

# THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS: A WOJTYLIAN RESPONSE

Ian Anthony Davatos  
*Palawan State University, Puerto Princesa, Philippines*

*Alongside the problem of evil, a new problem for theism has emerged: the problem of divine hiddenness. The structure of the problem is straightforward: it hinges on the idea that God's existence is not obvious to many people, believers, and nonbelievers alike. But if God is loving, God would make sure that everybody would have an immediate knowledge of His existence. However, there are people to whom God's existence is not immediate; in fact, there are nonbelievers who can rationally doubt God's existence. Thus, if there are indeed such people, then God does not exist. While Karol Wojtyła, also known as Saint John Paul II, has no sustained work that delves deeply into addressing the problem, some of his ideas may be developed to respond to it. In this paper, I formulate a Wojtylian response to the problem, as can be gleaned in Wojtyła's view about the nature and extent of faith and its relationship to reason. I also advance two challenges, inspired by Wojtyła, to a core assumption of Schellenberg's argument that I argue are impossible to be met without the need for religious faith. Then, I conclude by noting the implications of God's self-testimony in Jesus to the problem of divine hiddenness.*

## INTRODUCTION

Consider the fact of atheism in contemporary society. In recent years, there has been a spate of bestselling books from well-known thinkers espousing what has been dubbed as New Atheism (Harris 2005; Dennett 2006; Hitchens 2007; Dawkins 2008). The aim of these thinkers is not so much to argue for the cogency and rationality of atheism as an intellectual position but instead to take the offensive side and attack the supposed irrationality and dangerous tendencies of religion. The popularity of these new atheist books has led not only to the reexamination of many fundamental religious assumptions from various religious scholars but even to the deconversion of many religious believers from faith and religion to atheism and secular reason. Even Filipino philosophers have noticed this trend. For instance, Jove Jim Aguas (2019) has bemoaned the increasing secularization of the Filipino culture, brought about by the ever-increasing modernization in various aspects of life.

In a book chapter about atheism, Phil Zuckerman (2007, 61) concluded that there are about 500 to 750 million human beings worldwide who do not believe in

God. In the same article, Zuckerman noted that less than 1 percent of Filipinos are atheists (2007, 53). This shows that the Philippines remains a predominantly religious country, with most Filipinos being a Catholic Christian. However, despite that, atheists in the country are starting to gain ground by forming their own communities, such as the Philippine Atheism, Agnosticism and Secularism, Inc., which has its own Facebook page. But while the numbers of atheists and agnostics in the country remain minuscule in comparison to those who hold religious beliefs, a new argument for atheism is proposed such that this fact alone – that other people can have reasonable nonbelief about God – undermines the widespread belief that God exists.

This argument, now commonly known as the argument from divine hiddenness, is first systematically advanced by Canadian philosopher J. L. Schellenberg in his now-classic book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993). Recently, Schellenberg published a short book on the same argument, which is meant to make the hiddenness argument (as Schellenberg calls it) more accessible and contained its latest developments. In this paper, I plan to introduce Schellenberg's argument in its latest formulation and advance a set of responses to it that is largely based on Wojtyła's thought. Finally, I shall conclude by noting that when the presuppositions of Schellenberg's argument are identified and addressed, especially in interaction with the Christian framework, the challenge posed by its claims can be successfully met.

So what is Schellenberg's argument? It begins with understanding the nature of God as traditionally understood, and upon recognition of certain forms of nonbelief, it is concluded that God being perfectly loving cannot so exist. This is an argument from above, as Schellenberg characterizes it since it takes a traditional understanding of God as the starting point (2015, 38). Schellenberg begins by stating that, "If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person" (2015, 38). Schellenberg rightly points out that perfect love necessarily involves openness to relationships. Since God possesses the greatest possible love, then it is to be expected that "God will always be open to a meaningful conscious relationship with every finite person capable of participating in it" (2015, 40).

