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DIVINE HIDDENNESS, FREE-WILL, AND THE VICTIMS OF WRONGDOING

Travis Dumsday

Schellenberg's hiddenness argument against the existence of God has generated a great deal of discussion. One prominent line of reply has been the idea that God refrains from making His existence more apparent in order to safeguard our moral freedom. Schellenberg has provided extensive counter-replies to this idea. My goal here is to pursue an alternate line of response, though one that still makes some reference to the importance of free-will. It will be argued that God may remain temporarily 'hidden' to some people not merely in order to allow their free moral choice, but because His proper allowance of such choice has led to a great deal of suffering on the part of the *victims* of wicked choices. If His existence were constantly obvious to those victims, even in the midst of their victimization, many of them would be led to an attitude of enmity, even hatred, toward God.

1. Introduction

J. L. Schellenberg's argument against the existence of God can be summarized as follows: on any well-formulated theism, a positive relationship with God is necessary for our ultimate well-being (as well as being valuable in and of itself). Since God, if He exists, is necessarily perfectly loving, He loves us and desires such a relationship with each and every one of us (both for the sake of our ultimate well-being and for its own sake). Yet such a relationship requires a belief in God. So unless someone is incapable of such a relationship or actively resisting it, God will ensure that that person believes in Him. Yet, as a matter of empirical fact, there are at least some non-resistant non-believers. Therefore God does not exist.¹

This argument, often referred to as the 'problem of divine hiddenness,' has prompted much discussion and many replies,² and Schellenberg has

¹See especially his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); and *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

²See for instance Imran Aijaz and Markus Weidler, "Some Critical Reflections on the Hiddenness Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61 (2007), pp. 1–23; C. Stephen Evans, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006), pp. 241–253; Douglas Henry, "Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?" *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), pp. 75–92, and "Reasonable Doubts About Reasonable Nonbelief," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), pp. 276–289; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), pp. 433–453;



been diligent in responding to his critics.³ One important strand of thought in the literature has been the idea that God's allowing some non-resistant non-belief secures the good of human free-will in moral matters. On this view, if God's existence were starkly obvious to us, such that we were constantly aware of His presence, then our freedom to act wrongly would be inhibited. Just as one would prudently choose not to commit a robbery right in front of a watching police officer, one might prudently choose not to commit evil acts in the face of a starkly present God to whose judgement one is subject. Thus, in order to allow us to develop our moral character freely, in order to allow for our genuine autonomy and development of real virtue, God refrains from making His existence obvious to all of us at all times.

Such a line of thought has roots in Kant,⁴ and has seen further development by such thinkers as Hick,⁵ Swinburne,⁶ and Murray.⁷ Rightly or wrongly, Schellenberg remains unimpressed with it, and has pursued a number of avenues of reply.⁸ I will not focus here on addressing his critiques of the free-will response. Rather, I will pursue an alternate strategy, though one that still makes some reference to the importance of free-will. It will be argued that God may remain temporarily 'hidden' to some people not merely in order to allow their free moral choice, but because His proper allowance of such choice has led, in our rather corrupt world, to a great deal of suffering on the part of the *victims* of wicked choices. If His

Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Robert Oakes, "Life, Death, and the Hiddenness of God," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008), pp. 155–160; Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, "Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), pp. 183–198; Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); Chris Tucker, "Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine-Creature Relationships," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), pp. 269–287.

³See Schellenberg's "Response to Howard-Snyder," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996), pp. 455–462; "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), pp. 201–215; "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), pp. 287–303; "On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love: Replies to Henry and Lehe," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), pp. 330–342; "On Not Unnecessarily Darkening the Glass: A Reply to Poston and Dougherty," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), pp. 199–204; "Response to Tucker on Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), pp. 289–293; "Reply to Aijaz and Weidler on Hiddenness," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008), pp. 135–140.

⁴Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 152; and *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, trans. A. Wood and G. Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 123.

⁵John Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy," in *Encountering Evil*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Westminster: John Knox, 1981).

⁶Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 203–210; and *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd Revised ed., 2004), pp. 267–272.

⁷Michael Murray, "Deus Absconditus," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 62–82.

⁸Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, pp. 115–130; "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II)," pp. 292–296; and *The Wisdom to Doubt*, pp. 213–218.

existence were constantly obvious to those victims, even in the midst of their victimization, many of them would be led to an attitude of enmity, even hatred, toward the God who is openly seen to stand by, as it were, and permit their victimization. (Would one not resent a police officer who stood by and watched one's robbery?) Such an attitude could prove extremely harmful to the person, in that it could prevent the formation of a positive relationship with God, which Schellenberg grants is key to human well-being on a well-formulated theism. So God remains hidden in order to prevent that harm. That is, it will be argued that the problem of divine hiddenness can be addressed by refocusing attention from the autonomy of the *agent* of moral wrongs to the ultimate well-being of the *victims* of those wrongs. This argument will be referred to as the 'victim-centred reply.'

