

Divine Hiddenness and the Concept of God

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Abstract: John Schellenberg's version of the divine hiddenness argument is based on a concept of God as an omnipotent, morally perfect, and ontologically perfect being. I show that Schellenberg develops his argument in a way that is inconsistent with each of these aspects, from which it follows that the argument in question proves to be unsustainable.

In the existing literature the problem of divine hiddenness has matched the problem of evil in prominence as an argument for atheism. Among the several versions of the divine hiddenness problem that have arisen in the course of the last two decades, that championed by John Schellenberg¹ has

¹ See J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006 [1993]).

often been seen as "the most widely discussed articulation of the problem."²

According to the divine hiddenness argument, if God exists, he would be an all-loving, all-powerful, and totally perfect being. Consequently, he would be able to grant us an opportunity to have a reciprocal relationship of love with him. This would obviously be the greatest possible good for us, given the existence of such a perfect being. To this end, God would make his existence so evident that there can be no reasonable or inculpable lack of belief in him.³ Belief in God's existence, however, seems sometimes to be characterized by reasonable doubt. According to the divine hiddenness argument, there are those who do not believe even though they do not resist divine revelation. They are "inculpable," which implies that God is "culpable" because, although he is omnipotent and omniscient, he does not provide them with the opportunity to believe and consequently achieve the greatest possible good. If he exists, however, God is a perfectly good being; consequently, God does not exist. On Schellenberg's view, therefore, the lack of sufficient evidence -- not only rational but also experiential -- is, in itself, proof of God's non-existence even though this has been

² M. Rea, "Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence" in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. L. Pojman and M. Rea (Boston MA: Wadsworth/Cengage, 2013), pp. 383-92 at p. 391.

³ Schellenberg refers to evidence that is "sufficient" to believe. But the notion of "sufficient," as he employs it, needs to be determined more precisely. On the one hand, it seems to correspond to "undeniable" because evidence that is not undeniable gives rise to doubt and, consequently, is expected to be refused by Schellenberg. On the other hand, Schellenberg states that he does not refer to "incontrovertible reasons": "the reasons for Divine self-disclosure suggested by reflection on the nature of love are not reasons for God to provide us with some incontrovertible proof or overwhelm us with a display of Divine glory." Schellenberg 2006 [1993], pp. 212f.

acknowledged only in recent times.⁴

Some thinkers have contrasted the divine hiddenness argument with numerous and intellectually penetrating reasons why God does not make his existence more evident.⁵ Some have pointed out that God may ensure our happiness and ultimate well-being in a way that is, at first sight, incomprehensible to us. For Paul Moser and Daniel Howard-Snyder, for example, "the Jewish-Christian God hides at times for a range of reasons, not all of which seem clear to humans."⁶

None of these thinkers, however, has yet explored whether or not Schellenberg makes consistent use of the concept of God, which is crucial to the divine hiddenness argument. Only if God is seen as an omnipotent, totally loving, and ontologically perfect being -- so this argument runs -- it is possible to propose that, if he exists, God cannot allow inculpable and reasonable human beings to be deprived of their greatest possible good. But is the way in which the divine hiddenness argument treats such a concept of God really coherent?

⁴ See J.L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness" in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. C. Taliaferro, P. Draper, P. Quinn (Oxford UK: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 509-18 at p. 509.

⁵ See J.L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 133-39, where an impressively long bibliography of what has been published on the Divine Hiddenness Argument is provided.

⁶ Moser and Howard-Snyder compile a list of possible explanations of how God's existence and his hiddenness may coexist. Especially noteworthy among these explanations is the idea that, if God didn't hide, "we would be coerced in a manner incompatible with love" (p. 9). Another interesting reply to the divine hiddenness argument is the "responsibility argument," which was introduced by R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 189ff. It was employed in response to the divine hiddenness argument by T. Dumsday, "Divine Hiddenness and the Responsibility Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 357-71. I will refer to this argument in the second section (see n39).

In this essay I intend to show that the divine hiddenness argument fails because it treats the concept of God inconsistently. I first focus on the fact that the divine hiddenness argument only in principle considers God omnipotent. On closer inspection, it emerges that the divine hiddenness argument arbitrarily limits the omnipotence in question. I then consider Schellenberg's treatment of the concept of God as a perfectly loving being. I show that this treatment results in something incompatible with perfect love. Finally, I dig into Schellenberg's idea that God is a perfect being, the communion with whom would be the greatest possible good for us. I demonstrate that the way Schellenberg employs this concept does not lead to atheism.

