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# “WE ARE HERE TO HELP EACH OTHER”: RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY, DIVINE HIDDENNESS, AND THE RESPONSIBILITY ARGUMENT<sup>1</sup>

Dustin Crummett

Richard Swinburne and Travis Dumsday have defended what J. L. Schellenberg calls “the responsibility argument” as a response to the problem of divine hiddenness. Schellenberg, meanwhile, has levied various objections against the responsibility argument. In this paper, I develop a version of the responsibility argument and discuss some advantages it has over those defended by either Swinburne or Dumsday. I then show how my version can withstand Schellenberg’s criticisms.

## *I. Introduction*

God could have done, and could do now, much more to make his existence and presence and intentions evident to us—by, say, increasing the frequency of signs and wonders, or making it easier for us to have intense experiences of God’s love, or opening a Twitter feed.<sup>2</sup> Many of God’s children don’t believe that he exists; many others believe that he exists but have catastrophically false beliefs about what he’s like and what he wants; still more, quite apart from whatever they believe about God, find themselves unable to experience his presence during the darkest periods of their lives. These three phenomena often seem to occur without regard for what the agent deserves or would most benefit from.<sup>3</sup> No human parent

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<sup>1</sup>The title here is taken partly from the hymn “Will You Let Me Be Your Servant,” which contains the following verse—one which helps illustrate some of the value judgments which the response to the problem of divine hiddenness developed in this paper relies on: “We are pilgrims on a journey / We are travelers on a road / We are here to help each other / walk the mile and bear the load.” Other relevant verses include “I will hold the Christ-light for you / in the nighttime of your fear / I will hold my hand out to you / speak the peace you long to hear” and “When we sing to God in Heaven / We will find such harmony / born of all we’ve known together / of Christ’s love and agony.”

<sup>2</sup>Think of Judas’s line in *Jesus Christ: Superstar*: “Every time I look at you I can’t understand . . . why’d you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you’d come today you’d have reached a whole nation / Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication / Don’t you get me wrong . . . I only wanna know.”

<sup>3</sup>The typical name in the literature for non-belief that isn’t a result of some kind of wrong-doing on the part of the non-believer is “inculpable non-belief.” Alexander Pruss has suggested to me that there’s no way to know that we wouldn’t all have a constant and abiding sense of God’s existence and presence if we were all morally perfect. Then, at least



would ever dream of leaving their children in such a position, yet God, if there is a God, has let this happen to his children billions of times over and shows no signs of changing course. Accordingly, if we believe in God, we are existentially shaken and intellectually perplexed. This is what I mean by the problem of divine hiddenness.<sup>4</sup>

Theists with religious affiliations won't just want their response to this problem to account for these three data points. They will also want it to be consistent with what their tradition has had to say about how such regrettable states of affairs come to pass. Many religious traditions suggest that we have been tasked with helping one another come to knowledge of and relationship with God, and that helping us fulfill this task is one of the major reasons God has established religious communities. Many also accept the natural corollary that when we fail in these tasks, we can harm the ability of other people—themselves totally innocent—to come to knowledge of and relationship with God. Within my own tradition—the Christian tradition—there is ample scriptural evidence in support of this

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potentially (assuming the wrongdoing bears the right kind of relation to the effect,) every, or nearly every, case of non-belief might be culpable in some sense. If we are willing to grant—as Pruss is, and as I argue for above—that many atheists are in a morally equivalent situation (regarding overall moral merit, willingness to submit to God's commands, etc.) to many theists, then theists will likewise bear culpability for being such that their sins *could* have led them into unbelief (just as everyone who drives drunk is culpable for putting themselves in a situation where they could recklessly hurt an innocent person, even though not everyone who drives drunk does so.) We then will not have, or will not have a very widespread, problem of *inculpable* non-belief, but we will have a similar looking problem—why does the God of love allow these people to remain ignorant of his existence when he reveals it to their neighbors, who are seemingly no more deserving or better situated, and presumably does so without violating his justice and without other unacceptable ill-effects? Since it is the commonly accepted way of framing the problem, I talk in the main text about the problem of inculpable non-belief, but what I say can also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the problem of at-least-no-more-culpable-than-anyone-else non-belief. (There are other terms sometimes used in the literature—nonresistant unbelief, for instance—but similar worries will apply to these terms as well; maybe all of us, on account of our sinfulness, resist God to some extent, etc.) Remarks analogous to those in this footnote also apply to the other two aspects of the problem I discuss.

<sup>4</sup>Many philosophers construe the problem of divine hiddenness more narrowly than I do here, thinking of it solely in terms of non-belief. I don't think there's any substantive difference there between me and them; divine hiddenness, I imagine, isn't anything like a natural kind, and the problems are equally problematic no matter what heading we file them under. I treat the various problematic data as aspects of one overarching problem here for pragmatic reasons—because I suspect that they're importantly related, and thus that thinking about them together (particularly, as it happens, in the context of the responsibility argument, which I think has something to say about all of them) might be fruitful. Swinburne, Schellenberg and Dumsday all think of the problem of divine hiddenness as pretty much the problem of inculpable non-belief. Accordingly, when I discuss how my account differs from those of Swinburne and Dumsday, I will primarily discuss how it differs with respect to the problem of inculpable non-belief, and when I discuss how my account fares against Schellenberg's objections, I will primarily discuss how it fares as a response to the problem of inculpable non-belief in light of these objections. I will do so, though, with the understanding that, in each case, what they have to say about the responsibility argument as a response to the problem of divine hiddenness could mostly also be applied to the responsibility argument as a response to the other problematic data, *mutatis mutandis*. (I am grateful to Errin Clark for pressing me to clarify this.)

view. The obvious example in support of the first proposition is the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

And in support of the second, consider:

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!<sup>6</sup>

Or:

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.<sup>7</sup>

Also consider St. James's warning that not many people are suited to become religious teachers, since teachers will be held to a higher standard,<sup>8</sup> which is well explained by the thought that these teachers have great power to affect those under them and accordingly have an obligation to wield that power well. The dependency of our religious life on our religious communities also seems to be well-confirmed empirically by data on how religious beliefs vary with culture, upbringing, and other factors.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Matthew 28:18–20. All biblical references are from the King James Version.