The paper is divided as follows: in the next section I will provide some further details on Schellenberg's formulation of the hiddenness argument, making plain certain background assumptions that will be important in what follows. Then in section three the moral freedom response to the problem of divine hiddenness will be fleshed out a bit more, followed in section four by a review of Schellenberg's principal reply to that argument. Then in section five the victim-centred reply to the problem of divine hiddenness will be laid out, followed in section six by an examination of some potential objections.

2. The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

Schellenberg is certainly not the first to discuss divine hiddenness as a worry for theism,⁹ but his formulation of the argument is particularly robust. For one, it prescind from the question of whether there are any reasonable arguments for God's existence from natural theology, religious history, or other such sources. It is designed to work even in a possible world in which nearly everyone always has a reasonable belief in God. If Schellenberg's formulation is sound, then even one instance of non-resistant non-belief by a capable agent is enough to disprove the existence of God. This contrasts with the formulations of Drange¹⁰ and Maitzen,¹¹ who focus on the amount of such non-belief and its unequal distribution, respectively.

Given his claim that God would ensure that *every* capable and willing person would at *all* times be aware of Him, it is not surprising that

⁹See for instance Ronald Hepburn, "From World to God," *Mind* 72 (1963), pp. 40–50; Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Logical Status of Religious Belief," in *Metaphysical Beliefs*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1957); and Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism* (Dordrecht: Reidel), pp. 1983, 106–117. In historical sources Pascal, Butler, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche are often cited as relevant, though discussions of hiddenness show up quite early in the Christian tradition; see for instance St. Gregory of Nazianzus's treatment of the problem in his *Orations*, 28, chapter 12.

¹⁰Theodore Drange, "The Argument from Non-Belief," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), pp. 417–432.

¹¹Stephen Maitzen, "Divine Hiddenness and the Demographics of Theism," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006), pp. 177–191.

Schellenberg's preferred model of divine disclosure¹² is one in which God would grant every single individual a powerful and utterly compelling religious experience as soon as she reached the age of reason (i.e., the age where she really became capable of such a relationship). After that first striking experience, the person would then retain a continuing awareness of God's presence. This way, she could never come to reasonably doubt the existence of God. Schellenberg writes:

This experience, let us say, is non-sensory—an intense apparent awareness of a reality at once ultimate and loving which (1) produces the belief that God is lovingly present (and ipso facto, that God exists), (2) continues indefinitely in stronger or weaker forms and minimally as a 'background awareness' in those who do not resist it, and (3) takes more particular forms in the lives of those who respond to the beliefs to which it gives rise in religiously appropriate ways. . . . Since the experience is had as soon as a capacity for personal relationship with God exists, we may suppose that it occurs quite early on in the life of each individual, in particular, before any investigations as to the existence of God have been undertaken. We may further suppose that any investigations *subsequently* undertaken . . . fail to undermine . . . the beliefs formed by this experience.¹³

Schellenberg is surely correct in thinking that to have a world in which there is absolutely no non-resistant nonbelief, some such model would have to be in place. A world in which it was merely the case that, for instance, the design argument was more compelling—maybe a world in which we discovered that the universe really was only 6000 years old—would not do the trick, as there would surely be some people who would be ignorant of the relevant facts of science, at least for a time. Even a shocking world-wide miracle would not suffice; surely some would miss it (be asleep at the time or whatnot). And such a miracle would have to be frequently repeated in order to ensure that everyone becomes aware of it and convinced by it upon reaching the age of reason. Further, as van Inwagen notes,¹⁴ these miracles would likely not suffice to show the existence of *God*; perhaps just a powerful demiurge. By contrast, an ongoing personal and powerful religious experience, one revealing some of the attributes or part of the character of God to the individual, might be able to surmount that obstacle.

Schellenberg's model of divine revelation might be necessary even to avoid Drange's worry about the amount of unbelief in the world. One can envisage possible worlds in which the proofs of natural theology are obviously sound to the unbiased observer but in which they have been suppressed or neglected for some reason, such that very few are aware of them. In such a world one might demand of the theist: 'Sure, the arguments *appear* compelling, at least to the few who know them, but if God

¹²Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, pp. 47–52.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁴"What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?" pp. 28–31; *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 141–142.

were real He would ensure that far more people were aware of them. He would overthrow the communist dictatorship [or whatnot] and guarantee access to the proofs. Since that is not the actual state of affairs, God cannot be real.¹⁵ Periodic world-wide miracles might be countered by brainwashing the public into thinking they are being caused by a mere demiurge, or perhaps an evil demon bent on re-establishing the bourgeoisie. There is reason to think, therefore, that if divine hiddenness really is powerful evidence for atheism—whether via Schellenberg’s robust formulation or Drange’s more modest version—then Schellenberg’s suggested model of divine disclosure is the only one to *guarantee* that the problem would not take hold. Otherwise, it is virtually certain that there would be some non-resistant non-belief, and probable that there would be widespread non-resistant non-belief (at least in certain places and for certain periods of time). Consequently, a reply to Schellenberg will also help to constitute a reply to Drange.

