starting point in reflection on the nature of Divine Love” (ORN, p. 334). Instead, I reconstruct his argument “‘from below,’ guided by independent consideration of what reasonable nonbelief might be and the justifications a God might have for permitting it,” instead of “from above,” whereby one can see that “God would not permit inculpable nonbelief of any kind or for any duration” (ORN, p. 334). Third, I insufficiently attend to the grounds under which worries about self-deception are justified. Rejecting my concern that self-deception “is always a possibility, and can perhaps never reasonably be ruled out,” Schellenberg says we “sometimes have good grounds for believing an individual to be honest . . . and also that some doubters are honest” (ORN, p. 332).

Each complaint has answers, so that it is reasonable to doubt the existence of the kind of reasonable nonbelief Schellenberg needs for a cogent argument. Before those answers, however, note a general problem for his argument. Put simply, if the standards for reasonable nonbelief are stringent, it becomes plausible to hold that they are never met, while if they are more relaxed, it is dubious that God would of necessity prevent such nonbelief from occurring. This is why the nonbelief needed for his argument to persuade is hard to come by. The kind of reasonable nonbelief most readily identified is least likely to throw a wrench into the work of divine love. The kind of reasonable nonbelief “left over” is most likely to be deficient in one way or another. This tension plays out in the ways Schellenberg variously falls back on either P2 or P3, with his efforts to shore up one or the other premise always making the other less plausible.

II

Schellenberg argues that whatever holds for reflective nonbelief, we may rest assured that inculpable, unreflective nonbelief abounds. There are “first of all, individuals—primarily from non-Western cultures—who have never so much as entertained the proposition ‘God exists’ (G), let alone considered the question of its truth or falsity.” There also are those,

“from both Western and non-Western backgrounds, who are to some extent familiar with the idea of God, but who have never considered with any degree of seriousness whether it is instantiated” (*DH*, p. 58).

Several issues problematize retreat to unreflective nonbelief. First, in *DH* Schellenberg limits his attention to reasonable doubt. Of unreflective nonbelief, he simply says, it “seems clear enough that [it] is inculpably exemplified” (59) and then moves on. Thus, his claim that my skepticism about P3 is “not only unsupported but false” rings a bit hollow (ORN, p. 331). Second, though his latest essay gives grounds for the inculpability of unreflective nonbelief, he makes some questionable factual and normative assumptions. Many persons, he says, have never had “the theistic idea . . . squarely before their minds, and so have never been in a position to respond to it at all, whether culpably or inculpably” (ORN, p. 331). Also, some acquainted with the idea of God have “due to formative factors of upbringing and/or culture beyond their control, never been in a position to see the importance of thinking about it, and so have also never been in a position to respond to it in one way or the other” (ORN, p. 331). Both the factual and normative assumptions underlying Schellenberg’s claims are arguable.

To turn first to the facts, consider Tertullian’s *anima naturaliter Christiana*—the soul that is by nature Christian.⁷ Tertullian is often overlooked but germane to the problem of the prejudicially dubbed “jungle savage” that is without God, for his interest lies with the “unreflective” masses, those who are “simple, rude, uncultured and untaught.”⁸ Such souls’ testimonies are “simple as true, commonplace as simple, universal as commonplace, natural as universal, divine as natural,” and alike in witnessing to the reality of God.⁹ “Is it a wonderful thing,” he asks, “if, being the gift of God to man, [the soul] knows how to divine? Is it anything very strange, if it knows the God by whom it was bestowed?”¹⁰ “All the world over,” he concludes, “is found the witness of the soul” to God.¹¹ Even now, anthropologists and ethnographers regularly discern among non-Westerners something akin to Tertullian’s *anima naturaliter Christiana*.

Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt offer the classic ethnographic treatments of the issue.¹² Lang believes that we “may conceivably have something to learn . . . from the rough observations and hasty inferences of the most backward races.”¹³ Challenging Edward Tylor’s theory that the evolution of religion progressed through ancestor worship, spiritualism, henotheism, and ultimately monotheism, Lang documents how “the idea of God, as he is conceived of by our inquiring plain man, occurs rudely, but recognizably, in the lowest-known grades of savagery.”¹⁴ He corrects errant assumptions about “savage” religion, for of “the existence of a belief in a Supreme Being . . . there is as good evidence as we possess for any fact in the ethnographic region” and it “is certain that savages, when first approached by curious travelers, and missionaries, and again and again recognized our God in theirs.”¹⁵ Schmidt follows Lang’s lead but deepens the methodological rigor brought to bear on the ethnographic evidence. He marshals numerous scholarly judgments identifying belief in “a genuine Supreme Being” among primitive cultures, and he argues patiently against underestimating the sensitive religious dispositions and theological distinctions of which such peoples are capable.¹⁶ Explanations

of “primitive monotheism” vary, and some dispute the existence of primitive monotheism *simpliciter*, but ethnologists “nevertheless accept the existence of a belief and cult of a supreme being among many primitive peoples (as clearly proved by Schmidt in his *UdG*), no matter how this fact is to be interpreted.”¹⁷

Schellenberg’s appeal to most non-Westerners and many Westerners, allegedly incapable of getting God “squarely before their minds,” is thus unduly presumptive. His factual assumption—that unreflective nonbelief is the rule and not the exception—is ethnographically questionable and arguably false. Clearly, it does not follow that there are not any unreflective nonbelievers. Yet the evidence does challenge the supposition that unreflective nonbelief is commonplace. Without denying the issue of any evil in a world with a perfect God, we must also avoid mistaking or exaggerating what evils there may be.

Schellenberg furthermore makes a doubtful normative assumption. Given that some fail to form the “theistic idea,” or to discern the importance of considering the possibility of such a being, he assumes their nonbelief is inculpable. There are good reasons to resist his assumption. First, Christians have long held there is something wrong with not having formed the “theistic idea,” or with being aware of the idea of God but neglecting it. Stephen Moroney outlines the ample account of the noetic effects of sin offered by scripture.¹⁸ Similarly, a tradition of Christian thinkers including Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, and Edwards seem to blame unbelievers for their errant judgments.¹⁹ Edwards is especially clear, as William Wainwright notes:

That “sufficient light for the knowledge of God” is available is attested by scripture. It is also implied by God’s purposes for humanity. . . . So “if men have not respect to ‘em as real and certain things,” it can only be from “a dreadful stupidity of mind, occasioning a sottish insensibility of their truth and importance.”²⁰

In short, Christians ordinarily have regarded nonbelief (unreflective or not) as culpable.

Nontheists have reason to be cautious about regarding unreflective nonbelief as inculpable as well. Edwards stands with Socrates, Seneca, Petrarch, and others who urge attention to the care and improvement of the soul alongside life’s commonplace concerns. Socrates *blames* the Athenians for their unreflective dispositions and their neglect of matters of ultimate concern. Seneca *faults* those who “do not care how nobly they live, but only how long, although it is within the reach of every man to live nobly, but within no man’s power to live long.”²¹ Petrarch *reproaches* those who concern themselves with the superficial and suppress mindfulness of the significant, and specifically for “the way they shut out the thought of it even when it is forced upon them.”²² Disparate in representing ancient Greek, imperial Roman, and medieval Christian outlooks, these three even so share Edwards’s view that neglecting “eternal things” is blameworthy.²³ One need not be a theist to think human beings ought to consider such matters, can consider such matters, and thus may be faulted when they do not.