However, there remains an ambiguity with the term 'openness' here, something which Schellenberg himself attempts to address. By openness to relationships, he simply means in this context that God sees to it that it is always possible for anyone who is not resistant to God to participate in a relationship with God. In other words, God, by being perfectly loving, will always make it so "that nothing *God* does or fails to do puts relationship with God out of reach for finite persons at the time in question" (2015, 41). But this seems to expect too much from God. Perhaps, God wants to secure certain goods for human beings that would not be possible if God's existence is too obvious. Perhaps, God does not reveal himself in a universally unambiguous way in order to maintain the integrity of human freedom (Murray 1993). Perhaps, as David Howard-Snyder suggests, an inquirer who is open-minded and humble enough will realize that he is not in the position to deny that there may be inscrutable reasons for God to remain hidden (2015, 137).

But Schellenberg found a way out of such justifying reasons that make the hiddenness argument intact, and it is the realization that among the goods that humans may acquire or develop through God choosing to be hidden, "there has to be a way for

us to achieve that good, or a good of that type, in and perhaps precisely *through* a relationship with God” (2015, 47). So if human freedom is deemed objectively valuable, there must be a way to respect that freedom while God is making himself manifest to every human being. It may even be argued that limiting human freedom may be justified in this case since the price of such limitation is the revelation of God whose richness and beauty far surpass anything that humans have imagined or can imagine. Thus, if a perfectly loving God exists, then God would make Himself known to every human being. So if there are nonresistant nonbelievers—which presuppose that God did not make Himself known to everyone—it follows that a perfectly loving God does not exist. One of the most controversial ideas in Schellenberg’s argument is the notion of nonresistant nonbelief. It is thus deserved that he allotted a whole chapter in his latest book in explicating and defending the idea.

By ‘nonbelief’, Schellenberg simply means “*not believing in God*—and such ‘not believing’ can appear in many different ways” (2015, 75). So nonbelief here does not simply refer to atheists who claim that there is no God. Aside from atheists, nonbelievers include those people who have not even acquired any notion of God: they did not reach the point of doubting God’s existence since they did not have an idea of God in the first place. In Schellenberg’s terminology, these people are in a state of pre-doubt (2015, 76). By default, these people are nonresistant nonbelievers because to be resistant to God, one must first think about God, but this is an act that is inherently absent in pre-doubt human beings. Nonbelief also figures on those people who have come upon doubts, brought about by new information or critical reflection to religious belief. Schellenberg is clear that while there are cases of reflective doubts that may be an implicit manifestation of resistance to God, there are ones that are reached through an honest assessment of arguments and evidence. As Schellenberg (2015, 80) described these honest doubters:

They learned about the historical circumstances in which the scriptures on which they had always relied might have been formed, or for the first time studied the problem of evil, or had the difficulties in arguments for God expounded to them, or read about deep time, or encountered spiritual depth as well as religious experiences conflicting with their own in non-theistic religious traditions.

It may indeed be highly presumptuous to assume that all doubters of this kind are at the bottom still resisting the idea of God or any relationship to Him. Thus, a full understanding of this kind of doubters should lead one to recognize that there are in fact, nonresistant nonbelievers. Putting all these in mind, Schellenberg’s argument is airtight: if there are nonresistant nonbelievers, then it follows that God does not exist. It is a deductive argument, which means that the truth of the premises logically entails the truth of the conclusion. So the only way to counter this form of argument and avoid the conclusion is to question the plausibility of its premises. We have so far seen that the premises put forward by Schellenberg are forceful, even almost commonsensical. At this point, a natural question begins to emerge: how does Saint John Paul II respond to the argument? To that, we now turn.

## THE WOJTYLIAN RESPONSE TO DIVINE HIDDENNESS

The first thing to note about Wojtyła in relation to the problem at hand is that what can be gleaned as his *direct* response to it is a mere five-page chapter in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, which is aptly titled, “If God Exists, Why Is He Hiding?” (Wojtyła 1994, 37-41). Nevertheless, his other works, such as the *Fides et Ratio* and *Sign of Contradiction*, are a treasure-trove of ideas that can be gleaned as foundational to or strengthening the foundation of his over-all response and will thus be utilized throughout this work. However, Schellenberg’s defense of the argument is tight and comprehensive, and Wojtyła’s thoughts on the problem are not directly geared towards Schellenberg’s presentation of the argument in all its sophistication. But Wojtyła’s works can be studied and even developed such that they can produce a systematic response to Schellenberg’s, response whose main foundational structures are still rightly attributed to Wojtyła’s works, but whose application to Schellenberg’s argument is a novel task on its own. Such is the nature of producing a *Wojtylian* response, which is also the main burden of this work.