<sup>6</sup>Matthew 18:6–7.

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 23:13–15.

<sup>8</sup>James 3:1.

<sup>9</sup>See, for instance, *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010*. (Pew Research Center, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/12/globalReligion-full.pdf>. One could, of course, hold something equivalent to William Lane Craig's position, on which, to a substantial extent, the explanation for the correlation between societal context and religious affiliation runs the other way—the people who never wind up in a position to form a relationship with God are the ones that God (using middle knowledge) knew weren't going to form a relationship with him no matter what. But this view doesn't change the fact that societal context *seems* to have a substantial impact on religious belief, apart from the choices we make or would have made; stories like Craig's might provide a (very ad hoc and implausible, I think, though I won't argue it here) way of rejecting the claim I make *despite* the empirical evidence, but don't show that the empirical evidence fails to *support* the claim in question. (For a statements of Craig's position, see "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 [1989]: 172–188.)

These thoughts add (at least for some of us) a constraint on how we might respond to the problem of divine hiddenness, but they also suggest a way forward. Perhaps something very important depends on our having this kind of responsibility for each other, and perhaps this explains God's giving us this kind of responsibility, and perhaps failures by some to live up to the tasks with which they've been charged help explain why other innocent people suffer in the three ways we were worried about. This is the core of the response to the problem of divine hiddenness known as the "responsibility argument." Accounts like this have been defended by Richard Swinburne and Travis Dumsday.<sup>10</sup> J. L. Schellenberg, meanwhile, has launched trenchant attacks on the responsibility argument, questioning whether it is empirically plausible to believe that we have the relevant sort of responsibility for one another and whether God would want to give us this sort of responsibility to begin with. In this paper, I will present a version of the responsibility argument and defend it as a partial response to the problem of divine hiddenness—as something which has the potential to weaken the atheistic argument from divine hiddenness, to help reduce our perplexity concerning God's actions, and to help us better pick up on what divine hiddenness might tell us about our role in the world. I will defend the responsibility argument only as a *partial* response to the problem of divine hiddenness; I'm not so bold as to claim that it can provide a satisfying answer to *every* case of hiddenness, only that it can provide significant help in a reasonably large number of cases and thus can meaningfully contribute to a complete account.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) and Travis Dumsday, "Divine Hiddenness and the Responsibility Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 12:2 (2010): 357–371.

<sup>11</sup>I take a "partial response" to involve attempting to address, at least to some extent, just some cases of hiddenness, and a "complete response" to involve trying to address every, or almost every, case of hiddenness (where "addressing" just means "having something to say about.") A response might involve offering, as I do here, a story about why God might allow some cases of hiddenness, but it might also, in the vein of skeptical theism, mean explaining why sometimes lacking such a story isn't unacceptably bad. A referee has called into question the interestingness of merely partial responses. My view is that the way to proceed in evaluating the argument from hiddenness is to develop promising partial responses as well as can be done and then to see how and whether those partial responses might fit together into a plausible complete response. This will probably give us a heavily *disunified* complete response, but, while disunified accounts are bad when it comes to *some* phenomena, I think we should expect one here. I think it would be awfully surprising if we had either total ignorance or total understanding of God's purposes in allowing hiddenness, so I think it's fine to plead ignorance about God's purposes in *some* cases. Where we do have good guesses about God's purposes, I don't see any reason to think either that those purposes will be few in number in any one case or that they will be pretty much the same across cases (any more than we should expect that to be the case when it comes to, say, my purposes in writing emails). Accordingly, we shouldn't be surprised by there being a lot of different stories, each of which gives us plausible accounts of at least *some* of God's reasons in at least *some* cases. Partial responses are thus interesting because exploring their strengths and weaknesses is a practically necessary step on the way to developing an overall answer to the problem of divine hiddenness (or, if there *isn't* an answer, to finding that out.) Why limit myself to developing a merely partial response here? Well, here are some partial reasons: if I'm right about the metatheory, developing partial responses is important and it has to happen sooner

In the next section, I will lay out my version of the responsibility argument and show how it can help us to meet the challenges we face. In the third section, I will respond to some empirical arguments by Schellenberg suggesting that it's not plausible to believe that we have the sort of responsibility for one another that the argument requires. In the fourth section, I will address some arguments by Schellenberg claiming that God wouldn't want to give us the relevant sort of responsibility anyway—that the goods in question could be achieved in other, less harmful ways, and that, if they couldn't, they wouldn't be worth the cost anyway. Along the way, the respects in which my account differs from those propounded by Swinburne and Dumsday should become clear.

## *II. The Responsibility Argument*

The core of my account is this: it is—at least in some cases—good, and one of God's aims, not only that we come to know God's reality and purposes, and come to know and appreciate these with the right intentions, and come to enter into relationship with God, but also that we come to all this partly through participation in communities in which we can be mutually responsible for one another's spiritual development and knowledge of God. This is good because it gives us an opportunity to serve God and one another in a very important task and because it gives us the ability to form relationships with God and one another that are based partly on our positively and freely influencing one another's spiritual development and knowledge of God.