1. God as an omnipotent being

The omnipotence of God is indispensable to the divine hiddenness argument. Only if God is seen as omnipotent can he overcome any of the obstacles to religious belief that may instead be insuperable for at least some human beings.

Among all of the possible obstacles to belief in God, Schellenberg focuses on the lack of evidence. As I said above, for him God should provide us with evidence of his existence, i.e., with propositions "that provide the basis for deductive and inductive inference" as well as "nonpropositional, experiential evidence" in which the belief that God exists may be "directly (noninferentially) grounded."⁷

God sometimes hides, however, as is agreed by both unbelievers and

⁷ Schellenberg, 2006 [1993], p. 33.

believers. This is why Schellenberg claims that those whom he thinks inculpable unbelievers have unfairly been denied the opportunity to attain their ultimate well-being, from which it follows that no perfectly loving God exists.

It may be pointed out that Schellenberg has recently formulated the problem of divine hiddenness in a way that does not openly refer to the concept of evidence. Instead of claiming that God should render his existence (sufficiently) evident to us, he says: "if a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person."⁸ It seems, however, to be clear that the openness of God occurs insofar as evidence in its support has been offered. This is confirmed by the example that Schellenberg gives. A person who has been adopted wonders whether his/her biological mother is still alive. The latter is in the area and is told that the former asks about her, but does not let her biological child know that she is alive and nearby. This example emphasizes the role of evidence. The biological mother is expected to be open to a personal relationship with her child precisely by showing and making *evident* her existence and physical closeness.⁹

According to the divine hiddenness argument, therefore, God is supposed to give us reasons for believing. If he exists, he necessarily wills to manifest himself to prospective believers. But doesn't this constitute a limitation to his omnipotence?

In reflecting on God's will, Thomas Aquinas offers a convincing

⁸ Schellenberg, 2015, p. 103.

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 56f.

response. While wondering "whether whatever God wills he wills necessarily," he differentiates between what is necessary "absolutely" and what is necessary "by supposition." On the one hand, God wills *his own goodness* in a way which is *absolutely* necessary:

The divine will has a necessary relation to the divine goodness, since that is its proper object. Hence God wills His own goodness necessarily, even as we will our own happiness necessarily, and as any other faculty has necessary relation to its proper and principal object, for instance the sight to color, since it tends to it by its own nature.¹⁰

On the other hand, God wills *any other thing* in a way that is necessary "by supposition":

God wills things apart from Himself in so far as they are ordered to His own goodness as their end. Now in willing an end we do not necessarily will things that conduce to it, unless they are such that the end cannot be attained without them; as, we will to take food to preserve life.... But we do not necessarily will things without which

¹⁰ "Voluntas enim divina necessariam habitudinem habet ad bonitatem suam, quae est proprium eius obiectum. Unde bonitatem suam esse Deus ex necessitate vult; sicut et voluntas nostra ex necessitate vult beatitudinem. Sicut et quaelibet alia potentia necessariam habitudinem habet ad proprium et principale obiectum, ut visus ad colorem; quia de sui ratione est, ut in illud tendat." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition (London UK: Oates and Washbourne, 1920), hereafter abbreviated as ST. Here, ST I, q. 19, a. 3. My references to the Latin text are from the Leonine Edition (Rome, 1888-1948).

the end is attainable, such as a horse for a journey which we can take on foot.... Hence, ...His willing things apart from Himself is not *absolutely necessary*. Yet it can be necessary *by supposition*, for supposing that He wills a thing, then He is unable not to will it, as His will cannot change.¹¹

Aquinas is arguing that the creator of everything necessarily wants to do good, since he is the good, namely, the end of everything. The necessity in question, however, does not apply to the means that God chooses to pursue the good. For Thomas, God can prefer some goods to others and can even will evils of "natural defect, or of punishment"

by willing the good to which such evils are attached. Thus in willing justice He wills punishment; and in willing the preservation of the natural order, He wills some things to be naturally corrupted.¹²

Obviously enough, the insufficient evidence that Schellenberg laments may be among the evils that were just mentioned.¹³ God might have decided to

¹¹ "Alia autem a se Deus vult, inquantum ordinantur ad suam bonitatem ut in finem. Ea autem quae sunt ad finem, non ex necessitate volumus volentes finem, nisi sint talia, sine quibus finis esse non potest, sicut volumus cibum, volentes conservationem vitae.... Non sic autem ex necessitate volumus ea sine quibus finis esse potest, sicut equum ad ambulandum, quia sine hoc possumus ire.... Unde...sequitur quod alia a se eum velle, non sit *necessarium absolute*. Et tamen necessarium est *ex suppositione*, supposito enim quod velit, non potest non velle, quia non potest voluntas eius mutari." Ibid., emphasis added.