At the outset, Wojtyła is questioning the legitimacy of the question (as stated in the chapter’s title), or in our case, the problem of divine hiddenness. He remarked that such a question “would only be legitimate if man, with his created intellect and within the limits of his own subjectivity, could overcome the entire distance that separates creation from the Creator, the contingent and not necessary being from the Necessary Being” (1994, 38). Thus, Wojtyła is calling for the recognition that when humans are left to their own devices, it might be thoroughly difficult, if not impossible, to discover the nature of the Creator. However, the existence of a Creator is something one discovers by what Wojtyła calls “knowledge through creation” (1994, 39). In *Fides et Ratio*, Wojtyła points out to the book of nature, which refers to the created universe, as the first stage of divine revelation. According to him, when the universe is “read with the proper tools of human reason,” this “can lead to knowledge of the Creator” (n. 19). Is it possible to examine the universe and fail to conclude that it requires a Creator? Wojtyła admits that this is possible, but “it is not because they lack the means to do so, but because their free will and their sinfulness place an impediment in the way” (n. 19). While Wojtyła takes the idea of sin as an impediment to recognizing God’s reality as a fundamental assumption, one may question its plausibility. However, some thinkers have already developed this idea into various full-fledged arguments against the problem (Moser 2002; Lehe 2004; Azadegan 2013).

In an earlier work, Wojtyła recognizes the influence of Satan in atheism understood “as an inner state of the human conscience” (1979, 28). However, he is clear that even Satan himself recognizes God’s existence so that “outright denial of God is not possible” (1979, 30). So what does Satan want out of Adam and Eve? According to Wojtyła, Satan wants to impose his own attitude on them, which is generally his rebellion against his Creator. Satan wanted them to see that they do not have to be subservient to God but instead assert their own autonomy and humanity, setting aside the divine requirements “which have a direct bearing on the truth of man’s creaturely being” (1979, 30). However, Wojtyła notes that Satan did not completely succeed in turning man to complete rebellion against God. However, “he succeeds in inducing man to turn towards the world and to stray progressively in a direction

opposed to the destiny to which he [man] has been called” (1979, 31). This, in turn, makes the current world where man lives as “the terrain of man’s temptation: the terrain in which man turns his back on God in various ways and in varying degrees” (1979, 31). By turning to this world, man develops this tendency of human pride whereby the recognition of God as the world’s Creator and Designer slowly takes a back seat.

It is important to avoid misinterpreting Wojtyla at this point. Wojtyla recognizes a certain form of what he calls “autonomy of earthly realities,” which, when rightly understood, simply means “that created things and even societies have laws and values proper to themselves, which mankind must gradually discover, use and regulate” (1979, 33). Wojtyla is clear that such autonomy does not in any way violate the will of the Creator. But the autonomy of earthly realities may also be understood atheistically, which is to mean the belief that “created things do not depend on God, and that man can handle them in such a way as not to relate them to the Creator” (1979, 33). There is no doubt that it is the second interpretation that Wojtyla considers to be what is mistaken and is caused by the sustained effort of Satan to influence mankind to turn against God, their Creator.