Schellenberg furthermore faces a problem with what Robert Adams calls “involuntary sins.”²⁴ While some voluntarily disregard “eternal things,” others may involuntarily but still culpably discount God’s reality. Unfortunately, in his brief look at the issue, Schellenberg mistakes the scope and force of involuntary sin. He oddly thinks Adams’s concern is limited to “*morally repugnant* beliefs,” and since it is not morally repugnant to believe that the evidence for God is ambiguous, he says involuntary sin is “irrelevant and so may safely be disregarded” (*DH*, pp. 63–64). Yet Adams addresses a gamut of blameworthy states from barely noticeable peccadilloes to the morally reprehensible.²⁵ If doubt about God’s existence falls short of moral reprehensibility, that doesn’t make it inculpable, but only something other than reprehensible. Not only does Schellenberg mistake the scope of involuntary sin, he also fails to take seriously the force of Adams’s account. Wainwright points out that Schellenberg does not have “an *argument* for the claim that we aren’t culpable for ‘involuntary sins,’ merely an appeal to intuition.”²⁶ Intuitive appeals simply will not do in the face of Adams’s nuanced account of desire, emotion, deliberation, choice, and responsibility. Schellenberg’s errors about the scope, force, and relevance of involuntary sin give us another reason for caution in supposing unreflective nonbelief to be inculpable.

Finally, there is something disingenuous about his unqualified affirmation of the existence of inculpable, unreflective nonbelief. Why set stringent standards for reflective nonbelievers while ignoring such standards for unreflective nonbelievers? Schellenberg sets the bar high for reflective nonbelievers because he wants to be sure they are not deceptively or self-deceptively dismissive of the evidence for God’s existence. Yet if *reflective* persons may be deceptively or self-deceptively dismissive of the relevant evidence about God, is there any reason to suppose that *unreflective* persons are any less disposed to deception or self-deception?

In sum, in the few words Schellenberg offers about unreflective nonbelief, he assumes rather than argues that it is widely instantiated, and without making a case for it, he supposes that it is always inculpable. However, we have reasons for supposing that “unreflective nonbelievers” are not as generally thoughtless about or indifferent to God’s existence as Schellenberg assumes, so that there are far fewer of them than he imagines. We also have cause to regard unreflective nonbelief as culpable. Not considering the significant issues of human existence—including a highest good, God, to which unqualified commitment belongs—or briefly considering and then ignoring such questions, is blameworthy. Human beings should consider such questions, and they are in a position, at least sometimes, to consider such questions unless they ignore the profound for the picayune. Not least of all, “involuntary sin” leaves open the possibility that unreflective nonbelievers are culpable for their nonbelief even if they do not arrive at it voluntarily.

III

Nonetheless, Schellenberg might maintain P3’s truth. The odds seem to favor it. Given billions of people, some form of reasonable nonbelief is probably instantiated. If someone, however exceptional, through no fault of her own fails to enjoy the benefits of divine relationship, then perhaps

it is so much the worse for the idea of God. P3 might thus seem not only *prima facie* credible, as Schellenberg argues in *DH*, but also *secunda facie* credible despite my arguments.

Exposing two problematic positions taken by Schellenberg reveals P3's weakness within his overall argument. One relates to his view that reasonable nonbelief of any duration constitutes an evil. The other concerns his neglect of the epistemic implications of our social interdependence. Both derive from another feature of his argument: Schellenberg says we must understand divine love from above, not from below.

If we understand divine love from above, Schellenberg says we can see that "a loving God would not permit inculpable nonbelief of any kind or for any duration" (ORN, p. 334). He is motivated not merely by the intrinsic attractiveness of seeing things from the divine perspective. Rightly identifying the constitutive qualities of reasonable nonbelief depends on seeing the issues "from above," he believes, for his "understanding of 'reasonable' and of 'unreasonable' nonbelief is derived from reflection on the love of God, and not determined by independent consideration of what these notions can be taken to mean" (ORN, p. 331).

Yet however much we might try to identify with God—embracing God's nature, reflecting in light of God's omniscient wisdom, and loving in the profundity of divine charity—we cannot succeed in really seeing things from above. We must allow, then, that accounts of divine love are subject to the limits and frailties of our view from below. Honestly appraising the humble position we occupy reminds us that divine love could be different from what we imagine.²⁷

Be that as it may, Schellenberg believes that, looking from above, God would prevent reasonable nonbelief of *any kind* or for *any duration*. This claim seems incredible in both its typological and temporal aspects. Taking the temporal portion first, consider the following:

- (P2_a) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for as long as five years.
- (P2_b) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for as long as five weeks.
- (P2_c) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for as long as five minutes.

