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DIVINE OPENNESS FOR PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP*

1. INTRODUCTION

The atheistic hiddenness argument goes like this: if there is a traditional theistic personal God, then this God must be perfectly loving. Such a God would always seek to have loving relationships with other persons and would always provide whatever is necessary for each capable person to have a loving relationship with him. Next, the argument points out that participation in such a relationship requires belief in the existence of God, and that this belief in turn requires sufficient evidence of God's existence. Therefore, the existence of God entails the existence of sufficient theistic evidence. The argument indicates that there are some capable open-minded persons who do not believe that there is a God, which implies that the actual theistic evidence is insufficient for the belief. The argument ends with the atheistic conclusion. In a nutshell, the hiddenness argument says that the apparent divine hiddenness, i.e., the lack of evidence of God's existence, is a sure sign of God's non-existence.

In this paper, I address one troublesome feature of this argument, namely, that it implicitly rests on the idea that some people are incapable of having a loving relationship with God. According to J. L. Schellenberg, the author

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* I am grateful to John Schellenberg, Stephen Munzer, Alan Ludwig, and David Worsley for providing invaluable comments on earlier versions of this paper. A previous version of the paper was presented at the Institute of Philosophy (Moscow, Russia) at the workshop "Religious experience and its role in justification of religious belief" (October 2020). I thank the audience and organizers of the workshop

of the hiddenness argument, to participate in a loving relationship with God, a person must possess specific cognitive and affective abilities.¹ Those who are mentally disabled or demented, those who have certain atypical neurologies, and those children who have not yet developed the required capabilities cannot have this relationship—not by their choice but by their nature. The argument, on the one hand, exalts the perfection of the divine love to such an extent that the existence of a loving God cannot be reconciled with the lack of theistic evidence. On the other hand, it allows this perfect divine love to be compatible with the existence of human beings who are unfit for a loving relationship with God.

I contend that such treatment of divine love is inconsistent. I try to remove this inconsistency by conceiving of a divine-human loving relationship in such a way that no natural human condition would be an obstacle to it. I suggest that such a nondiscriminatory loving relationship could be accomplished by God's having a physical relationship with human beings. First, I demonstrate how the success of the hiddenness argument depends on the truth of the "consciousness constraint" on the divine-human loving relationship. In order to demonstrate that, I provide my own statement of the argument, which picks out this consciousness constraint as its indispensable element. Second, I introduce the idea of a physical relationship with God and provide reasons for holding that a loving God would prefer a physical relationship with human beings rather than a consciousness-constrained relationship. Third, I offer an interpretation of apparent divine hiddenness in the light of the idea of God's openness for a physical relationship.

2. THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT WITH A CONSCIOUSNESS CONSTRAINT

Both theists and atheists generally agree that the traditional monotheistic idea of a personal God implies that this God would love people and would always want to have a loving relationship with them. However, the bare notion of divine love does not tell us what exactly this loving relationship should be. There are different kinds of human loving relationships, such as

¹ Schellenberg suggests that "these would involve such things as a capacity at the time in question to feel the presence of God, recognizing it as such; a capacity to exhibit attitudes of trust, gratitude, and obedience to God, and so on"; see SCHELLENBERG'S "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), 21n15.

a loving relationship of a bride with the groom, of a king with his subjects, or of a mother with her baby. Possibly, one of these relationships is what God would want to have with people. It is also possible that God would prefer something else, which is either analogous to these human relationships or completely different from them. After all, God could have a personality that is quite different from a human personality.² We ought to be careful about making *a priori* assumptions concerning the form of interaction with people that would be most pleasing to God and we should be wary of ascribing our own relational preferences to him.³ Still, a discussion of the hiddenness argument requires at least a minimal concept of God's loving relationship with people. For this purpose, it suffices to have a parsimonious notion of "God's favorite kind of relationship":

God's favorite kind of relationship =_{df} a kind of loving relationship that God would always want to have with any person.

This definition, despite its generality, has several specific constituents. First, it points out that this is a *loving* relationship, which, among other things, implies freedom of participation, because God would not force anyone into it. Second, God would *always* want to have this relationship with a person, not only when the person reaches, say, the afterlife or a certain stage of development. Third, God would *want* this relationship for the sake of the relationship itself, not only as a means to an end.⁴ Finally, the definition has a fourth constituent—*any person*—which points out that God would want to have this kind of relationship regardless of the character and circumstances of the other participant.

² Here I follow Michael Rea, who suggests that "God might have a genuine, robust personality" and "his preferred mode of interaction"; see Michael REA, "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009), 86.

³ Unlike Michael Rea et al. (e.g., his *The Hiddenness of God* [Oxford: OUP, 2018], chap. 4 and 5), I do not suggest a strong skeptical maneuver here, that is, I do not imply that God's preferences are incomprehensible to us. I agree with Rea that the problem of divine hiddenness trades on "violated expectations" concerning the nature of divine love (*ibid.*, chap. 2). In this paper, however, instead of Rea's apophatic approach, I suggest the opposite—that God's preferred mode of interaction is not incomprehensible, as Rea suggests, but rather might be familiar to us and, perhaps, even more familiar than one might expect.