As noted, one prominent avenue of reply is the moral freedom response.

3. *The Moral Freedom Response*

Swinburne’s version of this argument¹⁶ focuses on the role that the strengths of conflicting desires play in our moral decision making. If we had a strong and constant awareness of the presence of God then unless we either cared little for what God thought of us or had no fear of His future chastisement, our desires to do evil would be so hampered by the conflicting desires to please the ever-present God that real moral choice would be severely impaired. Since free moral choice is a vitally important good, that would be a poor state of affairs.

Taking a somewhat different stance, Murray emphasizes that morally significant free choice is instrumentally valuable as a precondition for the development of virtue. Such development requires frequent opportunities over time for free choice between good and evil. And that in turn requires “the absence of circumstances which provide overwhelming incentives for creatures to choose only good or only evil. For if the moral environment contained such incentives, the creature with the capacity to choose freely would be precluded from exercising that ability and thus blocked from engaging in the sort of soul-making that makes freedom (and the earthly life) valuable in the first place. The result of all this is that God must remain hidden to a certain extent to prevent precluding incentives from being introduced.”¹⁷

¹⁵Some of those who defend traditional natural theology would wish to claim that we are actually in such a world; not, perhaps, a world in which the proofs are actively suppressed—though they have been in many times and places—but in which there is such widespread lack of awareness of their existence and true force, and indifference towards them, that the end result is the same: the proofs work in and of themselves but are not doing their intended job.

¹⁶*Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 203–210; *The Existence of God*, pp. 267–272.

¹⁷Murray, “Deus Absconditus,” pp. 65–66.

The claim, then, is that some measure of hiddenness is needed to safeguard the good of free-will, whether that good is conceived in intrinsic or instrumental terms. Schellenberg's model of divine disclosure is inconsistent with that good, so there must be something wrong with that model, and with the argument employing it.

4. Schellenberg's Reply to the Moral Freedom Argument

As noted earlier, Schellenberg has pursued several avenues of reply to this argument. But in his most recent work on this question, he attempts to show that not only is the moral freedom argument ineffective in solving the problem of divine hiddenness, but so is *every* potential solution that proposes to weigh some particular good (freedom, responsibility, etc.) against the overwhelmingly important good of a positive relationship with God. Given that on any well-formulated theism such relationship with God is the key to ultimate human well-being (as well as being intrinsically valuable), it can be argued that it makes no sense to weigh the good of relationship over and against some other good, such as freedom. Schellenberg states the point as follows:

Many serious objections to the divine hiddenness argument . . . have this in common: they concede that God has reason to make some sort of relationship with the Divine available but refer us to some additional reason they suppose to be available to God—usually expressed in terms of some great good God would or might seek to realize—in virtue of which God might permit nonresistant nonbelief for some time for some or all created persons, despite the Divine motivation to make Divine-human relationship at all times available to individuals. . . . Various goods we know of might be enumerated and considered in doing so—such goods, for example, as moral freedom, serious responsibility. . . . But discussing all the issues that arise in connection with such goods would obviously take a great deal of time. Fortunately, there is a way around that. First, let's notice that if the most fundamental spiritual reality is a personal God, then all serious spiritual development must begin with what I have emphasized, namely, personal relationship with God. Second, such relationship with an infinitely rich personal reality would have to be the greatest good any human being could possibly experience, if God exists. But then, one wants to ask, why this talk of some *other* good, for the sake of which God might *sacrifice* such relationship?¹⁸

So the good of relationship trumps all others, and Schellenberg takes this to be a general-purpose argument against many objections to the problem of divine hiddenness.

Various responses could be given here. With respect to freedom, one could argue that in order for a relationship to be genuinely loving, it must be entered into freely by agents possessed of a degree of moral autonomy and capable of exercising it. That is, one could argue that freedom is not a good whose value can be weighed over and against the good of relationship, but rather a necessary component, a constituent part, of genuine relationship.

¹⁸Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, p. 210.