The mechanisms through which religious communities can aid in their members' feeling God's presence and coming to know God's reality and purposes should be relatively familiar. Swinburne and Dumsday focus overwhelmingly on our taking responsibility for one another by developing and sharing natural theological arguments, and, to a lesser extent, by preaching theological doctrines and praying for the conversion of others. My account will include these things but will be broader and, I think, more realistic in the mechanisms it posits and emphasizes. (By "posits and emphasizes," I mean both that my account considers mechanisms that Swinburne and Dumsday don't *and* that it differs in how much work it proportionally assigns to the mechanisms they all consider. I like natural theological arguments as much as anybody, but while they are the centerpieces of Swinburne and Dumsday's accounts—Dumsday only mentions things besides natural theological arguments in a footnote—I suspect that they play very little role, if any, in the lives of most religious believers.)<sup>12</sup>

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or later; I don't have a complete response and am not qualified to develop one; life is brief; *Faith and Philosophy* has a word limit.

<sup>12</sup>The best versions of natural theological arguments—by which I mean something like the ones that are sophisticated enough to withstand the sorts of objections that are likely to occur to reasonably competent philosophers—are, in their details and maybe sometimes in their totality, often probably not even *comprehensible* to most religious believers.

The mechanisms by which we take responsibility for one another may well include developing and sharing philosophical arguments, but I think they will further wind up encompassing pretty much anything that, given theism, we would expect an ideal religious community to do. It's true that, by fostering strong intellectual communities, we can both help justify the rationality of religious beliefs and better work out their implications for day to day life (a task which will involve academic work going far beyond philosophy!) But there's more. By encouraging one another in individual spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, and participating in communal ones, such as collective worship, we can help bring about the spiritual benefits that these are supposed to provide.<sup>13</sup> By doing good deeds and building loving relationships with one another, we can transform one another's characters and thus make ourselves more receptive to God's will. We can provide occasions for others to perceive God's workings—either in non-inferential ways, such as those defended by Plantinga,<sup>14</sup> or in inferential ways, such as those defended by Moser<sup>15</sup>—in our own lives.<sup>16</sup> All of these things taken together can affect the ways in which we are naturally inclined to interpret the world. Accordingly, one's community can affect the evidence available to them regarding God's reality and purposes, the arguments they bring to bear on that evidence, the intuitions they bring to bear on those arguments, and their ability, intellectually and volitionally, to properly evaluate all of this, as well as their ability to relate to God and to experience God's presence. Even religious skeptics, or those with significantly false religious beliefs, will—at least in some circumstances, at least to a degree—be able to contribute positively to this project. An atheist, for instance, who attacks an untenable or harmful conception of God or God's will may not only achieve secularly recognized goods but also help all of us move closer to the real truth about the transcendent.<sup>17</sup>

However—so the account goes—if we are to be genuinely responsible for one another's spiritual development, there's always the possibility that we might neglect our duties to one another. We can see how this might bear on the existence of hiddenness. In cases covered by this account, there

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<sup>13</sup>Swinburne considers the possibility that hiddenness might be the result of moral evil “if there is an experience of God to be had for those who, having heard some preacher tell them what God is like, begin to pray to him” and if such a person intentionally avoids feeling God's call “because in consequence they would see the obligation to lead a different sort of life,” but he does not consider the possibility that such a person's failure to experience God in prayer might be *someone else's* fault (Swinburne, *Providence*, 203).

<sup>14</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup>Paul Moser, *The Elusive God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 126–143.

<sup>16</sup>Matthew 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

<sup>17</sup>We might worry about whether such a person deserves *credit* for the goods they bring about, since they don't believe in them. I think the answer will often be “yes.” Suppose—I think this is actually fairly common—the atheist thinks, “Look, God almost certainly doesn't exist, but if he does, and he's good, he surely wouldn't approve of *this*—and, yes, that gives me yet another reason to fight it.” It seems that such a person does deserve some credit for the goods they bring about, even though they believed they wouldn't bring them about.

is culpability, but it doesn't have to rest with the person who (for instance) holds the false belief; they might well have investigated the relevant issues honestly, extensively, and rationally. It might, instead, be that someone somewhere else along the line failed to live up to their duties.<sup>18</sup>

This failure might simply take the form of people not sufficiently aiding one another, but there are also plenty of ways someone might culpably pose a *positive* hindrance to others. By fostering anti-intellectualism out of cowardice, arrogance, or laziness, someone might prevent the doing or dissemination of work that might help us discern God's reality and purposes, or they might convince someone of dangerously false propositions about what God wants from his followers, or they might interfere with someone's ability to believe in God by convincing them that doing so involves holding rationally untenable positions. One can abuse one's position in a religious community to further one's own selfish ends, help foster hatred and intolerance, turn religion into a tool of violence and oppression, or hoard resources while neglecting those in need. In doing so, one might positively obstruct the communal ways of knowing God's reality and purposes while either causing people to mistakenly believe that this is what God wants of his followers or creating emotional barriers that might interfere with someone's ability to relate to God.<sup>19</sup> The same could be true of committing less dramatic interpersonal wrongs as well. And, here again, even religious skeptics will often have the ability to *negatively* impact others in ways for which they are culpable. We might think here, for instance, of the efforts by some communist nations to violently stamp out religion.