⁴ I borrow these three constituents from Schellenberg's own treatment of divine love in order to have a starting point that we both agree upon—see, e.g., his "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," in GREEN and STUMP, *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*, 19–20.

My concept of God's favorite kind of relationship also suggests that there are kinds of loving relationships that God would not always want to have. As I mentioned, there are various human relationships that are considered to be loving and praiseworthy. However, the mere fact that we value and desire a certain kind of loving relationship does not entail that God would necessarily want that too, let alone always want to have that with any person. Some admirable human loving relationships might be unsuitable for God. For example, I do not think that God would always want to be everyone's best buddy or, even less likely, to relate to people as a loving disciple to the teacher or as a loving child to the parent. Of course, it does not mean that God would *always refrain* from having anything but God's favorite kind of relationship. Perhaps in some situations other relationships could be pleasing to God or at least serve as a means to achieve a desired outcome. Consider an analogy: a philosopher's loving husband would from time to time consent to play the role of an enthusiastic audience when his wife gives a philosophical lecture at the family dinner table, but that is not what he really wants their relationship to always look like. There is a difference between God's provisional consent to participate in a relationship that is conditioned by circumstances, and God's being unconditionally predisposed to a certain kind of relationship. God's favorite kind of relationship is about the latter.

What else could be said *a priori* about God's favorite kind of relationship? This relationship, by definition, is something that God would always want. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that there would never be any omissions on God's part for it to happen. Schellenberg describes the same idea in terms of God's being *open* to relationship. He writes, "If thus open to relationship, God sees to it that nothing *God* does or fails to do puts relationship with God out of reach for finite persons at the time in question" (emphasis in the original).⁵ In other words, God would always provide whatever is necessary for every person to participate in God's favorite kind of relationship with him. This idea of divine openness to relationship can be transformed into a hiddenness-argument-style premise, which I shall use as a starting point for my statement of the argument:

- (1) If there is a God, then God always provides whatever is necessary for God's favorite kind of relationship with a person.

⁵ J. L. SCHELLENBERG, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (New York: OUP, 2015), 41.

So far, so good. But what exactly would God have to do for this relationship to happen? Is there anything else that we can know *a priori* about God's favorite kind of relationship that could help us in answering this question? Schellenberg insists that this kind of relationship has a necessary property of being *conscious*,⁶ which means that it is "a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in"⁷ and recognizes the presence of God as such.⁸ Let us define this conscious kind of relationship (hereafter CR) formally.

CR =_{df} a kind of relationship such that for any persons S_1 and S_2 and time t , if S_1 and S_2 at t are in a CR, then S_1 at t is conscious of being in the relationship with S_2 and S_2 at t is conscious of being in the relationship with S_1 .

A necessary condition for a CR is that both parties at the time in question are conscious of being in the relationship with one another, which means that both of them must (i) be conscious of being in the relationship and (ii) consciously recognize the other party. There are many examples of CR among human relationships, such as friendship or romantic love. Some human relationships, however, do not satisfy the above condition and thus do not qualify as CR. Sometimes one of the parties fails to recognize the other, as for example in the case of a relationship with a demented person, who mistakes you for someone else. Sometimes one of the parties is not conscious of being in the relationship, as in the case of a relationship with a person who is far on the autism spectrum and does not apprehend what it means to be in a relationship.

Schellenberg assumes that a loving relationship that God would always want to have with any person is such that the person should always be conscious of being in the relationship with God;⁹ or, to put it in our terms, that God's favorite kind of relationship is a CR. This is a key assumption both

⁶ This is how Schellenberg characterizes a *personal* relationship. I think that specifying a relationship as "personal" does no significant work here. Schellenberg's reasoning has the following structure: (i) necessarily, God would want a personal relationship; (ii) necessarily, personal relationships are such and such; therefore, (iii) necessarily, God would want such and such relationship. I believe that the meaning of the predicate "personal" is not sufficiently clear by itself, while Schellenberg's definition of "personal" is identical with the second premise of the above syllogism, which makes it ineffective as the middle term. Therefore, I prefer to eliminate the questionable middle term and deal directly with the conclusion.

⁷ SCHELLENBERG, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," 23.

⁸ See SCHELLENBERG, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 40.

⁹ See, e.g., SCHELLENBERG, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," 17–18; SCHELLENBERG, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 96.

for the success of the hiddenness argument and for the purposes of this paper. Thus, I should single it out as a separate premise:

(2) God's favorite kind of relationship is a CR.

Premise (2) is a constraint on the range of possibilities for divine-human loving relationships. First, it limits the number of human beings who can participate in a loving relationship with God by making it available only to those who possess certain cognitive and affective capabilities. Second, it restricts the realm of divine-human loving interactions by making them contingent on those cognitive and affective capabilities. Following Terence Cuneo, I label this constraint "the consciousness constraint."¹⁰ The consciousness constraint and, more specifically, premise (2) will be the main target of my criticism of the hiddenness argument. But before I turn to it, let us proceed with our premises for the argument.