However, that reply will not be pursued at present. Instead, a distinct line of response to the problem of divine hiddenness is pursued below, one that, while still making use of the role of free-will, shifts the focus away from the moral actor to the recipient of action—from the wrongdoer to the victim.¹⁹ The emphasis will be placed on the need to preserve the possibility of a person's having a positive relationship with God, which is consonant with Schellenberg's stated emphasis on the value of such relationship; hence the following reply may succeed in circumventing his general-purpose objection.

5. *The Victim-centred Reply*

Traditional theodicy relating to the problem of evil often focuses a good deal on the role of free-will in moral agents. God allows some evils, namely the evils perpetrated by rational agents, because to prevent them would be to take away the moral autonomy of those agents. For instance, if God always stops me from tripping people, then I will not be free to trip people, nor meaningfully free to choose to do so, and my moral autonomy—my ability to freely choose between good and evil—will be undermined. Such a removal of autonomy might be held to be bad in and of itself, or bad because it takes away the ability of people to enter into genuine relationships with one another and with God, or both. The free-will reply to the problem of divine hiddenness works in a similar way, as has been seen above. Just as God allows some evil in order to preserve the good of moral freedom, He allows some ignorance of His existence, again to preserve moral freedom.

Suppose that the free-will reply to the problem of evil has a measure of truth to it, such that God properly allows moral freedom, with all its negative consequences in human evil and suffering. Suppose further that Schellenberg is correct in thinking that this moral freedom is by itself an insufficient justification for divine hiddenness. On this perspective then, moral freedom helps to solve the problem of evil, but not (directly) the problem of divine hiddenness. If this were the true state of affairs, another reply to the problem of divine hiddenness would open up.

Imagine a possible world where evil is still very much a problem due to God's permission of moral freedom, but where divine hiddenness is no problem at all; a world where people still commit and suffer frequent moral wrongs, but where Schellenberg's preferred model of divine disclosure

¹⁹The editor has raised the idea that such a shift in focus from actor to recipient might also prove illuminating in cases where the action in question is beneficent rather than evil. As he puts it: "Perhaps we appreciate the good others freely do on our behalf if we *don't* think of their acts as performed with the certain knowledge that God exists and is judging them for how they act. This might give God an additional reason to permit a degree of hiddenness; not only does it (in certain cases, at least) preclude the souring of our relationship with *Him* in the wake of evil acts that others perform, but it also augments (in certain cases) our relationship with *one another* by increasing our appreciation for the good that they do." This seems to me a forceful point. If Schellenberg's preferred model of divine self-disclosure were adopted, I expect it would have the effect of skewing our interpersonal relations.

obtains and everyone has had a constant awareness of God's presence from age seven onward. In such a world, those who suffer moral wrongs suffer those wrongs while remaining explicitly aware of God. Now, perhaps—just *perhaps*—an already virtuous agent who has, moreover, thought through the problem of evil, will be able to suffer those wrongs without resenting the ever-present God for not intervening on her behalf. But it is plausible to think that many individuals, particularly the less mature (whether in age or character), would absolutely come to resent God, perhaps even hate Him. Consider a ten-year-old girl being severely bullied on the playground, or suffering the wrenching heartache of her parents' divorce, or the death of a sibling. All the while she is aware of God's presence. One might think that such an awareness would provide comfort, and perhaps for some it would. But it only embitters her. After weeks of begging God to stop the bullying/divorce/impending death and being gently told in reply that He must not due to the need to preserve moral freedom (or the stability of the laws of nature, or some higher explanation beyond her finite understanding, etc.), her response is growing enmity towards God.

It is difficult to say how common such a scenario would be on Schellenberg's model of divine disclosure, but one suspects it would be far from unknown. So perhaps God has refrained from adopting this model, and thus remains at least temporarily hidden to some, not in order to preserve their moral freedom (which freedom He wishes to maintain for other reasons), but in order to preserve the possibility of eventual positive relationship with many whose permanent estrangement would be a genuine risk on Schellenberg's model, a genuine risk of too early and too constant a revelation of the divine presence.

It is sometimes thought that one of the reasons why divine hiddenness is such a concern is that the fact of God's remaining hidden seems to make the problem of evil all the more intractable.²⁰ If only we could be assured of God's presence in the midst of our suffering, some think, then we would be assured of His reality and comforted in our suffering. No doubt for some that is true. But for others, especially the morally and spiritually immature, a sense of God's presence in the midst of intense suffering, when God will not relieve that suffering, would only spark resentment and serve to block future positive relationship.

