

Review of J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993), i-x, 219 pages.

For *Mind*, 1995

Do we rightly expect God to bring it about that, right now, we believe that He exists, on the basis of adequate grounds? It seems so. For if God exists, then He is perfect in love, and love at its best seeks the well-being of its object, not from a distance, but up close, explicitly participating in the beloved's life in a personal fashion, allowing her to draw from that relationship what she may need to flourish. Would an *explicit, reciprocal* personal relationship with God enhance our well-being? It seems so. There would be broadly moral and experiential benefits; hence, our relationships with others would improve. Moreover, the best love wants a personal relationship not simply for the sake of the beloved but for its own sake as well. So, God would want to develop a personal relationship with us.

Now, who is the "us" here? Those cognitively and affectively equipped to develop such a relationship, or, in a word, those *capable* of it. But this needs qualification. The best love respects the choices of its object. If we reject God's overtures, His desire to relate personally to us might be overridden by proper respect for our freedom. In general, if we culpably put ourselves in a contrary position, we should not expect to be able to relate personally to God if we choose. Now, why suppose that He wants to develop such a relationship *now* rather than later? Because a personal relationship with God could only enhance our well-being at any time at which we exist.

We seem to be led to the following proposition: If God exists, then for any human *S* at any time *t*, if *S* is at *t* capable of relating personally to God, *S* is at *t* in a position to do so (i.e., can at *t* do so just by choosing), unless *S* is culpably in a contrary position at *t*. But what if we were uncertain about the existence of God? Then we could not be in position to relate personally to Him. For we cannot have those attitudes that constitute the love of God - e.g. gratitude, trust, and obedience - unless we believe, *to some degree*, that He exists. Therefore, since belief is involuntary, we cannot be in a position to relate personally to God without theistic belief. Moreover, since belief is involuntary, we can believe that God exists only if we have grounds to do so, whether argumentative or experiential. But what if our grounds did not render the existence of God probable? Then we might learn this and inculpably fail to be in a position to believe God exists, which God would not permit. Thus, we can say:

P2'. If God exists, then for any human *S* and time *t*, if *S* is at *t* capable of relating personally to God, *S* at *t* believes that God exists on the basis of grounds that render theism probable, unless *S* is culpably in a contrary position at *t*.

In his tightly argued, superbly crafted and religiously sensitive book, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, J.L. Schellenberg uses P2' in conjunction with the premise that inculpable nonbelief occurs to infer that there is no God. Several questions arise in thinking about P2' and Schellenberg's argument for it in chapter 1, which I have just sketched. Perhaps it is logically impossible for us to have adequate grounds for theistic belief; thus, not even Omnipotence could be expected to bring it about. In chapter 2, Schellenberg shows defective several versions of this objection. Widespread religious experience of the sort that Alston and Plantinga focus on could justify theistic belief.

Shortly, I shall press my own worries about P2'. For now, consider the question of chapter 3: Do we have good reason to believe that inculpable nonbelief occurs?

To answer this question it is useful to consider the variety of ways in which theistic nonbelief can be *culpable*. (We can thereby better appreciate how easily we may be culpable.) I might spurn God's manifest love, develop a deaf ear to His overtures and lose theistic belief. Or, I might neglect to investigate the matter properly (61-62). First, I might culpably fail to gather grounds for theistic belief. The possibilities here are legion. I might fail to look for evidence, or bias the evidence I consider. I might ignore or suppress an inner prompting to believe, neglect spiritual disciplines, want theism to be false for various reasons, and so on. Second, I might culpably fail to assess my grounds properly. Perhaps I culpably fail to appraise my epistemic standards, or I culpably hold theses unfriendly to theism (e.g., meaning verificationism or radical constructivism). Might God permit such culpable nonbelief, for a time? Why not? It doesn't seem worse than any other way to permit us freedom in relating personally to Him.

Now, Schellenberg argues that some individuals capable of personally relating to God inculpably fail to believe He exists (65-69). We may have been privy to their investigation, or they may tell us of it. How can we be sure that we are not missing some hidden culpability or that their self-assessment is correct? Well, if they tend to be honest seekers of the truth, even when it reflects badly on them, or if they are determined to resolve the question and continue to search, then it is much more likely that they would not neglect their investigative duties. And if they *prefer* theistic belief to nonbelief, they are less likely to deceive themselves into nonbelief. Finally, if experts disagree, as is the case with theism, it is much more likely that inculpable investigators will be uncertain. Each of us must consider whether we have met or reliably heard of people who fit this description. It would not be surprising if there were. (Schellenberg could have focused on non-Westerners who have never heard of a personal deity, but he doesn't.) The claim that nonbelief is entirely due to personal sin receives a blazing critique in the latter half of chapter 3.