¹² "Volendo aliquod bonum, cui coniungitur tale malum, sicut, volendo iustitiam, vult poenam; et volendo ordinem naturae servari, vult quaedam naturaliter corrumpi." ST I, q. 19, a.9.

¹³ Christians, however, are accustomed to thinking that -- as Wainwright points

pursue the communion of human creatures with him -- which both Schellenberg and Aquinas believe He desires¹⁴ -- by a means other than evidence for his existence.

A means other than evidence is the one mentioned precisely by Aquinas when he focuses on the concept of faith. According to him, the faithful believe because they *want* to and not because they possess evidence for belief. On his view, faith is "an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine Truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God."¹⁵ Thomas emphasizes that no sufficient evidence in support of assent to divine revelation is available. A number of arguments for belief may be found, but what moves the faithful to firmly assent to divine revelation is "the inward instinct of the divine invitation."¹⁶ Since he is emphasizing the lack of sufficient evidence for religious belief, therefore, Aquinas would

out following Edward's teachings -- "even a fuller divine self-disclosure would be corrupted by us, and would thus not help us. What is needed isn't more evidence or a fuller revelation but a new heart to appreciate the evidence and revelation we have." W. Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God" in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 98-119 at p. 104. With regard to Aquinas, it has been said that for him, "if such matters [the revealed truths] were accepted on the basis of evidence and arguments..., would the believer lack the proper attitude towards them (as in the case of the demons)." G. Dawes, "The Act of Faith: Aquinas and the Moderns" in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 6, ed. J. Kvanvig (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 58-86 at pp. 66f.

¹⁴ "It belongs to the essence of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature" (ST III, q. 1, a. 1). Bauerschmidt appropriately points out that for Aquinas God joins created nature to himself. See F. Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), p. 180.

¹⁵ "Actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam" (ST II-II, q. 2, a.9).

¹⁶ "Interiori instinctu Dei invitantis" (ST II-II, q. 2, a.9 ad 3).

agree with Schellenberg, though the latter focuses primarily on God's existence, which instead Thomas believes can also be demonstrated.¹⁷ For Aquinas, therefore, the faithful believe because God grants them the will to believe and not sufficient reasons for assenting to divine revelation. Thomas also claims that from this it does not follow any loss of freedom on the part of the faithful. To say that an omnipotent God "can move the will without compromising human freedom"¹⁸ appears to be fully reasonable.

Aquinas's stance is a viable alternative to Schellenberg's, and, at least from a Christian point of view, is far more plausible. As has been said, "according to a long tradition in Christian thought, faith is primarily an orientation of the will, an act of surrender to God, that includes belief in His existence but is most importantly a response of obedience to God and a gift of oneself to Him."¹⁹ At least on this view, therefore, God is not expected to grant us reasons for believing; he is rather expected to work "directly in us by grace, so as to make us God-like in our thinking and acting."²⁰

¹⁷ For Aquinas and the Catholic tradition that traces back to him, some revealed truths -- especially God's existence -- can be attained also by demonstration. That is what Aquinas teaches throughout his works, as Ralph McInerny emphasized: "Early, middle and late in his writings, St. Thomas speaks of a twofold knowledge of God, one that was achieved by pagan philosophers and which is based on knowledge of material things, another that results from God's revealing Himself to men." R. McInerny, "On Behalf of Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 63-73 at p. 64. For more on how modern thinkers have interpreted such revealed truths, see R. Di Ceglie, "Preambles of Faith and Modern Accounts of Aquinas's Thought," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2019): 437-51.

¹⁸ Bauerschmidt, 2013, p. 147. See also below, nn34ff.