Consequently, here we have a response to the problem of divine hiddenness which avoids the central thrust of Schellenberg's general-purpose reply, for here it is not a question of directly weighing some competing good (such as moral freedom) over and against relationship with God and

²⁰See Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 306–307; and James Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995), pp. 13–24. For a thorough and convincing discussion of the broader conceptual relationships obtaining between the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness, see J. L. Schellenberg, "The Hiddenness Problem and the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

referring to that good in order to justify hiddenness, but rather of explaining hiddenness in terms of safeguarding that very relationship.

6. Objections

(1) *God could withhold a constant sense of His presence from the very young or otherwise immature, and provide it at a later age or stage of development, thus preventing a great deal of non-resistant non-belief while also preventing such resentment towards Him.* He certainly could, but any delay would constitute a departure from Schellenberg's model of divine disclosure and thus allow some non-resistant non-belief. Thus his robust formulation of the problem, in which any non-resistant non-belief disproves the existence of God, would still be defeated. Consequently, the hiddenness argument would need to shift from Schellenberg's formulation to Drange's, focusing as it does on the amount of non-belief. But if the victim-centred reply functions against Schellenberg's version, it also functions to some extent against Drange's. After all, the world is populated by a not-insignificant number of immature people. Again, not just the young, but the morally and spiritually immature. Consequently, we can expect to live in a world in which God is to some degree hidden—though the expected extent of that hiddenness will be difficult to quantify, partly because it can be difficult to quantify one's own and others' degree of moral and spiritual development, and partly because of the very real possibility that the objective standards here are rather more stringent than we realize.

(2) *Devout believers in God often confront evil and misfortune without the slightest resentment. Why think this would be such a huge worry, at least for them?* Serious, devout believers are presumably mature in their faith and so would presumably have fewer problems here. Though one wonders whether even mature believers—not saints, perhaps, but mature—would not suffer some thoughts of resentment if placed in a situation of intense and continual suffering while also aware of the presence of God. Might the relationship not be damaged by this? Again, if such is a worry, then God has a reason to remain experientially hidden based on the need to safeguard the long-term relationship (and hence long-term well-being of the person concerned). And on an individual level, to what extent can any of us be fully confident in our own capacities here?

(3) *Perhaps then God should not grant us a continual sense of His presence at all (at least, with respect to those of us who are not already saints). But surely He could still grant us more frequent religious experiences than He does, such that most of us could not rationally deny His existence. He could do this without giving rise to the negative consequences referenced in the free-will response and the victim-centred reply. In other words, He could be a good deal less hidden, without notable attendant problems.* Schellenberg in fact suggests something like this. He grants that the free-will response carries a certain force, but he thinks it ineffective against his overall argument, for there are "serious problems in the way of any attempt to apply it, not only to a situation in which God appears *evidently and forcefully present on a continual basis*—

where it is moderately persuasive—but also to a situation in which God only provides evidence causally sufficient for belief in the absence of resistance” [Emphasis in original].²¹ I expect he might say much the same with respect to the victim-centred reply.

Now, this line of response is not really open to Schellenberg, given the robustness of his formulation of the hiddenness argument, with its corresponding model of divine self-disclosure. For, as was noted earlier, it is doubtful that non-resistant nonbelief could be prevented at all times for all people unless his preferred scenario—a scenario of powerful and ongoing religious experience given to all and beginning from the age of reason—were actualised. Yet, as with the first objection above, the present objection might instead be put to use by an advocate of Drange’s formulation of the problem of divine hiddenness. Thus, perhaps there will be some non-resistant non-belief. And perhaps God could not grant to all (or even most) a continual sense of His presence without serious attendant problems. Still, God could give each of us regular (but not constant) and powerful religious experiences. These would convince us of His existence, but would not impose so continual a sense of His presence as to interfere with our moral freedom. And, for the immature, the experiences could be discontinued during periods of intense suffering, in order to forestall resentment toward God. So while there would still be some non-belief, there would presumably be a good deal less than there is now, and it is that amount which concerns Drange.

Several things can be said in reply to this proposal. But before discussing its relevance to the victim-centred reply, I would first like to discuss how a defender of the free-will response might address it, as it seems to me that there are some promising avenues of reply open here; for even on this sort of scenario one might think that moral development could be inhibited. Perhaps the regular (weekly? monthly?) sessions in the open presence of an all-powerful and righteous Judge would influence behaviour in a way not conducive to genuine autonomy and the development of real virtue, especially if begun early in life (as they would need to be if non-resistant non-belief were to be minimized). Such worries could be mitigated by making the religious experiences still less common. But then the likelihood of there being non-resistant nonbelief increases dramatically, with at least some individuals questioning the veridicality of the experiences (‘If these visions are really of God, why does He grant them so infrequently, leaving me on my own the rest of the time?’). In fact, there is something of a dilemma here: if the experiences are too common they are more liable to inhibit moral autonomy, and if too uncommon they are more liable to being dismissed as non-veridical (especially when combined with a person’s considerations of the problem of evil, naturalistic explanations for religious experience, etc.).