Suppose inculpable nonbelief occurs. What should we make of P2'?

Schellenberg does *not* claim that P2' is necessarily true (7-9) but that his arguments are "clearly sufficient to warrant the conclusion" that God will prevent inculpable nonbelief *unless* we have at least as much reason to think P2' is false as we have to think P2' is true (84-85). Now, P2' is false if and only if there is a reason for a perfectly loving God to permit inculpable nonbelief. So, Schellenberg affirms that, without at least as much reason to think that there is a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief as he has given to think that God would prevent inculpable nonbelief, his arguments in Chapter 1 constitute *sufficient* evidence to *conclude* that P2' is true.

Surely this is false. We do not need any evidence that there *is* a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief in order to find Schellenberg's arguments insufficient. Suppose we have no reason to suppose that there is a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief. Still, we might have good reason to think that, given what other things we reasonably believe, it would not be surprising at all were God to be privy to reasons to permit inculpable nonbelief, reasons that properly outweigh His desire to relate personally to us, reasons we weren't aware of. In that case, even though we rightly believed that God had a desire to relate personally to us, our total evidence would *not* be sufficient to conclude that God would prevent inculpable nonbelief. Indeed, in that case, even though we had no idea whether there is a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief, we should withhold judgment on whether He would permit it, and hence

refrain from concluding that P2' is true. Of course, it is a separate matter whether we in fact have good enough reason to think that it would not be surprising if God had reasons to permit inculpable nonbelief that we don't know of. (But it is not difficult to come up with something.) My present point is only that Schellenberg does not rightly assess what it would take to defeat his case for P2'.

Schellenberg gives three replies to an objection similar to the one that I have just given (88-91). Applied to my objection, the first reply is that since the goods for which God permits inculpable nonbelief are human goods, then it is unlikely that they or their relation to inculpable nonbelief should be impossible for us to grasp; otherwise, we should expect them to be unrelated to human life. One might as well suppose that if the goods for the sake of which a mother permits her infant son to be vaccinated are impossible for him to grasp, then he should expect that those goods for the sake of which she permits the vaccination are unrelated to his life.

The second reply (again, applied to my objection) goes like this: (1) The goods for the sake of which God permits inculpable nonbelief involve the conscious experiences of inculpable nonbelievers. (2) We know the conscious experiences of inculpable nonbelievers. (3) So, if there are any goods for the sake of which God permits inculpable nonbelief, we would quite likely know them now. Now, firstly, premise (1) is dubious. God might well permit inculpable nonbelief for the sake of goods that have nothing to do with conscious experiences of inculpable nonbelievers (see, e.g., 191 ff), or for the sake of goods whose goodness consists in the conscious experience of all humans, indiscriminately, not just inculpable nonbelievers. Secondly, we must distinguish *good-tokens*, instances or occurrences, from *good-types*, kinds of goods, and conscious experience *tokens* from conscious experience *types*. Clearly, the argument is about good-types and types of conscious experience; otherwise, premise (2) would be false: there are too many tokenings of conscious experience for any of us to know even a fraction of them. So we must read (2) as "We know the *types* of conscious experience of inculpable nonbelievers". But in that case, the lack of explicit quantifiers in (2) raises some non-trivial questions: How many of the types of conscious experience and goods do we know of? A few? The vast majority? All? Are the ones we do know of representative of the whole lot? These are not trifling worries. Without answers, we unjustifiedly affirm (2).

(The third reply misses the mark altogether: it assumes that the only way to respond to his case for P2' is to give reason to believe that P2' is false.)

Contrary to fact, let us suppose that Schellenberg's overall argument hangs on whether we can think of some reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief. Here, to my mind, the book is a treasure trove. Nowhere is there a comparable systematic, rigorous, intricate, rich, and sensitive examination of a plethora of such reasons. We are in Schellenberg's debt for gathering these things together in such an admirable fashion. The main suggestions he considers are these: Hick's claim that God permits inculpable nonbelief so that we might freely love, trust and obey Him - otherwise, we would not be free in these ways; Swinburne's idea that God permits inculpable nonbelief so that we might freely respond to temptation and thereby form our characters for good or ill - otherwise, fear of punishment or desire for divine approval would make it too prudent and rational for us to respond to temptation freely; Pascal's two claims that God permits inculpable nonbelief because, first, "if God were *not* hidden, humans would relate to God and to their knowledge of God in presumptuous ways" and "the possibility of developing the inner attitudes essential to a proper relationship with God would ipso facto be ruled out", and, second, it prompts us to recognize the wretchedness of life on our own and

stimulates us to search for Him contritely and humbly; and the Kierkegaardian idea that God permits inculpable nonbelief because if He made His existence clear enough to prevent inculpable nonbelief, then the sense of risk required for a passionate faith would be objectionably reduced. Other reasons featured less prominently include the idea that God permits inculpable nonbelief because if He made His existence clear enough to prevent inculpable nonbelief, the benefits of the temptation to doubt His existence would not be possible, religious diversity would be objectionably reduced, and believers would not have as much opportunity to assist others in developing personal relationships with God. Finally, Schellenberg considers the idea that while individually these reasons don't do the job, some of them jointly do. (He leaves out of consideration here the reasons of Hick, Swinburne and Pascal since their occurrence does not logically require the permission of inculpable nonbelief. But see my first worry below on this score.)