For many modern ears, the appeal to Satan to respond to divine hiddenness seems largely untenable: in this highly secularized age, who still believes in the literal existence of Satan? One might even describe such a line of thought as both crazy and irresponsible. But such a rhetorically dismissive response should by no means be taken as a persuasive refutation of Satan’s existence. In any case, some comments are in order. A renaissance of sustained thinking in matters of religion, including philosophy of religion, has put long-neglected issues, such as angels and demons, into the intellectual landscape. This has been shown by the recent spate of academic books dealing with the theme (Hoffman 2012). Thus, a dismissal of such a response is premature and needs justification. Secondly, there is nothing within the Christian framework that makes such an appeal incoherent or ad hoc; in fact, the Christian story inevitably requires the acknowledgment of Satan as a major character in the story. Finally, this appeal to Satan as a response to the problem of divine hiddenness has already been made by Travis Dumsday in the philosophical literature (Dumsday 2016), illustrating that it can at least be defended philosophically. While Dumsday admits that such a response is expected to be unpersuasive to the atheist, this can be a core part of the Christian’s repertoire in dealing with the problem. However, it is to be noted that Dumsday takes a different approach from Wojtyla in using the idea of the devil: Dumsday argues for the idea as a reason for God to remain hidden while Wojtyla recognizes Satan as a reason for man to fail to recognize God’s reality. Nevertheless, will a Wojtylian response fail to work if the assumption of the devil is abandoned? I do not think so. As long as one bears in mind the sinful tendency of human nature—which leads man to look at the world as not needing a Creator and with it man as not needing someone to lord over their lives—a Wojtylian response remains intact.

In what has been said so far, for Wojtyla, one can see that the hiddenness of God is not seen as evidence that God does not exist, as Schellenberg alleged. In fact, Wojtyla remarked that a question about God’s hiddenness belongs to what he calls “the repertory of *contemporary agnosticism*...and [a]gnosticism is not atheism” (1994, 39). Agnosticism is the view that one cannot know whether God exists or not, while

atheism is the view that God does not exist. This observation is in consonance with philosopher Paul K. Moser's remark that the problem of divine hiddenness "supports a *limited agnosticism*, the view that some (but not all) people should withhold judgment for now on God's existence" but the problem according to Moser "does not support atheism at all" (2004, 57-58). Indeed, the fact that God may not have provided evidence of His existence does not mean that such evidence will never be forthcoming.

However, Wojtyła's claim is even stronger: God has already revealed Himself in the created order, but it is within the choice and will of man to recognize the divine fingerprint in nature. Such claim attests to the fruitfulness of the project of natural theology, which is the discipline aimed towards proving God's existence through discerning the origin and nature of creation. Wojtyła even notes that the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas, as a response to the question of God's existence, should be read (1994, 31). In fact, Schellenberg's argument may be too strong in its claim since it entails at the outset that no project of natural theology is even capable of success since the argument presupposes that God has not made a way to reveal Himself, even if indirectly, to humanity. However, this is precisely what the natural theologian is trying to disprove so that by reflecting that the created order requires a Creator, knowledge of God through creation is vindicated. What Schellenberg wants to show is that if a perfectly loving God exists, then God would be open to a relationship with human beings, and such openness presupposes that God would make His existence known to them so that there would be no nonresistant nonbelievers. On the other hand, what the natural theologian aims to carry out is discovering certain pieces of evidence in nature that shows God's manifestation within the created order so that if a nonresistant nonbeliever will examine such evidence, he will come to the conclusion that such evidence points to the existence of God. In fact, Schellenberg clearly denies this, remarking that "an argument convincingly showing that God exists or very probably exists could be fashioned from existing and available materials, though no one had yet done so" (2015, 37-38). More so, Schellenberg remarks that even if this were the case—that a project of natural theology has been successfully accomplished—honest doubt would still be possible (2015, 38). This remark is odd: if a piece of evidence for God is successful in that it is rationally compelling, then we should not expect an honest doubt to arise.

In any case, both the end of Schellenberg's and the natural theologian's reasoning is in direct tension with each other, so one has to be abandoned in favor of the other. Now we need to recognize the intellectual vastness and depth with which natural theology has developed over the centuries, beginning from such notions as motion, morality, and the metaphysical necessity to argue that God exists down to the current landscape that sees numbers, consciousness, and the reliability of our cognitive functioning (among a host of others) as good evidences for God (Walls and Dougherty 2018). Taking this into account, this makes Schellenberg's claim too strong since it entails that any alleged evidence of God in nature remains insufficient to make one rationally conclude that God exists. This is a tall order, especially because one has to first examine the details of each of these alleged evidences for God to reach the conclusion that they are insufficient for theistic belief. Any single argument that seeks to completely refute all purported evidences and arguments for God's existence without a sustained examination of each of them should rightly be doubted for its unreasonable ambitiousness.