²¹“The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II),” p. 292; see also *The Wisdom to Doubt*, pp. 213, 223.

Yet surely, one might reply, an omniscient being could arrange things in such a way that moral autonomy could be preserved while non-resistant non-belief would be kept to a minimum, even if not entirely prevented. In reply, one could make note of the difficulty of specifying just how much hiddenness would be allowed by God (presumably less than the amount we actually see), and why *only* that much. But more significantly, from the perspective of the theist, there is the simple empirical point (much neglected in the hiddenness literature) that religious experiences are actually quite common across the population. About a third of all people (35–40 percent) have at least one in the course of a lifetime,²² and a lesser though still significant number have multiple such experiences.²³ The one-third figure is higher among the devout and somewhat lower among those who self-identify as non-religious (a quarter rather than a third).²⁴ A hiddenness argument relying on intuitions about the amount of unbelief rather than the mere existence of unbelief must face up to the contrasting intuitions that can be raised from a recognition of this empirical data. The theist might indeed be troubled by the fact that God does not grant experiences of His presence to more people, more often, than He actually does. But correspondingly the atheist might be troubled by the fact that such a massive number of people claim such experiences, even among those who belong to no organized religion. Perhaps God is not quite so hidden as has been assumed.

If Schellenberg's model of divine self-disclosure is objectionable, so is total hiddenness; even a theist might be suspicious of a world in which no one ever had a sense of God's presence. Presumably the preferred state of affairs lies somewhere in between. The question is where. When these empirical considerations are combined with the free-will reply, other replies not discussed here,²⁵ and the easily forgotten point that there may be

²²For a summary of survey data collected over the past forty-five years see Spilka et al., *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford, 2003), pp. 299–312. A representative example: in a 1978 study Hay and Morisy sampled 1,865 people in Britain. 36 percent responded affirmatively to the question "Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?" For further data and analysis see also David Hay, "The Biology of God: What is the Current Status of Hardy's Hypothesis?" *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 4 (1994), pp. 1–23.

²³According to one study, "although about a third of all people have had the experience, only 18 percent have had it more than twice and only 8 percent 'often' and more." See Peter Fenwick, "The Neurophysiology of Religious Experience," in *Psychiatry and Religion*, ed. D. Bhugra (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 170.

²⁴Spilka et al., *The Psychology of Religion*, p. 308. See also B. Beit-Hallami and M. Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief, and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 80–81.

²⁵Several strands in the literature hold promise, though I am especially partial to Swinburne's 'responsibility argument' (see *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 210–212, 257–258; and *The Existence of God*, p. 271). According to this idea, God does not make Himself personally apparent to all because He wants to grant us the great responsibility (and privilege) of bringing others to a knowledge of Him, which responsibility could not be granted were we all informed of God's existence by God Himself. I attempt to develop this idea further and reply to Schellenberg's objections (as stated in his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, pp. 191–199;

further explanations for hiddenness to which we are not privy,²⁶ it is plausible to maintain that the actual state of affairs may not be too far removed from what could legitimately be expected of a theistic universe.²⁷

So far my reply to this objection has focused on lines of response that an advocate of the free-will defense might employ. But what of my own victim-centred reply? Here too a counter-argument is available, I believe. For the idea is supposed to be that God should grant us regular, powerful experiences of Himself, such that non-resistant non-belief is (mostly) eliminated, but stop them during periods of intense suffering in order to prevent our resentment (with its attendant barriers to relationship and hence the individual's long-term well-being). But then we could just as easily end up with a situation where the individual resents God due to His abandonment of the sufferer when the sufferer believes she needs Him most. Given that this could well be the outcome in many such cases, one obvious way around this problem would be for God to grant rather fewer experiences of Himself, and to fewer people, but still enough such experiences that most enquirers could learn of them and of their commonality across the population (as well as across times and cultures). That way, we could still have good experiential evidence for God's existence,²⁸ yet not have an expectation of regular, personal religious experiences, and so not have any special resentment regarding the absence of those experiences during periods of victimization or other intense suffering. In other words, we would end up with a state of affairs not dissimilar to the one we seem actually to be in.

"The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II)," pp. 288–292; and *The Wisdom to Doubt*, pp. 211–213), in my "Divine Hiddenness and the Responsibility Argument" (under review).

²⁶From McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*, pp. 88–91, 103–104, it is clear that even if such an argument from ignorance is not wholly compelling on its own, it can form an effective part of a cumulative case. In addition, the replies considered here are mostly presented from the perspective of a sort of *minimal* theism; particular religious traditions may have further avenues of reply available to them which draw on additional doctrines particular to the tradition. For instance, a distinctly Christian theism might appeal to certain facts about the fall of humanity, among other teachings.