Now, with premise (2) in mind, we can ask: What exactly should God do for every person to participate in a CR with him? Here comes the well-known part of Schellenberg's argument, which deals with belief, evidence, and nonresistant nonbelievers. It goes roughly like this: in order to participate in any CR with God one must be conscious of being in a relationship with God. Yet, one cannot be conscious of being in a relationship with God unless one believes that God exists, and this belief requires evidence. So, if God had provided everyone with whatever is necessary for their belief in his existence, then there would be sufficient evidence of God's existence available to all. In that case, it would be impossible for belief-capable people not to believe that there is a God unless they deliberately resist this belief. However, some people are nonresistant nonbelievers. Therefore, it is not the case that every person has whatever is necessary for any CR with God.

For the purposes of this paper there is no need to explicate each step of the above line of reasoning, so, I wrap them up in a single premise:

(3) It is not the case that God always provides whatever is necessary for any CR with a person.

I take premise (3) as true: I agree with Schellenberg that theistic belief is necessary for any CR with God, that theistic belief requires sufficient theistic

¹⁰ Cuneo introduces the consciousness constraint as a problematic claim regarding the nature of a divine-human loving relationship. He outlines it as follows: "God would have to do whatever God could to ensure that humans are always able just by trying to engage in a meaningful conscious relationship with God wherein they apprehend God as God"; see Terence CUNEO, "Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013): 157.

evidence, and that the universally available evidence is insufficient for theistic belief. In other words, I do not think that God's existence is sufficiently obvious for many people to be epistemically justified in seeking a relationship with God.

Premise (3) is the final piece of my statement of the hiddenness argument. Here is the argument in its full form:

- (1) If there is a God, then God always provides whatever is necessary for God's favorite kind of relationship with a person. [Premise]
- (2) God's favorite kind of relationship is a conscious relationship (CR). [Premise]
- (3) It is not the case that God always provides whatever is necessary for any CR with a person. [Premise]
- (4) It is not the case that God always provides whatever is necessary for God's favorite kind of relationship with a person. [From (2) & (3)]
- (5) There is no God. [From (1) & (4)]¹¹

The truth of the conclusion (5) depends on the truth of premises (1), (2), and (3).¹² I consider (1) and (3) as true, and (2) as false. Thus, in the rest of the paper I shall argue against (2), and, more generally, against the consciousness constraint on a divine-human relationship.

The easiest way to reject (2) is to point out its lack of support. Schellenberg treats it as being necessarily true, as something that logically follows from the very concept of perfect divine love.¹³ I think that (2) is possible and

¹¹ It should be noted that this is my own statement of the hiddenness argument. I believe, however, that this statement is faithful to Schellenberg's reasoning. Of course, I stand to be corrected.

¹² The main thrust of objections against the Hiddenness Argument is typically aimed at premise (1): the critics argue that God might have overriding reasons to withhold evidence of his existence from people. A brief summary of the objections against (1) and (3) can be found in Veronika WEIDNER's *Examining Schellenberg's Hiddenness Argument* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 157–75.

¹³ See, e.g., J. L. SCHELLENBERG, "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (New York: CUP, 2002), 50–51, or SCHELLENBERG, "Reply to Aijaz and Weidler on Hiddenness," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008): 136–37. Schellenberg argues that the sort of love that can be a great-making property in God must be conscious, because conscious love is better than the opposite ("Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," 18, 26; *The Hiddenness Argument*, 106). Moreover, in his reply to CUNEO's "Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," Schellenberg claims that the major flaw of Cuneo's argument is the assumption that "the notion that conscious interaction is only *contingently* tied to union and intimacy of the sort we admire and seek in love" (J. L. SCHELLENBERG, "Replies to my Colleagues," *Religious Studies* 49, no. 2 [2013]: 266; emphasis in the original). I agree that many people, including myself at this stage of my life, appreciate human-human loving relationships *with* conscious interaction more than the ones *without* it. It is not clear to

even tenable. I do not agree, however, that (2) is a necessary truth. Why must a relationship that God would always want to have with any person necessarily include the person's conscious awareness of being in relationship with God? Unless persons are reduced to their consciousness, personal beings may possess other capacities that could facilitate the relationship. Consider such complex persons as human beings. From a position of intellectual humility, I do not see *a priori* reasons to insist that God would prefer to connect with finite human minds. We may presume that our mind is the bearer of the likeness of God. We may cherish the idea that our affective and cognitive facets of selfhood are the best things we can offer to God in a personal relationship. God, however, might have a different view of our emotional and intellectual value. Simply put, it is possible that those aspects of human nature that are vitally important for God's favorite kind of relationship "just ain't in the head."¹⁴ Until proven otherwise, (2) cannot be accepted either as necessarily true or as plausible.

This paper could end right here, for a key premise of the hiddenness argument has been shown to be unfounded. But that would be far too easy. After all, (2) is possible, and in the absence of any alternative it would still remain the most plausible solution on the table. Thus, to strengthen my case, I need to offer a viable alternative to (2). For that, I need to set forth a kind of relationship that is not a CR and that could count as a plausible candidate for God's favorite kind of relationship.