Schellenberg insists that God would not allow us any diminution of epistemic access vis-à-vis God's reality for any period of time whatsoever. He holds that divine love carries with it the necessity of our capacity for uninterrupted discernment of God's reality, unless we culpably resist it. Taking the typological claim in turn, consider other specifications of P2:

- (P2_d) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for St. John of the Cross.
- (P2_e) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for any novice Christian.
- (P2_f) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for any five-year-old child.

Combining the temporal and typological terms, yet other possibilities arise:

(P2_g) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for St. John of the Cross for as long as five days amidst his dark night of the soul.

(P2_h) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief doesn't occur for any five-year-old child for as long as five minutes.

If such cases count against God's existence, it would seem something has gone awry.

Looking at matters "from below" sheds light on the problem. To his credit, Schellenberg allows the divine-human relationship to be understood developmentally. "Were it to obtain, it would admit of change, growth, progression, regression. It might be shallow or deep, depending on the response of the human term of the relation" (*DH*, p. 28). If development marks our relationship with God, then starts, halts, jumps, and reversals are only to be expected. The reasons why are not difficult to ascertain. The "response of the human term of the relation" includes not only our voluntary responses to God, but involuntary factors impinging on our relationship with God. Think of the forms of human limitation—of cognitive power, attention, and stamina; of bodily appetites, exhaustion, disease, and death; of social location and interdependence. Amidst such realities, it is unsurprising that reasonable nonbelief of some duration arises within human experience. Perhaps one man's attention, due to neurochemical imbalances, fails him, and God's palpable presence one moment seems unrecoverable the next. Maybe one woman's psychologically crippling home life renders the trust propaedeutic to love of God beyond her, and the idea of God's reality seems fantastical. Or suppose a child reared in the church, given to experiencing divine benefaction during prayer and worship, suffers an injury that frustrates the ease of sensing God's company. Suppose in such cases that reasonable nonbelief obtains.²⁸ No perfectly loving God would allow this for even five minutes, Schellenberg thinks. How then can the divine-human relationship "admit of change, growth, progression, [and] regression"? Would God allow movement between the shallow shoals and great deeps within a dynamic relationship, but never allow anyone so much as to wonder where and whether God is? What about the saintly such as St. John of the Cross, whose refined faith emerges out of the crucible of God's sometime apparent absence?

Schellenberg's failure is his neglect of what we are. Essential to human nature are the constraints of embodied, dependent rational creatures.²⁹ Were we finite rational beings for which doubts about God were impossible, we would be angelic, pure intellects and not interdependent, psychosomatic amalgamations. Both our embodiment and social interdependence play roles. Given such things as chemical imbalances, psychological trauma, and physical injury, we can lose sight of important truths without culpability. We also can suffer epistemic harm through the fault of others, including the development of belief sets that make it hard to acknowledge God.³⁰ To say we should be safe from reasonable nonbelief attributable to the constraints of human nature is to say, in effect, that God should not

have created us. We rather should say that God—in creating embodied, socially interdependent, rational creatures—leaves open the possibility of epistemic failure deriving from physical embodiment and social interdependence. It will not do to complain that God should intervene, making his reality beyond doubt when embodied minds suffer frailty or when epistemic harm by third parties threatens. The unflinching intervention of a *deus ex machina* would play false with what we are, rendering chimeric bodily limit and social interdependence. Ultimately, something like Cartesian acceptance of our creaturely finitude, with gratitude for the insights about God of which we are capable (unless resisted through our own or another's culpability), seems the best response to the challenge of divine hiddenness—more so than taking limited epistemic access to God's reality as an insurmountable problem of evil.³¹