²⁷It may also be worth noting that there certainly have been cases in which people experience a regular or even near-constant sense of the presence of God. For instance, one frequently reads of such a phenomenon in the context of the lives of the saints in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Here we have a fact that fits my present argument: namely, that these always seem to be people of marked moral rectitude who came to experience this presence in the course of lives of obvious sanctity and continual prayer. In other words, God may grant a constant or near-constant presence of Himself to those who can handle it spiritually. The average person, by contrast, might find his moral autonomy infringed upon by such a presence, or (as in the victim-centred reply) come to resent the God it reveals, while a moral reprobate would (in addition to these problems) probably find such a constant presence more of a torture than a blessing.

²⁸I say 'good' rather than 'wholly indefeasible,' because there are of course various objections to taking such experiences as veridical, some of them related by Schellenberg in *The Wisdom to Doubt*. I argue elsewhere ("Neuroscience and the Evidential Force of Religious Experience," *Philosophia Christi* 10 [2008], pp. 137–163) that the best of these objections, those arising from contemporary neuroscience, can be addressed. Here I need only rely on the idea that religious experiences can constitute *prima facie* evidence for the existence of God.

(4) Presumably there are cases in which a person resents God for not intervening during her victimization, but in which God still grants an experience of Himself to that person, perhaps at some later time. Why then does He not do so with everyone?²⁹ Perhaps God does so in those cases in which God's knowledge of the person's character is such that it is apparent that doing so will likely not damage the prospects of a long-term relationship, and He refrains from doing so in those cases where such intervention would likely have such an effect.³⁰ At any rate, if such an experience were a one-off event, I suspect both Drange and Schellenberg would reject it as insufficient evidentially, and if it were instead constant or regular, then the worries raised in my reply to objection three would recur.

(5) The last objection may bring to mind another point made by Schellenberg, namely that love involves seeking personal relationship, and so involves risk.³¹ It may even involve the risk of rejection. But God's love would be such that He would not remain hidden from us on this account. He would seek out relationships with us even in the face of possible rejection. One can grant this point and still note that the manner of seeking relationship may differ according to circumstances. Love may involve risk, but it need not involve imprudence. My point has been that for many people, Schellenberg's preferred model of divine disclosure (or even a scenario in which God grants regular rather than constant experiences of Himself) would be an imprudent manner of seeking relationship, given the prevalence of evil in our world and what is likely a common proneness to resent an evidently present and non-intervening God in the midst of that evil.

Perhaps if Schellenberg's model of disclosure were the only one open to God, the 'love is risky' point would have more sting. For then God would really have only two alternatives: make Himself constantly evident to all of us from an early age, or leave us all in a state of justified non-belief in Himself. But clearly that is not the only possible method of divine disclosure. God might, for instance, choose to reveal Himself experientially to certain people (especially those for whom such experience is not as risky), whose task would then be to testify to that revelation and so draw others into relationship with God by means of testimony. Or He might choose to reveal Himself to people via less frequent (and hence less risky) but still relatively common experiences of Himself. Once again, this may reflect the state of affairs in which we actually find ourselves. This is a state in which there is some non-resistant non-belief, as some among us find all claims to such revelation suspect, and/or lack experiences apparently of

²⁹My thanks to an anonymous referee for the present objection.

³⁰If one were to adopt a middle knowledge perspective here, a stronger reply would be available. But I prefer to remain neutral on that issue, and any account of God's omniscience with respect to a person's current thoughts and character should be sufficient for the point being made.

³¹See for instance Schellenberg's "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 47–50.

God (or come to doubt the experiences they have had). But what the victim-centred reply is designed to show is that there is, nevertheless, good reason for God's allowing this state of affairs, given the options.

(6) *Still, if the risk proved too great, God could overwhelm the suffering individual with such a strong sense of divine love and compassion that any possible thought of resenting Him would be undone.* Really? Perhaps that is possible, but showing it would require a good deal of argument. The scenario of the unfortunate ten-year-old seems quite plausible, even if God were to grant her still more intense experiences of His presence and love. For then His inaction in the face of His apparent love might come to seem more and more incomprehensible (and, perhaps, reprehensible).

Of course, one could hold that God should so overwhelm the individual as to take away her free-will concerning whether to entertain such resentment. Given the importance of a loving relationship with God for a person's ultimate well-being, God should simply force a positive response to His presence. Indeed, this is one line of reply that Schellenberg endorses with respect to the free-will response: on a well-formulated theism, the relationship is so important that a loving God would simply disable our free-will in cases of intractable resistance.³² (I take this to signify a shift in Schellenberg's thinking, as this argument does not fit comfortably with the previous 'love is always risky' point; for if God will simply overwhelm us if we prove uncooperative, love is hardly risky at all.)