Before I offer my alternative to (2), I briefly examine a potential alternative to (2) that others have already proposed. There are several responses to the hiddenness argument that use a common strategy: they introduce a special kind of human relationship with God, which could be labeled as *quasi-conscious relationship* (hereafter quasi-CR).

Quasi-CR with God =_{df} a kind of relationship with God such that for any person *S* and time *t*, if *S* at *t* is in a quasi-CR with God, then *S* at *t* is not conscious of being in relationship with God and *S* at *t* is conscious of being in relationship with *quasi-God*,

where "*quasi-God*" is a manifestation, an aspect, or a representation of God for *S*. A typical example of a human-human quasi-CR would be a child writing

me, however, why conscious loving relationships are objectively better than other loving relationships and why conscious interaction is a non-contingent component of an admirable love.

¹⁴ I borrow this application of Hilary Putnam's phrase to divine-human relationship from Terence CUNEO, as well as some of his insights concerning the falsity of the consciousness constraint on the divine love ("Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," 154, 157–62).

letters to and receiving gifts from Santa Claus, who is in fact her father. A well-known theological example of a quasi-CR with God is Karl Rahner's idea of anonymous Christians, who receive the grace from God without believing in the Christian God.¹⁵

Some authors suggest that it is possible for human beings to have a quasi-CR with God, that is, to be in relationship with God without being aware that their relationship is with God but being aware of their relationship with a superior entity, i.e., a *quasi-God*. Instead of God, a person can relate to the ultimate Good, to the Eternal,¹⁶ to the Absolute, to the Unknown,¹⁷ to the manifestations of goodness and beauty in the world,¹⁸ to acts of self-sacrificial love,¹⁹ or to their conscience.²⁰ It is often assumed that such quasi-CR could be acceptable to God. I do not intend to contest this assumption. But it poses no threat to (2). In order to reject (2), we need to find a non-CR kind of relationship that could be God's favorite kind of relationship. Yet none of the foregoing authors even suppose, let alone claim, that their quasi-CR is indeed what God would always want to have with people. All they assume is that God could provisionally accept a quasi-CR as sufficient to start down the path of developing a CR with the person. They do not deny that God's favorite kind of relationship is a CR. Therefore, their strategy does not provide a genuine alternative to (2).

In what follows, I offer a genuine alternative to CR as God's favorite kind of relationship, which I characterize as a *physical* relationship. I do not, however, simply offer one tenable idea over another tenable idea. I argue that this physical relationship, which is a consciousness-independent relationship, is a more plausible candidate for being God's favorite kind of relationship than a CR, which in turn entails that (2) is implausible and the hiddenness argument is unsuccessful.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Karl RAHNER, "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 390–98.

¹⁶ William WAINWRIGHT, "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God," in HOWARD-SNYDER and MOSER, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 113–14.

¹⁷ Jamie M. FERREIRA, "A Kierkegaardian View of Divine Hiddenness," in HOWARD-SNYDER and MOSER, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, 164–80.

¹⁸ CUNEO, "Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," 161.

¹⁹ Paul K. MOSER, "Divine Hiddenness and Self-Sacrifice," in GREEN and STUMP, *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*.

²⁰ Stephen EVANS, "Can God Be Hidden and Evident at the Same Time? Some Kierkegaardian Reflections," *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2006): 247.

3. PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Before addressing divine-human physical relationships, let me explain what I mean by physical relationships in general. I understand a relationship as a direct, personal interaction between personal beings. Some personal actions primarily address the body (e.g., feeding, protecting, giving shelter) in order to bring about a certain physical state. What I mean by “primarily” is that the action might also have a mental effect (e.g., elicit joy or gratitude), yet this mental effect is not the main purpose of the action. Let us label such actions *physically oriented actions*. Apart from physically oriented actions, there are personal actions that primarily address the mind (e.g., joking, comforting, apologizing) in order to bring about a certain mental state. These *mentally oriented actions* might include a physical component (e.g., hugging or shaking hands), yet their main purpose is not concerned with the body. In addition, there are dual personal actions that address *both* mind and body, and their purpose is to bring about a certain mental state *as well as* a certain physical state. In what follows, I shall not be interested either in mentally oriented actions or in dual actions, only in physically oriented actions.

A *physical relationship* is a kind of relationship that essentially consists of physically oriented actions. The word “essentially” here means that even if a physical relationship is accompanied by mentally oriented actions or mental effects of the physically oriented actions, these mental ingredients do not constitute the nature of the relationship. Common examples of physical relationships include all sorts of physical care—medical, social, domestic, etc. that help people to meet their physical needs.²¹ What is important about physical relationships is that they are consciousness-independent. Such relationships exist regardless of whether one of the parties is conscious, quasi-conscious, or non-conscious of the relationship with the other party. Examples of limited conscious awareness in physical relationships include a mother’s care for her baby, who is not conscious of being in a relationship, or an adult daughter’s care for her senile father, who does not recognize her as his daughter, or a nurse’s care for a minimally conscious patient, who is neither aware of the relationship nor recognizes anyone.