IV

I have expressed doubts about the kind of reasonable nonbelief needed for Schellenberg's argument to gain traction. The dubious assumptions he makes about unreflective nonbelief render it less useful than he imagines. The problem of involuntary sin leaves open another line of objection. He tries to ease the burden of meeting P3 by widening the meaning of "reasonable" based on his view of divine love. Yet the idea that God would preclude reasonable nonbelief "of any kind or for any duration" has defeaters grounded in human nature. In short, though he sees reasonable nonbelief as a widespread human experience, it is not as prevalent or typically inculpable as he claims, and where we might most readily find it, explanations saving the designs of a perfect God are available. One last issue merits attention: the problem of self-deception, to which I have made passing reference above.³²

Howard-Snyder and Moser see "a distinctively epistemic problem for the proponent of the argument from divine hiddenness." It is "no easy task to tell whether any particular candidate for inculpable nonbelief possesses or fails to possess those motivations, attitudes, and dispositions that putatively explain their inculpable nonbelief."³³ This is because no matter how one gauges honesty, scrupulousness, self-critical judgment, etc., it is possible to subtly shade one's take on the evidence, or faintly trim one's diligence in seeking evidence, or imperceptibly privilege one's long-held judgments. Still, Schellenberg says "we can sometimes have good grounds for believing an individual to be honest . . . and also that some doubters are honest" (ORN, p. 332).

Difficulty strikes at multiple levels. First, on what grounds might one judge oneself not to be self-deceived about the evidence for God's existence? I offered a list in DRNE including "exemplary investigative procedure, great expenditure of time and energy, honesty in other situations, love for truth, rational self-control, and . . . desire to have the issue responsibly settled." Perhaps those qualities make a case for the non-self-deceptiveness of someone's investigation. Other attributes might strengthen the case. Trenchant self-criticism is good, since pride is a deadly sin and can cause intellectual error. With Pascal, we might look for willingness to seek "what the Church offers by way of instruction."³⁴ Perhaps additional

desiderata could be identified. Still other issues remain. How many of the specified attributes must be instantiated to warrant a favorable judgment about the adequacy of investigation? To what extent is a favorable judgment compromised by a failure to instantiate one or more of the specified attributes? By what means may one measure the degree to which one instantiates these desiderata?

Second, leaving aside these difficulties, cannot the specified qualities always be self-deceptively instantiated? That one could self-deceptively instantiate honesty, scrupulousness, and self-critical judgment means that judgments about self-deception are deeply problematic. Shawn Floyd asks, "If people's beliefs about themselves are shaped by unreliable doxastic practices, then how could they know whether they are self-deceived? Their self-understanding may be shaped by beliefs that are themselves self-deceptively produced."³⁵ One can seem to be, to want, or to do something without *really* being, wanting, or doing that thing. To try to appear one way against the reality of things constitutes deception. When one is not aware that an inconsistency exists between what-seems and what-is, then self-deception looms. The insurmountable difficulty is that one can seem—both to others and to oneself—to be honest about the evidence for the reality of God without really being honest. One can appear—both to others and to oneself—to want responsibly to resolve the question of God's existence without really wanting to do so. One can seem—both to others and to oneself—to engage in all of the activities conducive to rational investigation of God's existence without really doing so. One can, that is, engage in deception and self-deception without appearing to do so. Indeed, it is necessary that they not appear as such in order to succeed. Successful deception and self-deception, by their very nature, are all but undetectable to the subjects of the deception.

Third, some self-deception may be "simple," when one blatantly neglects one's epistemic responsibility, but most is "complex." Complex self-deception arises when one has mixed motives, or a divided will, and thereby can in one way claim fair judgment, but in another way can be faulted for less than a fair judgment. One can want and not want to possess the truth; one can desire and not desire to be honest. As Wainwright observes, "the fact that many agnostics and atheists want to believe in God is consistent with their also *not* wanting to do so. For both can be true of the same person. Indeed, theists themselves often display the same ambivalence."³⁶ Among the epistemically responsible, self-deception is likely complex when it occurs. As difficult as simple self-deception can be to detect, complex self-deception is all the more intractable. This explains how Schellenberg's understanding of self-deception goes wrong. He writes,

initial awareness and deliberate forgetting [of one's neglect of the evidence] suffice to make the neglect which one later fails to notice voluntary, and culpable so long as it lasts. These things are also *necessary* for voluntariness and culpability in such neglect. . . . This is important, because it shows that persons not given to dishonesty as blatant as has just been described make very poor candidates for doubt that is self-deceptively culpable. (ORN, p. 332)