However, given the *prima facie* value that most are inclined to place on free will and moral autonomy, this may seem counter-intuitive. Certainly it is not a model of divine-human relationship that would be regarded as acceptable by most orthodox Jewish or Christian theologians. Nor is it one that I personally find appealing. Still, it must be granted that this is a mode of reply open to Schellenberg, and if one does not share my intuitions on this score then it may well constitute an effective counter to both the free-will response and my victim-centred reply.

(7) *The victim-centred reply relies on the background assumption that it is better for a person to remain ignorant of God's existence than to resent or hate God. (For the risk of such ignorance, a risk arising from God's not granting constant or at least regular religious experiences to anyone capable of them and willing to receive them, is being borne for the sake of avoiding possible resentment toward God.) But the truth of this assumption is not obvious. What if ignorance of God is spiritually more pernicious for a person than is hatred of God? After all, if someone hates God then she is presumably at least acknowledging God. And don't some theologians grant that anger towards God can be a better state, spiritually, than indifference towards God?*³³ There may be some truth in this, but universal generalizations are problematic in the present context. Perhaps for some people ignorance would be more pernicious than resentment, and for others the reverse. Maybe it varies according to peculiarities of

³²Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, pp. 225–226.

³³My thanks again to an anonymous referee for this objection.

character; we all have our own tailored proneness to certain sins, so perhaps those of us more naturally prone to sloth and apathy are more at risk from ignorance, and those more naturally prone to defiant pride more at risk from resentment. If something like this holds true, we could presumably still be left with a state of affairs in which, for a high percentage of us, it is better not to have constant or regular religious experiences (or, better for us until we have attained a certain stage of moral/spiritual maturity).

Admittedly, however, this is an area in which there are wheels within wheels: there may be people for whom prolonged spiritual ignorance is not ultimately detrimental for their eventual knowledge and love of God; there may be others for whom even brief periods of doubt and unclarity are tremendously destructive. There may be some for whom the risks of resentment which I have laid out are minor, and others for whom they are not. Likewise, there probably are some cases where impassioned rage against God evinces a spiritual state superior to that of someone merely indifferent. (On the other hand, surely the virtuous agnostic is in better shape than the committed satanist.) Again, when we take into account these many variables, and the limits to our knowledge of their extent and impact in peoples' lives, we should perhaps be less surprised at the per-capita rates of religious experience uncovered by sociologists. We simply cannot rationally infer the non-existence of God from the less-than-universal awareness of God among non-resistant non-believers, nor can we infer His non-existence from the relative frequency or infrequency of such awareness. The situation on the ground, so to speak, is simply too complex for that.³⁴

7. Conclusion

To sum up: key assumptions of Schellenberg's formulation of the problem of divine hiddenness have been laid out. The free-will response has been reviewed, followed by Schellenberg's latest critique. The victim-centred reply was then presented. This solution to the problem of divine hiddenness plausibly circumvents Schellenberg's latest objection to the free-will response. However, it faces at least two possible sources of weakness: it relies on the idea that God is correct in granting us the freedom to accept

³⁴We are still working from within a minimal theism here, but it might be worth noting that specific religious systems have further resources to mitigate the evil of this remaining non-resistant non-belief. One idea here would be the notion that there is a life after death in which we will all encounter God (or, at least, the truth of His existence). If correct, such a doctrine would have the mitigating effect of rendering all non-resistant non-belief *temporary*. If the necessary temporal limitation of non-belief is then combined with the further idea that to develop, in this life, a deep-seated hatred or resentment of God might cause a *permanent* breach with Him, both in this life and the next, then God's allowing some temporary non-resistant non-belief in this life becomes all the more evidently justified. For now the weighing of relevant risks includes in the calculation the weighing of a temporary evil (non-resistant non-belief) against a permanent good (eternal communion with God). Of course, this point is complicated by the fact that different religious groups have varying views on the question of whether an instance of non-resistant non-belief that lasts through to the end of a person's life is necessarily an insuperable barrier to communion with God after death. Different views on this would obviously impact the weighing of risks in different ways.

or reject Him, an idea Schellenberg questions; and it further relies on the idea that some sort of free-will theodicy to the problem of evil is plausible, such that God properly refrains from intervening in much of the suffering and victimization we encounter in the world. This of course is widely questioned. Still, if one grants the common theistic perspective on both of those issues, then we have in the victim-centred reply a new and potentially workable solution to the problem of divine hiddenness.³⁵

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