²¹ Following Engster, I understand care as “everything we do directly to help individuals to meet their vital biological needs, develop or maintain their basic capabilities, and avoid or alleviate unnecessary or unwanted pain and suffering, so that they can survive, develop and function in society” (Daniel ENGSTER, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory* [Oxford: OUP, 2007], 29).

One might object that a genuine relationship must be reciprocal, that is, it must include an actual response to a personal action, whereas passive reception of physical care does not qualify as a valid response. Here we ought to distinguish between a completely unresponsive person (e.g., in a coma) and a person who is not conscious of being in the relationship with the other party. Reciprocal interaction with the former is indeed problematic, while reciprocity with the latter is quite possible. All it takes for a person to participate in a physical relationship is to be capable of perceiving the action and reacting to it accordingly, which neither requires awareness of being in a relationship nor recognition of the other party. If the person can physically respond to the personalized action—eat the offered food, cooperate while being washed or dressed, etc.—that would be enough to constitute genuine reciprocity.

One might also object that the aforementioned cases of physical care are not relationships, but only parts or stages of relationships that at some point necessarily involve mutual conscious awareness and recognition. For example, nursing and geriatric care are the first and the last phases of lifelong relationships, and these phases ought to be considered within the context of the whole story. But what if there is no other story apart from the physical relationship? Would the absence of the conscious phase invalidate the relationship? I don't think so. These physical relationships might be accompanied by the caregiver's expectations or hopes of a conscious response: the mother looks forward to her baby becoming aware of her love some day, and the adult woman caring for her demented father yearns for his moments of clarity when he recognizes her as his daughter. Nevertheless, in these cases the conscious response is not the main purpose of the physical care. And even if that response never occurs, these relationships would still count as genuine.

Finally, one might object that consciousness-independent relationships in general and physical relationships in particular are somehow deficient in comparison with fully functional, conscious relationships (CR); thus, they should not be treated as genuine relationships, but only as simulacra, flawed copies of the real thing. This objection might be relevant within a conceptual framework where physical is considered inferior to the mental. Otherwise, I do not see any sustainable reasons to treat consciousness-independent relationships as relationships of lower quality than CR. Moreover, certain physical relationships are superior to any CR, for they are the most fundamental, definitive, and vital among human relationships. For example, maternal care for the child's life, safety, and well-being is an archetype for our understanding of true love and selfless devotion to another person. This care provides

a foundation for the child's development of attachment, which, in turn, equips the child for future relationships. In this sense, all CR should be treated as derivatives of the physical relationship of a mother and child, not vice versa.

Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that physical relationships can be genuine relationships and that they are quite common among human beings. Let us now consider whether it would be possible to have a physical relationship with God. Note that the hiddenness argument deals with the personal God of traditional monotheistic religions, who is generally conceived as immaterial perfect Being; so let us adhere to this concept of God. Could a non-physical God have physical relationship with human beings? Is that metaphysically possible? In order to give an affirmative answer to this question, I suggest that we employ another indispensable element of the traditional concept of God: the idea of God being the creator and sustainer of the material world. This idea entails the possibility of interaction of an immaterial creator with the material creation. As creator and sustainer of the physical world, God could cause a physical event that brings about an intended physical effect in a person's life, and that would qualify as a physically oriented action—the constituent of physical relationship. In return, the person could physically cooperate with the divine action in order to bring about the intended physical effect, and that would qualify as the reciprocal physically oriented action—another constituent of physical relationship.

At this point, no need exists to provide an exhaustive account of physical relationships with God; it suffices to acknowledge their possibility. Nevertheless, a few examples may be helpful. The first example is from a particular traditional theistic religion: Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran Christians believe that in the sacrament of Holy Communion the incarnate God offers his physical body as food to his people, and people physically partake of it, thus consummating the physical relationship of “becoming one body” with God. The second example is from a more general theistic context, where a typical loving physical relationship with God has the following form: God bestows physical gifts personally on a beloved human being, who responds by accepting those gifts and making proper use of them.

The foregoing considerations support the idea that a physical relationship with God is metaphysically possible. If that idea is sound, then it is also possible that the following is true:

(2*) God's favorite kind of relationship is a physical relationship.

Earlier I argued against the plausibility of premise (2) in my statement of the hiddenness argument by pointing out its lack of support. That was sufficient to suspend (2); yet, that was not sufficient to repudiate it. Here I have offered (2*) as a possible alternative to (2). Without any support, however, (2*) may seem no more plausible than (2). Thus, I need to provide reinforcement for (2*). I obtain it from natural theology by using the physical world as evidence in our investigation concerning God's favorite kind of relationship. The following discussion presupposes that God is the creator of the universe. Henceforth I omit the repetitive conditional antecedent "if there is a God and if God has created our world" to save space.