It is important to note that, in a case covered by this account, the culpability wouldn't have to rest with those *immediately* around the person in question. It *might* rest with them, but they might have done the best they could, or they might have possessed harmful flaws for which they were not themselves culpable. Responsibility could rest with people very

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<sup>18</sup>The most natural reading of this account would be that it requires our having libertarian free will. Some, however, have argued that compatibilist conceptions of moral responsibility are sufficient for free will theodicies; if these arguments succeed, then compatibilist free will would also be suitable here. (See, for instance, John Bishop, "Compatibilism and the Free Will Defense," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71:2 (1993): 104–120; Bruce Langtry, *God, the Best, and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Robert Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup>Swinburne acknowledges the potential role of non-intellectual factors in determining whether one comes to believe in God when he considers that "humans . . . may have refused to allow themselves to feel the force of the [good natural theological] arguments because in consequence they would see the obligation to lead a different sort of life" and tells us that "above all, it would be a moral evil if someone had an experience of God and then tried to persuade themselves that it did not occur" (Swinburne, *Providence*, 203.) However, Swinburne does not consider the possibility that someone might have such emotional barriers for reasons other than their own wickedness. Someone might find it extremely difficult to accept religious claims because they grew up in an area wracked by religious violence or faced crushing discrimination that was justified by invoking religious tenets, but surely in such a case the responsibility for this person's reluctance would rest with the people who committed the wrongs in question rather than with the person who is unable to believe.

far removed in time and space. There is nothing strange about this; it is, in fact, pretty clear that many people do experience spiritual obstacles which have at least a partial root in, say, abuse scandals that did not *directly* impact them or their communities, or in the merging of political and religious power in the late Roman empire, and so on.

Finally, I ought to say something here about the implications of this account for the afterlife. Many theists believe that everyone who, at the moment of death, has their beliefs about God wrong in certain important sorts of ways, or has their relationship with God out of joint in certain important ways, will get damned to hell forever. If, as accommodationism assumes, many of these people aren't relevantly at fault for their false beliefs to a greater degree than anybody else, we will need to have *something* to say about this, unless we are willing to say that God allows some people to be damned who he apparently (since he saved their equally vicious neighbors) could have saved without undue negative consequences. We could just give up belief in eternal hell altogether and accept some form of universalism, holding that everyone, eventually, will be reconciled to God.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, we could believe that if we haven't had a fair shot at being reconciled to God in our earthly lives, God gives us additional chances after death, where he corrects for the factors that caused us to inculpably stray. If one is absolutely committed to the claim that everyone whose relationship with God isn't relevantly appropriate *at the moment of death* gets damned, we *could* even reconcile that with this account if we're willing to admit some really weird scenarios. Maybe, in the last instant of one's life, God miraculously slows that person's perception of time down, "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"-style, corrects for whatever factors caused the inculpable error, and gives the person a chance to somehow respond. This *does* seem like a very strange scenario. But I guess it's the sort of thing God might do if there really is something that important about ensuring that our fate is fairly decided at the moment of death. Any of these routes avoids the untoward consequence we were worried about.

We can now see how this account, if true, helps to address the problem of divine hiddenness as I've construed it here. It respects the fact, confirmed both empirically and, for many of us, by our religious traditions, that we have immense power to influence one another's religious lives, and it gives us at least a partial explanation of why God might give us such power. Once that's in place, we can see how the account can contribute to explaining the evils I discussed at the beginning of this paper: because we can influence one another's ability to relate to God and beliefs about God's existence, nature, and will, we can unfairly harm one another in each of these respects. It does this without minimizing the intrinsic badness of

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<sup>20</sup>For a philosophical and (Christian) theological defense of universalism, see John Kronen and Eric Reitan, *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (New York: Continuum, 2011). For a fairly brief biblical defense of universalism, see Keith DeRose, "Universalism and the Bible" (Personal website, 1999), <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~kd47/univ.htm>.

hiddenness or the things that flow from it, or claiming that it always leads to greater goods and is therefore just as well, or claiming that it's always deserved anyway.<sup>21</sup> Finally, I'll argue in the fourth section that it can do these things while preserving God's concern, not only for the world as a whole, but also for each of his individual children.

We can also now see some of the major ways in which my account differs from those offered by Swinburne and Dumsday. One is the way I pointed out in the first section: their accounts are aimed squarely at the problem of inculpable non-belief, while mine attempts to address a broader range of problems. As I said, it doesn't seem to me that we're *disagreeing* on anything here; it's simply that they adopt a narrower focus while I suspect that considering all these issues together might prove fruitful.

Where they cover the same ground, our accounts also differ in some more substantive respects. First, as noted above, my account of the mechanisms by which we take responsibility for one another is broader in its emphases than theirs; I think this provides us a more realistic account of the situation we actually find ourselves in and also, as we'll see in the next section, strengthens our hand against Schellenberg's claim that God has not given us the tools necessary to take responsibility for one another in the relevant ways.

Second, both Swinburne and Dumsday portray God as intentionally leaving certain people ignorant of his existence, so as to bring about the great good of others being able to teach them.<sup>22</sup> In cases covered by my account, meanwhile, God doesn't purposefully leave people ignorant, and the goods he has in mind don't require that anyone ever *actually be* ignorant; rather, he gives us the ability to influence one another's beliefs for good or ill, and keeping others from becoming ignorant of his existence (or from forming false beliefs about his will, or from being unable to form a robust relationship with him) is just as much a valuable exercise of responsibility as rescuing someone from such a state. If God's intentionally leaving people in the dark so that others can rescue them looks to us like an unpalatable case of his treating them as mere means, we might find my version preferable. Further, as we'll see in the next section, my story might leave us better positioned to respond to Schellenberg's charge that the responsibility argument can't account for spatially and temporally isolated non-theists.