If all neglect were blatant, then perhaps more confidence in the capacity to avoid, detect, or repent of it would be warranted. Belying Schellenberg's austere depiction of human psychology, though, are the complexities of self-deception. Since self-deception is often more subtle than brazenly defying duty and subsequently suppressing memory of bad faith, a more modest finding is warranted: "Human beings are enormously complicated, and it is no easy task to tell . . ." ³⁷

Schellenberg might respond that I am expressing gratuitously radical doubt about human trustworthiness. Yet a wealth of social scientific evidence suggests the ubiquity of self-deception. Floyd reports studies showing that virtually all people think they are more intelligent than average, more attractive than average, more deserving than others, etc. ³⁸ However innocuous such judgments may be, they demonstrate how ordinary self-deception is. To underestimate the possibility of self-deception, then, would be an error (maybe even a self-deceptive error!).

Regardless, Schellenberg might say, in some cases we can discern our susceptibility to self-deception and avoid it. After all, we sometimes see in some people evidence of this capacity. Yet self-consciously avoiding self-deception sometimes does not guarantee the ability to do so all of the time. Moreover, we are likely to succumb to self-deception in the matters that concern us most, for therein do the complexities of motivation, will, and desire render the detection of self-deception most difficult. ³⁹ Bas van Fraassen sees trouble all around, for

the weights to give to different bits of evidence are not "written into" that evidence but must be supplied by oneself; and the imagination . . . so active in directions pleasing to oneself, or alternatively frightening, servant of wishes and fears, is itself the flawed mother of the flawed queen of the world! . . . how shall we ever find a spot of safety, secure from the distrust of one's own opinion? ⁴⁰

Schellenberg might also turn the tables. If those in doubt about God's existence may be self-deceived, then it is also true that those who hold out the possibility of self-deception among doubters may be self-deceived in *their* judgments. In one place, he says it is sinfully uncharitable to doubt nonbelievers' sincerity, for it constitutes "an ideologically based blindness to the good of (some) others and inability (in some contexts) to perceive sincerity and blamelessness. It looks a lot like a lack of openness to love." ⁴¹ Failures of charity are possible. Those who doubt the existence of God may be self-deceived about the blamelessness of their epistemic practices, but those who—through a failure of humility or charity—come to doubt the inculpability of nonbelievers may also be self-deceived. But isn't this just to cast all of us into a skeptical abyss? It hardly amounts to a recipe for strengthening P3.

One need not be a Christian to question the prospect of unblemished self-knowledge. Nietzsche observes, "we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law 'Each is furthest from himself' applies to all eternity—we are not 'men of knowledge' with respect to ourselves." ⁴² Freud's skepticism about the human capacity for self-knowledge is equally well

known. However, few traditions are more attuned to our flawed capacity for self-knowledge than Christianity. Augustine, for example, writes, "For though no one can know a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him, there are some things in man which even his own spirit within him does not know."⁴³ Augustine's concern is not one of mere limit. He asks God, "Does this remain the real truth—that I deceive myself and neither think nor speak the truth in your sight?"⁴⁴

It is not out of self-assured superiority that Christians might doubt the honesty of others' search for God, but out of deep misgivings about *anyone's* ability to avoid self-deception, including themselves. Thus is it that Christian ascetics embrace with utmost gravity the spiritual disciplines of self-mortification and practice the same with redoubtable intensity. They know how errant the will and the mind sometimes go, especially regarding spiritually significant truths.⁴⁵ Here again, van Frassen delineates the conundrum:

Beside the problems we have now about the very possibility of defining the conditions under which 'He deceives himself' is true, there are also strong doubts about whether (if there are such conditions) we could ever have adequate reason for thinking they obtain. . . . Once the possibility of self-deception is taken seriously it undermines all stories . . . , including those that attribute self-deception. We are in a quandary, personal as well as philosophical.⁴⁶