One reason to accept (2*) is based on the fact that human nature, among other things, is physical (I take that as obviously true). It is reasonable to assume that God has created human beings as the most fitting partners for his favorite kind of relationship. Suppose that God's favorite kind of relationship is not a physical relationship. Clearly, God could have created purely non-physical partners for this relationship. It would make little sense for God to complicate the relationship by binding his partners for a non-physical relationship with a physical nature. Nonetheless, God has created his partners as beings with a physical nature. One might suggest that God could have had some additional reasons to make the relationship more complicated. Still, *ceteris paribus*, (2*) is the simplest explanation: we have a physical nature because God wanted to have a physical relationship.

Another reason to accept (2*) is founded on the observation that physical relationships are the most common and fundamental relationships in our world. God has created this world in order to have a very particular relationship with human beings. But how would they know what kind of relationship God wants to have with them? In order to ensure that human beings choose the right thing, God could have left signs and clues in the creation that would reveal God's favorite kind of relationship. God could do even better than signs and clues: he could have implanted the pattern of this relationship into the very structure of the world. I find it very likely that God designed the world in such a way that his favorite kind of relationship would be the most evident, familiar, and common to its inhabitants, so that human beings would not need to face any hardship in learning and adjusting to God's favorite kind of relationship because they would already have a natural inclination and affinity to it. Thus, it is plausible to assume that the most common and basic relationship in our world has the greatest probability of being God's favorite kind of relationship. It seems that the most basic relationships, which

sustain our natural order, are physical relationships. If one is to single out the most fundamental relationship, then, as argued earlier, that would be the maternal-filial relationship, which is the archetype and the foundation for all other loving relationships.

Schellenberg, too, uses maternal love as a close analogy to God's love.²² However, his discussion of the maternal-filial relationship centers on the child's expectations from the mother, as if the child's conscious awareness of the relationship with the mother is a necessary component of their relationship. In other words, Schellenberg treats maternal-filial relationship as a CR.²³ But is it really a CR, or is it, as I suggest, a physical relationship? This relationship necessarily includes the mother's constant worry about whether the child is fed, clean, warm, healthy, and safe, which starts from the first moments of the child's life and does not wane even when the child becomes an adult. In the course of time, the mother and child might develop additional aspects of their relationship, such as psychological care, friendship, or partnership. However, these additional aspects come and go, while the compulsion of mother's physical care remains unyielding. The mental aspects of the maternal-filial relationship are contingent upon culture and individual circumstances, whereas the physical aspect is predetermined by nature. Therefore, the maternal-filial relationship is essentially physical. And if we conceive of divine love by analogy with maternal love, then we should conclude that God's favorite kind of relationship is a physical relationship.

In light of the above reasons, we can assume that (2*) is probable. Yet its being merely probable is not sufficient to reject (2) conclusively. For that, I need to demonstrate that (2*) is more probable than (2).

To compare probabilities of (2) and (2*), consider two possible worlds. In both worlds there are human beings like us, and there is a God who always provides whatever is necessary for God's favorite kind of relationship with

²² See, e.g., J. L. SCHELLENBERG, "Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 33–34.

²³ Describing maternal love, Schellenberg writes: "The perfectly loving parent, for example, from the time the child can first respond to her at all until death separates them, will, insofar as she can help it, see to it that nothing she does ever puts relationship with herself out of reach for her child" (J. L. SCHELLENBERG, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," in *Religious Studies* 41, no. 2 (2005): 203). It is worth noting that Schellenberg starts the timeframe of the relationship with "the time the child can first respond to her at all." The cited statement would be true even without the temporal limit (i.e., "from the first moment of the child's life until death"). It would make little sense to limit the timeframe, unless one wants to emphasize a conscious aspect of the relationship.

a person. The first world—call it Solaris—is a world where (2) is true. The second world—call it Arcadia—is a world where (2*) is true.

In Solaris, God always wants to have a CR with every person, so God always provides all people with sufficient evidence of his existence. What kind of evidence would suffice? I tend to agree with Schellenberg that it should be an abiding internal non-sensory experience of an ultimate and loving reality.²⁴ Those in Solaris who have the cognitive and affective capacity to be conscious of being in relationship with God interpret their experience so that they believe in the existence of a loving God and consciously respond to him. Thus they enter into a CR with God. As their relationship with God develops, they start experiencing more particular forms of God's presence, which they interpret as forgiving, comforting, or guiding.

In Arcadia, God's relationship with human beings is physical. God individually bestows physical gifts on a person, for instance, food, clothing, bathing, and healing, and the person responds to that by receiving the gifts. This interaction occurs at multiple specifically appointed places. All it takes for a person to have the relationship with God is to be present at the right place and not decline the gift. Those who are physically unable to come by themselves can attend with the help of others. Many of the attendants are conscious of having a relationship with God. Some, however, do not have a proper concept of God and think that they have a relationship with a different entity. Some do not grasp the nature of personal relationships and receive God's gifts only for practical reasons. And some have no understanding of what's going on whatsoever and respond to God's actions instinctively. Nevertheless, God has his favorite relationship with all of them regardless of the nature of their conscious awareness.