Third, throughout I have stressed the importance of *mutual* responsibility. Swinburne and Dumsday primarily speak of the responsibility as running one way — as being the responsibility of those who have the *truth* about God to teach it to those who *don't*.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, some people might

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<sup>21</sup>For an argument that taking attitudes like these towards evils more generally might undermine our motivation to combat them, see William Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008) 193–195.

<sup>22</sup>See Swinburne, *Providence*, 210–212 and Dumsday, "Divine," 365.

<sup>23</sup>Dumsday explicitly tells us that the responsibility argument "is designed to show that a loving God would allow some nonresistant non-belief in order to foster the good of

have greater knowledge of God than others and thus have more in the way of knowledge to offer those others than those others have to offer them. It will happen rarely, though, if ever, that we have such a comprehensive grasp of the truth, and our interlocutor has so little of value to offer, that we have *nothing* to learn from them. I think this picture more accurately reflects the situation in which we seem to find ourselves. I also think adopting it is likely to have practical benefits; I think that treating evangelism as a genuine dialogue—one in which we think we have a hold on very important truths, but in which we are prepared to listen to and learn from our dialogue partner—is both more likely to be effective and more likely to help keep us from falling into the sins often perpetrated by those who are too confident that they have the whole truth and nothing but it (sins ranging from workaday bigotry to political persecution.) I also think, as we'll see in section four, that this view helps us address some of Schellenberg's normative criticisms of the responsibility argument.

Finally, when I respond to Schellenberg's criticisms of the responsibility argument in the next few sections, I will consider a few points that Swinburne and Dumsday don't (to my knowledge) explicitly address anywhere. Meanwhile, on some of the points that they do address, my response will differ importantly from theirs in ways that we'll see—ways that, I think, weaken the force of Schellenberg's objections.

Construed in the right way, then, the responsibility argument has a lot to be said for it—or so *I* say. In the next section, I will address Schellenberg's empirical criticisms of the responsibility argument, and in the section after that, I'll discuss his normative ones. As I mentioned in the first section, Schellenberg, like Swinburne and Dumsday, construes the problem of divine hiddenness more narrowly than I do here, and so his arguments all center around inculpable *non-belief*, but much of what he has to say—and much of what I have to say in response—could, with some modification, be applied to the other problematic data that I have discussed.

### III. Schellenberg's Empirical Arguments

#### III.A. Do We Have the Necessary Tools?

Schellenberg has called into question whether it is plausible to believe that we actually have the ability to take responsibility for one another in the

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human responsibility, with some people having the task of leading others to a belief in God" (Dumsday, "Divine," 358), speaks of the responsibility in question as being "the responsibility of some to teach others about God" (p. 364), and so on. For Swinburne, there seems to be room for mutual responsibility in situations where everyone is ignorant about God, but once some people achieve "knowledge of God"—which some people apparently have, and which seems to function in pretty much a binary way (that is, you have knowledge of God or you don't)—everything seems to become about the responsibility of those who have such knowledge to impart it to those who don't: "In the pursuit of this very great good, the knowledge of God, it is good that humans cooperate, cooperate in investigation when none have found the great good; and when some have found it and others have not, that those who have found should try to help those who have not, to find it. What a good thing it is that those who know should be able to teach those who do not—in all matters, but above all in this most important of matters!" (Swinburne, *Providence*, 211.)

way required by the argument. Schellenberg believes the responsibility argument requires the claim that theists are “possessed of evidence that *clearly* supports God’s existence and that honest inquirers will *see* to support God’s existence,” which he rejects on the grounds that “the evidence that various individuals have claimed to provide support for God’s existence is often evidence that inculpable non-believers who fail to believe even after long investigation and soul-searching have considered.”<sup>24</sup> Schellenberg is clearly thinking of our affecting one another primarily by producing and publicizing things like natural theological arguments. Of course, even then, we needn’t claim that any theists *actually* have, or have had, evidence of the sort in question. Perhaps, due to someone’s negligence, the arguments in question were never developed, or were lost. Even recognizing this, one can still see the force of Schellenberg’s objection. Evaluating philosophical arguments is very difficult, and even the best don’t convince everyone who honestly examines them. Further, many people lack the tools to evaluate complex philosophical arguments and aren’t sure which authorities to trust. Thus, even if theists have, or could have, developed natural theological arguments strong enough to make it rational for any given person to believe in God, holding the rest of society constant, it seems doubtful whether everyone who honestly inquired would see that this is the case. St. Thomas—who I suppose was a fan of natural theology if anybody ever was—recognized this point and argued that special self-revelation on the part of God was necessary partly because of it:

Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.<sup>25</sup>

Complementing the discussion of developing and publicizing natural theological arguments, Swinburne briefly considers that, by preaching certain theological doctrines, we might cause someone to pray and thus have an experience of God,<sup>26</sup> and Dumsday mentions teaching theological doctrines to one’s children.<sup>27</sup> Doing these things might well have such good results, but here again, many honest atheists are already well aware of what God is supposed to be like and that many people think we’re supposed to pray to him. Many were once religious themselves, and lost their faith against their will; many tried praying, but to no avail. Without an

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<sup>24</sup>John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 192.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, I-I, Q. 1. A. 1.

<sup>26</sup>Swinburne, *Providence*, 203, 211–212.

<sup>27</sup>Dumsday, “Divine,” 365.

expanded conception of the mechanisms by which we take responsibility for one another, this response won't have much to say about these people.