What can the hiddenness arguer's, such as Schellenberg, way out of this? He may try to argue that if God indeed made Himself known to humanity through creation, then God's manifestation must be in such ways that there would remain no nonresistant nonbelievers. But the fact that there are nonresistant nonbelievers seems to imply that there has been no such divine manifestation, which by consequence means that God does not exist. But this possible response is too swift, especially because we have not yet settled the question of whether each nonresistant nonbeliever has dispassionately examined the evidence and reach the conclusion that they are all inadequate. It could be the case that nonresistant nonbelievers have just failed to look at any evidence and simply chose to focus on their earthly lives. It might also be the case that some of these nonbelievers simply do not care whether or not God exists; the question of God's existence is not a live issue for them. And so, the presence of nonresistant nonbelievers does not in any way invalidate the idea that God has made Himself known through creation. But one might ask, "could God, an unsurpassable great being, not have made His presence more persuasive so that no nonresistant nonbelief is possible?" To feel the force of this rhetorical question, let us turn to Schellenberg's principle with regards to openness to a relationship:

**Not Open:** If a person A, without having brought about this condition through a resistance of personal relationship with person B, is at some time in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that B exists, where B at that time knows this and could ensure that A's nonbelief is at that time changed to belief, then it is not the case that B is open at the time in question to have a personal relationship with A then (2015, 57).

One may completely agree with this principle without conceding to the conclusion of Schellenberg's argument. After all, when applied to divine-human relationships, there is no reason to suppose that God can change a nonresistant nonbeliever's stance from nonbelief to belief in a way that would *be indubitable for every free and rational being* like humans. In fact, we can throw a challenge to the hiddenness arguer: what kind of indubitable evidence for God would have to exist or occur that would convince each nonresistant nonbeliever that God indeed exists? Or put in another way, if God would directly provide a revelation of Himself, how should it be such that no nonresistant nonbeliever would deny it? Upon reflection, this challenge is harder than it initially appears, especially considering that any evidence for God can be denied without inconsistency. Schellenberg made some remarks to the effect that a certain kind of religious experience may be the answer. As he said, "God could still be present to us experientially in an amazing range of ways, communicating with us, as it were, from within" (2015, 63). But if this is Schellenberg's way to meet the challenge, then this is overwhelmingly odd because he himself has argued in detail that "religious experience cannot be taken by a careful investigator to provide justification for religious belief" (2007, 189).

In fact, whatever piece of natural theology is put forward, and an imaginative skeptic can always come up with a justification why such alleged evidence provides no *definitive* proof that God exists. Consider this scenario: the sky may open up, a voice may be heard from above claiming that the source of the voice is God, but even

in such a scenario, a skeptic may have a naturalistic explanation: this might be the activity of super-advanced aliens from some other faraway civilizations. One can see this scenario as symmetrical to the case of a 21<sup>st</sup> century man time traveling back to the time of ancient people two thousand years ago, bringing with him the latest technologies in communication, entertainment, and transportation. We can likely assume that the people of the distant past would interpret our time traveler as resembling some sort of godlike entity, and some may even see him as God personified. But the fact that they cannot explain such technological advancements then does not follow that they are reasonable to conclude that the time traveler is God. But the same reasoning can be applied to any sort of alleged divine manifestation in our current world. So by the use of mere reason alone, one cannot be led conclusively to the conclusion that there is a God. Something more is needed.

It is here that Wojtyła's appeal to faith becomes central. Believers need not and should not abandon reason in their search for the ultimate truths, but for Wojtyła, "our vision of the face of God is always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding" (n. 13). It is by the exercise of faith and faith alone that we are able "to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently" (n. 13). But what is faith, and how does it take a further step than reason in recognizing God's revelation? Wojtyła is clear that faith is "an obedient response to God" (n. 13). It requires an acknowledgment of God's divinity, transcendence, and supreme freedom. When God makes Himself known to humanity, it is God Himself, not humans, who is "the source of the credibility of what he reveals" (n. 13). Thus, a recognition of God's self-testimony requires putting one's faith in that special divine act. But, one may ask, why is faith needed in this case? Is it not possible for a reason to simply assent to the truth? It is at this point that it is essential to determine the gravity of the truth to which one is expected to assent. Certain truths require no serious and sustained commitment, such as the truth of what the actual date is today or the truth about who the current president in the Philippines is.