Consider two important differences between Solaris and Arcadia. The first difference concerns the freedom of human participation in the relationship with God. The inhabitants of Arcadia are genuinely free to accept or reject God's invitation to the relationship, whereas in Solaris this freedom is compromised. In Arcadia, the relationship with God occurs at specific places and it has the form of physical interaction; it is never out of reach for anyone and it does not obstruct the regular flow of human daily life. It is within ordinary human powers to stay either in or out of those places, and either to participate or refrain from the interaction.

²⁴ See Schellenberg's description of a world where God is not hidden (his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], 48–52). Presumably, neither sensory nor sporadic experience is sufficient to secure the persisting theistic belief; plus, external evidence of God is less likely to elicit a personal response.

In Solaris, the situation is different. The God of Solaris always makes sure that his existence is sufficiently evident to every person at every moment. The non-sensory experience of God in Solaris is continuous, unsolicited, and uncontrolled by the recipient. It is beyond ordinary human powers to take even a short break from experiencing God in Solaris, and one cannot achieve that without breaking the relationship.²⁵ The God of Solaris is like a friend who constantly follows you just to make sure that you never doubt her existence, and the only way to stop feeling her presence is to shut down your senses or chase her away.²⁶ This God, by demanding people's love, traverses their personal boundaries and deprives people of their autonomy.²⁷ He forces the experience of his presence upon human minds, which produces compliance rather than love.²⁸ A perfectly loving God would seek to preserve human freedom and would prefer the consciousness-independent relationship of Arcadia to the consciousness-constrained relationship of Solaris.²⁹

The second difference concerns the accessibility of the relationship with God to various groups of people. The most disturbing consequence of the consciousness constraint on divine-human relationships is that it segregates people based on their natural condition. There are people in Solaris who are by nature not eligible for God's favorite kind of relationship. To have access to a CR with God, one must have the capacity to be conscious of being in relationship with God, which implies that one must possess mental faculties that allow to be in a relationship, to be aware of being in relationship, to have

²⁵ The only way to stop that experience would be via some unnatural procedure of blocking one's non-sensory perception of God's presence. Such blocking would be culpable both spiritually and epistemically and would be tantamount to an act of defiance.

²⁶ One might suggest a scenario of a non-obtrusive religious experience (e.g., where the experience is bestowed upon request). Schellenberg, too, insists that God would not suffocate people with attention (J. L. SCHELLENBERG, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* [New York: OUP, 2015], 40). Such a scenario, however, would threaten the requirement that God must make sure that every person *always* has evidence sufficient for belief in God's existence.

²⁷ Schellenberg allows that God would not "intervene in the lives of nonresistant *believers*, perhaps disruptively, to give them evidence sufficient for belief" (*The Hiddenness Argument*, 106, emphasis mine). Even so, the autonomy of those who doubt or disbelieve would still be disrupted.

²⁸ Schellenberg suggests that religious experience could provide the required evidence without significantly removing human freedom ("What the Hiddenness of God Reveals," 38). I agree that some measure of freedom might be preserved; nevertheless, some measure of freedom would still be lost. Therefore, a scenario where no freedom is lost, *ceteris paribus*, would be more preferable than this one.

²⁹ The idea that divine hiddenness is a necessary condition for maintaining human free will is not new, its discussion is multifaceted, and the literature is vast. That discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. All I need here is to demonstrate that, from the perspective of human freedom, (2*) is more plausible than (2).

an adequate concept of God, to form a belief that God exists, and, on top of that, to be able to identify the other party as God. Meeting these requirements is beyond the mental capabilities of little children, demented elderly, mentally handicapped, psychologically traumatized, autistic people, and many more.

Schellenberg rightly notes that “an omnipotent God would be able to create us with the required mental furniture in place.”³⁰ Why, then, are so many people in Solaris left without the required mental furniture for a CR? Perhaps, we could transfer the cases of trauma, disability, and age-related infirmity to the problem of evil. But what about little children? Their incapacity for a CR obviously belongs to the natural order of things. Therefore, it was God himself who has decided that Solaris should be full of people who are unsuited for his favorite kind of relationship. Even if we could somehow manage to brush off the children’s unsuitability for God as some developmental necessity, there is yet another group of human beings whom we cannot easily dismiss: autistic people. Many autistic people are not capable of being in a CR because of their different neurology; however, they are neither damaged nor disabled, and they cannot be “cured” of their natural condition.³¹ The existence of CR-incapable people indicates that the God of Solaris has designed a world where his favorite relationship was not intended for *all* people. As I see it, a God with such limited love does not qualify as perfectly loving.

In contrast, the God of Arcadia has created a world where his favorite kind of relationship is available to any person who is capable of physically receiving his gifts, which is true of every human being. Clearly, a perfectly loving God would want to have a loving relationship with as many people as possible. That gives us another reason to believe that God would prefer consciousness-independent relationships with human beings to consciousness-constrained relationships.

To sum up: first, it is possible that human beings could have physical relationships with God. Second, it is probable that God would want to have a physical relationship with human beings. Finally, there are compelling reasons to assume that God would prefer to have a consciousness-independent rather than a conscious relationship with human beings. If the latter is true,

³⁰ SCHELLENBERG, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 51.