Finally, Swinburne mentions that "parish discussion groups and prayer meetings"<sup>28</sup> might play a role, and Dumsday suggests the same for "praying for the conversion of the world."<sup>29</sup> With regard to the discussion groups, Swinburne rightly points out that ordinary religious believers often possess insights into the nature of God that "the learned" have missed. Beyond that, the idea seems to be that, through petitionary prayer, we might cause God to intervene in the lives of others to bring about their conversion. It's hard to know exactly how to evaluate this proposal without giving a fully developed theory of petitionary prayer. I'm not going to attempt such a thing here, partly because that's only tangentially related to the topic of this paper, but mostly because I don't *have* a fully developed theory of petitionary prayer. I will simply note, first, that here again many seemingly honest atheists are dutifully prayed for by their loved ones (*all* are prayed for by those who pray for the conversion of the world!) and yet persist in their non-belief.<sup>30</sup> Further, I'll note that, in general, God seems to prefer largely letting our *direct* action determine what happens and intervenes only in relatively special circumstances. In any event, if there are other methods by which we can directly take responsibility for one another, it will be *practically* useful for us to know about these, since petitionary prayer is, of course, supposed to be a supplement to, not a replacement for, those actions we can take ourselves.<sup>31</sup>

Even if it turns out that the number of cases the responsibility argument can address will have to be severely limited, we might not necessarily view this as a problem; we could simply say that this explanation of divine hiddenness covers only some cases, and that other cases will have to be explained in other ways.<sup>32</sup> All the same, it is, of course, *ceteris paribus*, better from a theoretical point of view for the theist to expand the

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<sup>28</sup>Swinburne, *Providence*, 211.

<sup>29</sup>Dumsday, "Divine," 365.

<sup>30</sup>One could have a view of petitionary prayer on which God is more responsive to the prayers of the wholeheartedly devout and morally upright ("The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective," James 5:16). Perhaps, then, if there were more who were wholeheartedly devout and morally upright, our prayers for the conversion of the world would be more effective and the world would be closer to converting. Again, it's hard to evaluate this proposal without a developed doctrine of petitionary prayer, which I don't have. But I'll note that such a proposal is in keeping with my stress that our account of the mechanisms should be *holistic*, in that it portrays our efficacy in taking responsibility for one another through prayer as dependent upon our entire lives and being, not just on how many times we open our prayer books.

<sup>31</sup>Consider, for instance, James 2:14–17: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

<sup>32</sup>In fact, Swinburne's discussion of the responsibility argument is accompanied by a defense of the claim that divine hiddenness is necessary for us to have free will at all.

argument's scope as far as can be plausibly done. And again, it will be practically useful for us to know if there are other methods by which we can take responsibility for one another.

I think there *are* other methods, and I outlined some of them in the last section. It seems plenty clear—clearer still if we grant theism—that if religious communities were, and had been for a long time, more tolerant, more active in aiding the suffering, more closely knit, more spiritually disciplined, and so on, as well as more fostering of intellectual communities and relevant scholarly work, many people would find it much easier to be religious.<sup>33</sup> And, if God exists and is perfectly good and loving, it seems entirely plausible that these virtues would aid us in discerning the divine nature and will and in developing our relationships with God.<sup>34</sup> Further, neither Swinburne nor Dumsday explicitly consider the possibility that we might give others difficulties by posing positive hindrances to them, rather than simply by failing to meet our duties.<sup>35</sup> It again seems fairly clear, however, that when religious believers exhibit moral apathy, commit heinous crimes in the name of their religion or pervert it for their own selfish purposes, and so on, they often leave others in a position where it's more difficult for them to believe in or relate to God than if they'd never had anything to do with them.

It seems to me, then, that if we adopt this expanded conception of how we can relevantly help or hinder one another, we will be able to address many cases that Swinburne and Dumsday's accounts won't have much to say about, and that where Swinburne and Dumsday's accounts do offer explanations, invoking the expanded conception will often help us to provide explanations which are more thorough and plausible. Again, I'm defending my version of the responsibility argument only as a *partial* account of divine hiddenness, and so I don't claim that even our

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<sup>33</sup>Dumsday does say that "Perhaps for some the principal means of carrying it out [taking responsibility for one another] is the leading of an exemplary life as a theist, providing an example to others of the fulfillment that a vibrant faith in God can provide, thus leading them to consider further God's possible reality" (Dumsday, "Hiddenness," 365). This remark is correct, but I think is insufficient in a number of ways: first, I suspect that for almost all ordinary believers, living such an exemplary life is a, or the, primary way in which they can contribute; second, living such an exemplary life can aid others in ways beyond simply causing them to "consider further God's possible reality"; finally, Dumsday doesn't really make any further use of anything in this discussion—when Schellenberg argues that natural theological arguments are not strong enough to convince all reasonable skeptics, Dumsday's response (p. 369–370) is to argue that they are, in fact, stronger than Schellenberg thinks, rather than to point out that there are other methods by which we can take responsibility and which might be more effective in many or most cases.

<sup>34</sup>The conditional likelihood of both of these increases if we begin talking about specific instances of the major theistic traditions rather than just generic theism.

<sup>35</sup>When Swinburne considers ways in which inculpable non-belief may be the result of moral evil on the part of people other than the non-believer, he only offers that humans "may not have told each other about ['good arguments for the existence of God']" and that "humans may not have bothered to preach the gospel message" (Swinburne, *Providence*, 203.) Dumsday doesn't explicitly address the question, but I gather that the picture is again supposed to be one on which inculpable non-belief is explained by others' failing to help the person in question rather than by their posing positive hindrances.

expanded conception of the mechanisms will allow us to offer a plausible explanation of *every* case of hiddenness. But I do think we can address a reasonable number of cases and that adopting the expanded conception of the mechanisms leaves us in a better position than we would otherwise find ourselves in.