Along with the other issues I have addressed, taking seriously this last intractable quandary should bring us all—Schellenberg along with his favorable and critical reviewers—to question whether there exists the reasonable nonbelief needed for his argument's success. Where truly reasonable nonbelief is most probably instantiated, say in the examples explored in section III, it seems to pose no real difficulty for God's existence. Equally important, for the reasons discussed in section II reasonable nonbelief is simply not the pervasive evil Schellenberg thinks it to be. Finally, over all instances of apparently reasonable nonbelief hovers the shadow of self-deception. Given the issues, it would be precipitous for Christians to forfeit belief in God because of Schellenberg's argument. Moreover, it would also be premature, *pace* Schellenberg, for those "who doubt or weakly believe . . . [to] come to believe that there is no God" (*DH*, p. 213).

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NOTES

1. D. V. Henry, "Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?" *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), pp. 75–92.
2. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
3. J. L. Schellenberg, "On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love: Replies to Henry and Lehe," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), pp. 330–42.

4. By "reasonable nonbelief," he simply means inculpable nonbelief (*DH*, p. 3).

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (*Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, trans. R. McNerny [New York: Penguin, 1998], pp. 522, 528), IaIIae, Q. 3, Art. 8 and Q. 4, Art. 4.

6. He calls them "common complaints" because they are directed to me and Robert Lehe, whose critique appears in "A Response to the Argument from the Reasonableness of Nonbelief," *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (2004), pp. 159–74. To avoid speaking for Lehe, I will treat these complaints as directed only at me. Schellenberg also identifies three "peculiar problems" with my position; they relate to the nature, object, and standards of adequate investigation. Because his "common complaints" are more philosophically interesting, I will confine my present remarks to them.

7. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chap. 17.

8. Tertullian, *De Testimonio Animae*, chap. 1.

9. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

12. A. Lang, *The Making of Religion* (New York: Longmans and Green, 1898); W. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, 2nd ed., trans. H. J. Rose (London: Methuen, 1935).

13. Lang, p. 3.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 183. He adduces numerous examples, including the Andaman Islanders: "For long these natives were the joy of emancipated inquirers as the 'godless Andamanese.' . . . Yet when the Andamanese are scientifically studied . . . [they] turn out to be quite embarrassingly rich in the higher elements of faith. . . . Their religion is probably not due to missionaries, as they always shot all foreigners, and have no traditions of the presence of aliens on the islands before our recent arrival. Their God, Puluga, is 'like fire,' but invisible. He was never born, and is immortal. By him were all things created, except the powers of evil. He knows even the thoughts of the heart. He is angered by *yubda* = sin, or wrong-doing. . . . 'To those in pain or distress he is pitiful, and sometimes deigns to afford relief.' He is Judge of Souls, and the dread of future punishment 'to some extent is said to affect their course of action in the present life'" (pp. 211–12). (Internal references omitted; he cites E. H. Man, "On the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 12 [1883], pp. 69–116 [part 1] and pp. 117–75 [part 2].)

16. Schmidt, pp. 186–209.

17. H. Zimon, "Wilhelm Schmidt's Theory of Primitive Monotheism," *Anthropos* 81 (1986), p. 248. Cf. N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 22. For a Christian theological perspective, see T. L. Tiessen, *Who Can be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

18. S. K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 129–31.

19. Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 33.9; Anselm, *Proslogion* 1; Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.52.1; and Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.33. See also app. 2 of Moroney's book: "Representative Teachings on the Noetic Effects of Sin in Christian Tradition and Christian Scripture."

20. W. J. Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. D. Howard-Snyder and P. K. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 102, citing Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. C. A. Holbrook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 149, 157.

21. Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 3 vols., trans. R. M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917–1925), p. 159 (epistle XXII).