Now, what *exactly* does Schellenberg expect of these suggestions? He says that a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief must involve "a state of affairs in the actual world which it would be logically impossible for God to bring about without permitting the occurrence of at least one instance of [inculpable] nonbelief, for the sake of which God would be willing to sacrifice the good of belief and all it entails" (84-85). But is this right? If permitting inculpable nonbelief is *no worse than any alternative means* to some outweighing good state of affairs, can't that good still figure in a reason to permit inculpable nonbelief even though permitting inculpable nonbelief is *not logically necessary* for that good to obtain? It seems so. This constitutes a grave oversight on Schellenberg's part since he frequently rejects a candidate good because it does not logically necessitate permitting inculpable nonbelief. A second worry is this. Suppose we agree that a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief must involve a good state of affairs that logically requires the permission of inculpable nonbelief. Can we then argue, as Schellenberg does, that a candidate good cannot be a reason since it could be realized in one's life without the permission of inculpable nonbelief, *if one were thus-and-so*? It seems not. For that would only show that the good in question is not a reason to permit inculpable nonbelief *in one who had those features*.

The reader should consider whether these two sorts of worries apply to Schellenberg's critique of the various reasons he discusses (e.g. 124-29, 145-52, 162-67, 175-79). I will only illustrate how they arise in connection with his critique of Hick's suggestion that God permits inculpable nonbelief so that we might freely love, trust and obey Him ("moral freedom").

Schellenberg says moral freedom is a great enough good, but rejects it because "the permission of [inculpable nonbelief] is not required for the existence of this good" (96). Therein lies the first worry. Moral freedom need not require the permission of inculpable nonbelief in order for it to figure in a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief. The permission of inculpable nonbelief need only be no worse than any alternative means.

Schellenberg occasionally argues that there are better means than the permission of inculpable nonbelief to the realization of some of the goods he discusses (e.g., 194, 204). Presumably, then, he would say that inculpable nonbelief is a significantly worse means to a robust range of moral freedom than alternative means, say, built in capacities for resistance and self-deception. I don't know why anyone would believe this, but it deserves more reflection.

An instance of the second worry appears in his argument for the claim that "the permission of [inculpable nonbelief] is not required for the existence of this good".

Moral commitment need not follow upon the formation of theistic belief because such belief *can be* successfully resisted.... One *can*, if one finds the moral implications of a belief distasteful, avoid acting upon it...by taking steps to remove one's active awareness of it or to lose it altogether..... [Moreover, even if] theistic belief is retained, moral commitment *need not* follow [since one] *may* deceive herself about the moral implications of her belief. (110, my emphases)

True enough. But it does not follow that "a range of moral choices *would* remain open to one provided with good evidence for theism" (111-12). Due to influences about which I never had a choice, were I to come to theistic belief, I might be psychologically powerless to engage in the sort of self-deception and resistance that would ensure that I had a robust range of moral choices. For all Schellenberg says, moral freedom could be a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief *in people like this*.

Perhaps one will think that there are no people like this. Schellenberg makes some suggestions in this direction (112-13, 128 n. 43, 129-30 and 175-76).

Perhaps one will think that while moral freedom is a reason for God to permit inculpable nonbelief in persons with dispositions of the sort I have mentioned, it is no reason to permit inculpable nonbelief in persons *not* so disposed. But, if we take this line, P2' must be amended to exclude inculpable nonbelievers of the sort I have described. Of course, that's only one sort. Whether there are others depends, in part, on what other mental states are psychologically compatible with inculpable nonbelief. And whether inculpable nonbelief occurs in the absence or presence of such mental states is much murkier than whether inculpable nonbelief occurs. It seems that the more we fiddle with P2' in the recommended way the more difficult it will be to discern problematic cases of inculpable nonbelief.

Lest the reader be misled by my worries about Schellenberg's argument, let me hasten to say that I give this book my heartiest recommendation. No-one interested in philosophical issues pertaining to our relation to God can afford to miss it. Finally, my undergraduate students appreciated Schellenberg's tone, lucid style and rigor. I shall use *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* as a textbook for years to come.<sup>1</sup>

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