¹⁹ L. Garcia, "St. John of the Cross and the Necessity of Divine Hiddenness" in D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser 2002, pp. 83-97 at pp. 88f.

²⁰ B. Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary*

At any rate, Aquinas's view of how God intends to grant us communion with him is of peripheral interest here. It only serves to explore the plausibility of Aquinas's reflection on God, his will, and his necessary purposes.

What I am interested in showing is, instead, that the view that I have just mentioned, which Aquinas champions in regard to God and his will, is more consistent with the omnipotence of God than Schellenberg's. Unlike the latter, the former does not claim that God can follow only one method, namely, evidence for belief, so as to give rise to a relationship with us. In other words, Thomas appropriately emphasizes the fact that we are unable to rationally determine the means that God chooses to certain ends.²¹ And this is clearly more consistent with the transcendent omnipotence of God than Schellenberg's claim that God is supposed to provide sufficient evidence that he exists.²²

(New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 239f. For more on this, see R. Di Ceglie, "Faith, Reason, and Charity in Aquinas's Thought," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 79/2 (2016): 133-46.

²¹ Providing the rational reasons to explain why God chooses certain means and not others seems to be arduous at best. Unlike Schellenberg, Aquinas is well aware of the unsurpassable distance between God's reality and our intelligence. As has been mentioned, Aquinas "loosely connects our noncomprehensive knowledge of God to our sense of God's transcendence." G. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2004), p. 29.

²² For Paul Moser, "the exact details of God's purposes are sometimes unclear to us, as we should expect given God's transcendent superiority." P. Moser, "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding" in D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser 2002, pp. 120-48 at p. 135). In the footsteps of Aquinas, Brian Davies points out that, since God is not like anything we know, he should be regarded as incomprehensible. See B. Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London UK: Continuum, 2006) at p. 78. Of course, from this it does not follow that we do not know anything of him. Davies distinguishes two senses of the verb "to comprehend" and concludes that, if taken as "to understand fully or adequately," this verb cannot apply to our knowledge of God (see *ibid.*, p. 79).

2. God as a perfectly loving being

Schellenberg says that the concept of God on which he bases the divine hiddenness argument is the "traditional" one, which includes God's being perfect love.²³ It may be said that such a traditional concept coincides with the Christian one, as Schellenberg himself concedes while saying that the claim that God should be perceived as all loving might be considered "a claim only Christians have any reason to accept."²⁴ Not surprisingly, J. Ross says that, as a Jew, he hesitates "to follow the notion that God is 'perfectly loving' in the sense described by Schellenberg."²⁵

At any rate, it is by way of a merely philosophical reflection that, for Schellenberg, perfect love can be ascribed to God. According to him, "in forming our conception of divine love, we can do no better than to make use of what we know belongs to the best in human love."²⁶ In fact, "God is conceived as embodying the perfections of personal life," from which it

²³ J.L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 195f. It is time to point out that I take for granted this conception of God for the purpose of the argument, since it constitutes a starting point for the divine hiddenness argument. It is opportune to remark, however, that "some thinkers hold that the attributes traditionally ascribed to God -- simplicity, necessity, immutability, eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, creativity and goodness -- are inherently incoherent individually, or mutually inconsistent." M. Beaty, "Goodness" in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. C. Meister and P. Copan (New York NY: Routledge, 2014 [2007]), pp. 356-67 at p. 360.

²⁴ Schellenberg 2006 [1993], p. 10.

²⁵ J. Ross, "The Hiddenness of God: A Puzzle or a Real Problem?" in D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser 2002, pp. 181-96 at p. 182.

²⁶ J.L. Schellenberg, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 201-15 at p. 203.

follows that "he must be conceived as perfectly loving."²⁷ The perfection at hand, so the divine hiddenness argument runs, implies

(1) a desire for the best possible good of the beloved

and

(2) a desire for union with the beloved.