³¹ Joanna LEIDENHAG, in her “The Challenge of Autism for Relational Approaches to Theological Anthropology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23, no. 1 (2021), provides an excellent overview of the history of theological and psychological stigmatization of autistic people, as well as compelling arguments against treating autism as a disability.

then God's favorite kind of relationship is not subject to the consciousness constraint, premise (2) of the hiddenness argument is false, and the argument is unsound.

4. CODA

It has become common in the hiddenness literature to provide made-up sentimental stories about personal relationships. Thus, I offer yet another dramatic narrative as a possible analogy to the hiddenness problem.³² Imagine a loving mother and her teenage son, who enjoys extreme activities, nihilistic music, intoxicating substances, and anti-social behavior. There was a time when they were close, but those days are gone. His mother still desires to caress him, to comb his hair, to treat his bruises, and to prepare a healthy meal for him, yet he regards her care as degrading and shuns it. He is no longer interested in whatever his mother can offer him, while his mother simply cannot find it in herself to keep up with his new demands. She can neither become nor pretend to be what he expects her to be. What she wants is to be his mother, not a sidekick for his self-indulgence.

One day, the son decides that he needs a facial tattoo, but he cannot make up his mind concerning its design. He is tormented by indecision and finally reaches out to his mother for advice. His mother, however, becomes so appalled that she refuses to participate in this discussion. "Why don't you say something?" he cries desperately. "Sit down," she responds softly, "I've made you breakfast." He persists, "I don't need your breakfast! For once, I need you to help me!" But she remains silent. Finally, he snaps and bolts from the kitchen, thinking to himself, "That woman doesn't love me. Maybe she's not even my real mother. Perhaps, I don't even have a mother."

He goes away for good, looking for someone to love him the way he wants to be loved. Subsequently, he develops his own theory of how good mothers should treat their children. He remains firm in his belief that he doesn't have a real mother. In the meantime, his mother has cleaned up his room and washed his clothes, she has prepared her best meal and has set the table. She is waiting for her son to come back, so that she can once again be a mother for him.

³² This hiddenness story is a variation on Schellenberg's dreadful drama of a lost child in his *Analogy Argument* (SCHELLENBERG, "Divine Hiddenness Justifies Atheism," 31–34).

If the main idea of this paper is correct, then God would be always open for a physical relationship with all human beings. It is not, however, in the nature of God's love to seek conscious relationships, and he would not always be willing to satisfy every human expectation of intellectual or emotional connection with God. If people do not appreciate his physical gifts and do not want to remain in his presence, he would respect their choice and would not haunt them with constant reminders of his existence. Like the mother in our story, God would neither hide from nor impose himself on anyone. He would remain right there where he has always been, offering exactly what he has always been offering. It is up to people whether to stay with God or go look for someone more to their liking.

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DIVINE OPENNESS FOR PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP

S u m m a r y

The success of the atheistic hiddenness argument depends on the "consciousness constraint" it imposes on the divine-human loving relationship: namely, that this relationship requires human conscious awareness of being in the relationship with God. I challenge the truth of this proposition by introducing the concept of a physical relationship with God that is not subject to this constraint. I argue, first, that a physical relationship with God is metaphysically possible; second, that its plausibility is supported by natural theology; and third, that a perfectly loving God would prefer physical relationships with human beings over consciousness-constrained relationships, because a perfectly loving God would prefer to preserve the integrity of human freedom of participation and allow inclusion of all people regardless of their natural cognitive capabilities. I also offer an interpretation of apparent divine hiddenness in the light of the idea of God's openness for physical relationships.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; Schellenberg; personal relationships; love; natural theology; divine creation; equality and capabilities.

BOŻA OTWARTOŚĆ NA FIZYCZNĄ RELACJĘ

Streszczenie

Powodzenie ateistycznego argumentu z ukrycia zależy od „przymusu świadomości”, jaki nakłada on na bosko-ludzką relację miłosną, tj. warunku świadomości bycia w relacji z Bogiem. Podważam

prawdziwość tego twierdzenia, wprowadzając koncepcję fizycznej relacji z Bogiem, która nie podlega temu przymusowi. Twierdę, po pierwsze, że fizyczna relacja z Bogiem jest metafizycznie możliwa; po drugie, że jej wiarygodność jest poparta teologią naturalną; i po trzecie, że doskonale kochający Bóg wolałby fizyczne relacje z ludźmi niż relacje ograniczone świadomością, ponieważ doskonale kochający Bóg wolałby zachować integralność ludzkiej wolności uczestnictwa i umożliwić włączenie wszystkich ludzi bez względu na ich naturalne zdolności poznawcze. Proponuję również interpretację pozornej boskiej skrytości w świetle idei otwarcia Boga na relacje fizyczne.

Słowa kluczowe: Boże ukrycie; Schellenberg; relacje osobowe; miłość; teologia naturalna; boskie stworzenie; równość i zdolności.