But there are some truths whose nature is such that assenting to them inevitably influences the trajectory of one's life. This is the case with ultimate truths, including religious ones. And Wojtyła recognizes that human beings have been endowed with dignity such that it is largely up to them whether they would accept ultimately significant truths or not. As Wojtyła said, "He [the human being] can be drawn toward the truth only by his own nature, that is, by his own freedom, which commits him to search sincerely for truth and, when he finds it, to adhere to it both in his convictions and in his behavior" (1994, 190). He recognizes the protests throughout the history of the Church "against all those who attempted to force faith, 'making conversions by the sword'" (1994, 192). Interestingly, this results in another challenge to the hiddenness arguer: how is it possible for God to provide a definitive evidence of His existence without such an act resulting in forcing human beings to have faith in Him? Upon reflection, it is not difficult to see that forcing faith is an oxymoron: if faith is understood as trust, then it is clear that one cannot force anybody to trust; it would be their decision to make that final leap of faith. As such, the second challenge, like the first, seems impossible to be met, and until the two challenges have been adequately addressed, we are justified in believing that a core assumption of Schellenberg's argument—that it is possible for God to provide a definitive evidence of His existence



without infringing on humanity's autonomy and freedom—is simply mistaken. In order to recognize God, genuine faith is thus necessary.

Now, one should not interpret Wojtyła as calling for the practice of blind faith, a kind of trust in something or someone that is devoid of any good reason. Wojtyła recognizes the essential and irreplaceable place of reason in human thinking, especially in its capacity for metaphysical inquiry and even in its power to recognize the power and divinity of God through creation (n. 22). However, as argued before, the sinfulness of man diminished this natural capacity of reason to fully recognize God in the created order. So, does this mean that humanity is forever lost in confusion? Wojtyła's answer to this question would complete his response to the problem of divine hiddenness. Now, the problem is searching for a revelation of God that would provide communication that would make the most sense for human beings, and the Christian story has supplanted the answer: because God in His transcendence and absolute otherness chose to become one ourselves! If God would make the clearest self-testimony to humanity, it would seem to be precise as the Christian story narrates it: where God takes a human form, lives a human life, and manifests His divinity, among others, by overcoming death by resurrection.

This picture for Wojtyła illustrates that in providing a self-testimony to humanity, God “has gone as far as possible. He could not go further. In a certain sense God has gone too far” (1994, 40)! But we need to remember that recognizing this self-testimony of God in Jesus presupposes faith; reason alone cannot lead one to believe that Jesus is God personified. In the beautiful words of Saint John Paul II, “Christ wants to awaken faith in human hearts. He wants them to respond to the word of the Father, but He wants this in full respect for human dignity” (1994, 193). Reason can be utilized to assess the arguments and evidences surrounding the question of Jesus' divinity but faith, the choice to entrust oneself in “the truth of the person—what the person is and what the person reveals from deep within” (n. 32), especially in the case of faith in Jesus, requires an act of will in which reason can go no further. As such, if there are indeed nonresistant nonbelievers, it would be interesting to note how they would respond to the self-testimony of God through Jesus Christ. What is clear however, is that the problem of divine hiddenness can be adequately addressed. Inspired by Saint John Paul II's reflections, what we always need to remember is this: God has always made Himself known through His creation and more than that, God has chosen to reveal Himself in Jesus, an overwhelming truth which can be bolstered by reason but ultimately assented only by faith.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, the problem of divine hiddenness has acquired a reputation, alongside the venerable problem of evil, for being one of the thorniest problems that theists have to face. In this article, I introduced the thoughts of Karol Wojtyła and how they can be weaved into a set of responses to the problem. Using Wojtyła's insights as a springboard, I advanced two challenges against defenders of the problem that undermine some of its crucial assumptions. The revelation of God through Jesus Christ is Wojtyła's most fundamental answer to the problem, for it is a way for God to reveal His utter transcendence to man without thereby forcing man to have faith in Him.

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