### III.B. What about Temporally and Spatially Isolated Non-theists?

Schellenberg has also raised empirical objections about whether it is plausible to believe that people in certain contexts could have the relevant sort of responsibility, focusing on spatially and temporally isolated non-theists. Schellenberg tells us that “for long periods of human history perhaps no one was in a position to *have* or (thus) to fulfill the responsibility at issue here, since all the world was in the same boat in respect of ignorance of theism.”<sup>36</sup> Likewise, still today many people are similarly isolated for geographical, cultural, or other reasons. What can we say about this? First, it is important to note that people in such circumstances often might still be able to bring one another closer to the truth about the divine. Imagine a Buddhist who greatly helps others better relate to the transcendent while thinking that the transcendent is impersonal, or perhaps an empathetic Viking who’s not entirely sold on human sacrifice.

Even so, the ability that these people have to take the relevant sort of responsibility for one another might, at least in some cases, be radically diminished. This might seem very confusing if (as Swinburne and Dumsday do) we imagine that God *intentionally* arranges for people to become isolated in these ways. However, my account does not require that anyone ever *actually* be in such a position, though it implies that they *could*, if we fail to meet our duties to one another—which, clearly, we very often do. On this account, then, we should not imagine that God intentionally leaves these people without certain kinds of important knowledge for the sake of a rescue mission that no one could have been expected to be in a position to perform; rather, we might be able to trace their honest mistakes to culpable acts committed by people in the past—perhaps very far in the past, perhaps in pre-history.<sup>37</sup> Of course, by the nature of the case we often won’t have any real way to find observational evidence for or against this, but if the rest of the account is plausible, something like this may well be true. And, again, I don’t want to claim that my account covers *every* case

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<sup>36</sup>John Schellenberg, *Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 240.

<sup>37</sup>Travis Dumsday has suggested to me what he regards as a “wacky” possibility: namely, that (as was believed by some patristic and medieval Christian theologians) angels were initially charged with instructing humans about divine truths, and that this teaching was disrupted with the fall of Satan and his cronies, leading to widespread ignorance about God that is the result of wrongdoing but not *human* wrongdoing. One’s evaluation of this possibility will, presumably, be about the same as one’s evaluation of the analogous possibility (raised in the problem of evil debate) that natural evils are in fact the result of demonic wrongdoing. It’s worth noting that, since the belief in the angelic instructional hierarchy among Christians who accepted it was held for reasons more or less independent of our modern problem of divine hiddenness, it’s at least not as if the response, in this context, is *ad hoc*.

of hiddenness, only enough to make it worth our attention. I believe, then, that Schellenberg's empirical criticisms do not succeed in showing that my version of the responsibility argument fails to plausibly explain, or at least be a plausible partial explanation of, at least a great many cases of divine hiddenness.

#### IV. Is Responsibility Worth It?

##### IV.A. Does the Overwhelming Value of Relationship with God Undermine Accommodationism?

I will now attempt to address the normative arguments that Schellenberg has given. Schellenberg tells us that, before even examining particular accounts, we should be able to see that any accommodationist response to the problem of divine hiddenness will fail, since no good could possibly be great enough to justify hindering someone's relationship with God: "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 talk of some *other* good, for the sake of which God might *sacrifice* such relationship?"<sup>38</sup> Travis Dumsday's response is to claim that being in relationship with God means cooperating with God to achieve God's aims, and that, given that people coming to knowledge of God is one of God's most important aims, our taking responsibility for one another in this manner is an essential constitutive part of being in a relationship with God, so that we *could not* have a relationship with God otherwise.<sup>39</sup> Later, he softens this claim and says that our taking responsibility for one another in this way is only a necessary part of a "normal, robust relationship with God," even if one might be able to have a relationship with God for at least some period of time without doing so. I worry that even this weaker claim might still be too strong (I doubt anyone would ever think to endorse it unless they were doing so in order to counter this very objection!) Fortunately, it is stronger than it needs to be.

Accommodationism is perfectly compatible with the claim that a relationship with God is the greatest good a creature can experience—even greater, even *infinitely* greater, than all other possible goods combined—once we realize that God's remaining hidden from someone in some way for some time doesn't entail his sacrificing his relationship with them (at least where "sacrifice" means something strong enough for it to serve the role it needs to in Schellenberg's argument.) God could have some kind of relationship with that person even at that point, and their relationship might flourish greatly later. God's hiding in the way required by the responsibility argument might even give us a chance to enhance our relationship with him. As Schellenberg himself notes, "there must be at any point after the beginning of a relationship with God literally an infinite

<sup>38</sup>Schellenberg, *Wisdom*, 210.

<sup>39</sup>Dumsday, "Divine," 364.

number of ways of developing in relationship with God and experiencing wonderful new goods."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps some of these goods are made available by our having had, and having lived up to, the sort of responsibility in question. This, I think, allows us to satisfactorily answer Schellenberg's worry without endorsing Dumsday's implausibly strong claim about the *necessity* of our having this kind of responsibility.<sup>41</sup>