22. F. Petrarch, *My Secret Book*, trans. J. G. Nichols (London: Hesperus, 2002), p. 6.

23. Wainwright notes that “maxims of prudence that are normally observed in worldly affairs are neglected in religious matters. Edwards asks us to consider ‘how careful and eagle eyed’ the merchant is ‘to observe and improve his opportunities and advantages to enrich himself,’ or how easily people are ‘alarmed at the appearance of danger to their worldly estate,’ and how ‘they bestir themselves . . .’ Yet in spiritual affairs, we ignore familiar and obvious considerations like ‘the difference between long and short, the need of providing for futurity, the importance of improving proper opportunities, and of having good security, and a sure foundation, in affairs where our interest is greatly concerned, etc.’” (pp. 102–03, citing Edwards, *Original Sin*, pp. 154, 156).

24. R. M. Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” *The Philosophical Review* 94 (1985), pp. 3–31.

25. Adams lists “anger . . . jealousy, hatred, and other sorts of malice; contempt for other people, and the lack of a hearty concern for their welfare; or in more general terms, morally objectionable states of mind, including corrupt beliefs as well as wrong desires” (p. 4).

26. Wainwright, p. 118, n. 22.

27. Correlatively, because our vantage point is from below, we seem left with access to an inscrutable goods response to the problem of evil Schellenberg identifies. Schellenberg tries to forestall an inscrutable goods defense in *DH*, pp. 88–91, but reviewers have found his efforts wanting (see D. Howard-Snyder, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *Mind* 104 [1995], p. 432; and L. Lacy, review of *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, by J. L. Schellenberg, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40 [1996], pp. 123–24). If we can underestimate our epistemic access to God’s purposes, we also can overestimate it. Schellenberg seems at risk of the latter.

28. The problem of evil more generally cast looms large here. Leaving aside whether a perfect God would allow neurochemical imbalances, psychological and social harm, and physical injury, my point is to identify persons whose suffering of evil, through no fault of their own, gives rise to another evil not of their making either: the inability, for a season, to discern God’s existence.

29. Cf. A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

30. Wainwright describes the epistemic implications of social sin, because of which “it is not surprising that people are blind to the Good. This does not absolve humanity of responsibility for epistemic failure. For insofar as our own guilty choices contribute to the perpetuation of sinful social structures, we are responsible for the blindness they partially cause. . . . Noetic blindness can be traced back to sinful human choices, but the choices aren’t only ours but those of countless others. Human freedom includes the ability to cause significant epistemic harm to others as well as to ourselves” (pp. 111–12).

31. Cf. R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. J. Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 42.

32. See the penultimate paragraphs of sections I and II.

33. Howard-Snyder and Moser, “Introduction: The Hiddenness of God,” in *Divine Hiddenness*, idem, pp. 10–11.

34. B. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 155, #427; cited in *DH*, p. 143.

35. S. Floyd, "How to Cure Self-Deception: An Augustinian Remedy," *Logos* 7 (2004), p. 60.

36. Wainwright, p. 109.

37. Howard-Snyder and Moser, "Introduction," in *Divine Hiddenness*, idem, p. 10.

38. See Floyd, p. 66. He cites Moroney, pp. 90–97 and M. L. Snyder, W. G. Stephan, and D. Rosenfield, "Attributional Egoism," in *New Directions in Attribution Research*, vol. 2, ed. J. H. Harvey et al. (Hilldale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978), p. 113.

39. Floyd, p. 79.

40. B. van Frassen, "The Peculiar Effects of Love and Desire," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. B. McLaughlin and A. O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 145; cited in Floyd, p. 80.

41. Schellenberg, "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals," in *Divine Hiddenness*, ed. Howard-Snyder and Moser, p. 53. This claim is voiced by a diabolical character created by Schellenberg.

42. F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 15.

43. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 10.5 (pp. 210–11).

44. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.37 (p. 247); cited in Floyd, p. 61.

45. For an exemplary instance, see John Cassian, *Conference* 1.22.2. "Like Evagrius, he is acutely conscious of the twists and turns of the human heart and our knack for self-deception" (W. J. Harmless, *Desert Christians* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], pp. 389–90).

46. Van Frassen, p. 135.