#### IV.B. Is This Too Much Responsibility?

Elsewhere, Schellenberg claims that God should have given us less responsibility for one another's coming to knowledge of the divine than the responsibility argument requires.<sup>42</sup> God could have made his existence sufficiently clear to everyone who honestly considers the issue, and given us the task only of figuring out specific facts about God and convincing those who are willfully blind. This restricted responsibility would be superior, he thinks, because it would allow those who (in our world) inculpably disbelieve the ability to go ahead and start their relationship with God and because it would allow these people to go ahead and begin exercising the sort of responsibility the account in question says is so valuable. However, as we have already seen, many non-theists *will* have opportunities to exercise the sort of responsibility discussed here. Further, even if it is impossible for someone to have a relationship with God without believing that God exists, as Swinburne notes,<sup>43</sup> people can take steps that will lay the foundations for a relationship with God when one does become available (this is basically required by the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25.)<sup>44</sup> These considerations mitigate, but perhaps do not eliminate, the points Schellenberg raises here. The defender of the responsibility argument will simply have to appeal to the fact that our having this sort of responsibility seems like something that could be tied to very valuable goods and to the fact that having any sort of robust responsibility may carry certain risks. Advocates of the responsibility argument don't need to think that the trade-off of risk and reward that the argument suggests God chose is the "best" one; there may not *be* a best one. But in light of the arguments raised throughout the rest of this paper, it may be a reasonable one, at least in some of the cases under consideration. The points Schellenberg raises here do not undermine that claim.

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<sup>40</sup>Schellenberg, *Wisdom*, 210.

<sup>41</sup>This also lets us answer Schellenberg's charge that God would desire relationship, not merely as a means of maximizing our welfare, but also for its own sake, so that he might not hide even if it was the best means of maximizing our welfare (Schellenberg, *Divine*, 23). Our having the relevant sort of responsibility might not *only* enhance our welfare, it might also (relatedly) enhance our relationship with God.

<sup>42</sup>Schellenberg, *Divine*, 192–194.

<sup>43</sup>Swinburne, *Providence*, 212n.

<sup>44</sup>In a non-theological context, the possibility that someone might have a relationship, or the groundwork for a relationship, with someone they don't even know about is hinted at by Carly Rae Jepsen in "Call Me Maybe" with the intriguing line, "Before you came into my life, I missed you so bad . . . I missed you so, so bad."

IV.C. Does the Responsibility Argument Violate God's Concern for Particular Individuals?

The final—and, I think, best—of the ethical arguments that Schellenberg considers concerns whether God is treating certain individuals in an unloving manner by sacrificing their well-being for the supposed greater good. Schellenberg tells us that “it should be evident on its face that a principle justifying the misfortune of certain individuals on the grounds of their usefulness when those individuals are *unaware* of their usefulness and might not choose to be thus useful if the matter were put to them, and when perfectly fine goods—including important responsibilities . . . —may be secured in other ways, is at the very least problematic.”<sup>45</sup> It does seem to me that this might be an unacceptable consequence. However, it doesn't seem to me that the responsibility argument requires that something like this be true. Again, many people who are importantly wrong about God will still have the ability to exercise some sort of positive responsibility of the type discussed in this paper, and to form relationships based around this, in *this* life, and those who don't may have such opportunities in the afterlife—either by, as Dumsday suggests,<sup>46</sup> helping *us* through something like the intercession of the saints, or by helping one another in some future heavenly or purgatorial realm. Further, if there are people who, even in the afterlife, never have such opportunities—or who just irreversibly bungle all the ones they have—they might still value being part of a heavenly community in which some people had such opportunities and made the most of them. (What's doing the work here is something like the idea that it can be a benefit to you to be part of a close-knit community in which people have very meaningful relationships with one another, even if you personally weren't part of the experiences that helped them form these relationships.) It's possible that, while reasonably regretting the fact that humans didn't fulfill their responsibilities better than they did, many of those who Schellenberg portrays as having their well-being sacrificed will, *sub specie aeternitatis*, rationally *not* regret, even from a purely self-regarding perspective, God's giving us this responsibility, on account of the benefits that, in the long run, accrue to them and their loved ones as result.<sup>47</sup> If this is so, it is hard to see how we could accuse God of acting in an unloving manner towards them in giving humans this sort of responsibility.

All that being said, one might still think that the sorts of good discussed in this paper can't plausibly justify God's actions in the most disturbing

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<sup>45</sup>Schellenberg, *Wisdom*, p. 240.

<sup>46</sup>Dumsday, “Divine,” 367–368.

<sup>47</sup>This suggestion is, of course, indebted to the work of Marilyn Adams, though it differs from her proposal in important ways (namely, Adams's proposal requires that we come to rationally not regret *the horrors we suffer themselves*, while my proposal requires only that we rationally not regret God's giving us the responsibility that made the relevant evils real possibilities, even in light of the badness of the (themselves regrettable) evils whose possibility they necessitated.) See Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

cases of divine hiddenness. God's hiddenness, as we've discussed, contributes to some unspeakably awful things. One might think it's ridiculous—even offensive—to suggest that God's allowing these horrors could be explained by his concern for the goods appealed to in this paper. Speaking poetically, one might think, with Ivan Karamazov's Grand Inquisitor, that if God's giving us the sort of free will that we allegedly have is what's supposed to explain God's allowing the most horrific evils we commit, then when he gave this free will to us, his love for us clouded his good judgment—that he thought too highly of us, that he wouldn't have given us such a gift if he'd had a more realistic assessment of what fragile creatures like us would do with it to one another *and* to ourselves. If you think that the goods appealed to in this paper couldn't explain God's allowing the most horrific results of divine hiddenness, I'm not inclined to argue. I'm reluctant, for both epistemological and moral reasons, to try to make judgments about what could explain God's allowing evils that are so much worse than anything I've ever experienced—in fact, so much worse than anything I could even *imagine*. But I never asserted that my account could give us an *exhaustive* statement of why God acts as he does, only that, plausibly, it can help us understand at least some of God's reasons in at least some cases of hiddenness. That, I think, is credible, it may be all we can reasonably aim for, and for the responsibility argument to be worth our attention, it is enough.<sup>48</sup>

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