As Schellenberg says,

the best human love -- the best love of parent or spouse or friend -- involves seeking *meaningful personal relationship* with the beloved. It seeks a kind of *closeness* between itself and the beloved.... The lover, being -- as the best and truest lover must be -- benevolently disposed toward the beloved, will also seek relationship *so that* she may offer opportunities for *explicit participation in her life*.²⁸

Of course, if the relationship in question applies to God and his human

²⁷ Schellenberg 2006 [1993], p. 11

²⁸ J.L. Schellenberg, "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion" in D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser 2002, pp. 33-61 at p. 41. An analogous consideration is advanced by Eleonore Stump, according to whom love emerges "from two interconnected, mutually governing desires, for the good of the beloved and for union with the beloved." E. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness. Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), p. 103. Schellenberg has recently noticed that his emphasis "on God being open to personal relationship instead of just exercising benevolence from a distance" is in line with the view of love advocated by Stump. See J. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy" in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*, ed. A. Green and E. Stump (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 13-32 at pp. 17f n8).

creatures, then (1) and (2) coincide with one another. If God feels (1), this necessarily coincides with (2), since the opportunity to participate in his life is certainly the best possible good for us, given God's existence.

Let me now notice that determining the nature of God's love by way of analogy with that of human beings is not exempt from risk. Aijaz and Weidler warn that "we cannot be sure whether our insight into human love is complete."²⁹ Accordingly, they question Schellenberg's connection between divine love and the seeking of a personal relationship.³⁰ Howard-Snyder and Moser point out that "we might revise this concept [the concept of perfect love] in such a way that our expectation of a loving personal relationship with God is refined somehow."³¹ For them,

people who emphasize that God would do whatever it takes to prevent inculpable nonbelief frequently regard God's love in analogy with parents who wish to comfort their young children in distress. Others, however, see God's love in analogy with familiar adult love, where the lover primarily wants certain attitudes and behavior to accompany any reciprocation of love on the part of the beloved.³²

²⁹ I. Aijaz and M. Weidler, "Some Critical Reflections on the Hiddenness Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 61 (2007): 1-23 at 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9ff..

³¹ Howard-Snyder and Moser, 2002, p. 6.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 7f.

I find this distinction between adult and young children of special interest for our purposes. For the sake of clarity, let me radicalize it by making reference to the distinction between adult and new-born children. In both cases, the love a parent feels for them is expected to be characterized by (1) and (2). But (1) is somehow different when is referred to adult children from the case in which it is referred to new-born ones. In the latter case, a parent is supposed to do everything for his or her children, without any cooperation on their part. In the former case, instead, cooperation is required, since flourishing is not possible to adult people if they do not employ their abilities, especially intelligence and freedom.

Predictably enough, it is the love for adult children that appropriately applies to the relationship between God and the prospective believers. Not surprisingly, the Christian tradition has often seen the act of believing as a divine gift and at the same time a human meritorious initiative.

Sufficiently representative of this view is Aquinas's reflection on faith, which I have already referred to in the previous section. ~~Not~~ ~~surprisingly,~~ ~~+~~ This reflection can appropriately be seen as "the dominant Western tradition of thought on the subject," susceptible of being "accepted today by many both Catholic and Protestant Christians, as well as by the agnostic and atheist critics of Christianity."³³ Although Aquinas argues that it is God who grants us the will to believe, which may at first

³³ J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge: A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009 [1966]), p. 12. More recently, G. Dawes claimed that 'few Christians will have read Aquinas, but since his view is widely shared by theologians they may have absorbed it "by osmosis"' (G. Dawes, 2015, p. 80)

sight seem to imply the destruction of human freedom,³⁴ he also argues that from this it does not follow that the faithful do not freely believe. While focusing on the act of faith, Aquinas makes ample use of the concept of merit:

Our actions are meritorious in so far as they proceed from the free will moved with grace by God. Therefore every human act proceeding from the free will, if it be referred to God, can be meritorious. Now the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God, so that it is subject to the free will in relation to God; and consequently the act of faith can be meritorious.³⁵

According to Aquinas, therefore, the act of faith as well as any other human act is meritorious if it is free and moved by God's grace, namely, by the good in itself. Of course, Aquinas is led to such a view for theological reasons, but from this it does not follow that the view in question may not be accepted by thinkers like Schellenberg, who conceive of God as an omnipotent and perfectly loving being. Once assumed this concept of God, in fact, it is plausible to agree that such a powerful being is able to

³⁴ "Since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God" (ST II-II, q.6, a.1).

³⁵ "Actus nostri sunt meritorii in quantum procedunt ex libero arbitrio moto a Deo per gratiam, Unde omnis actus humanus qui subiicitur libero arbitrio, si sit relatus in Deum, potest meritorius esse. Ipsum autem credere est actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam, et sic subiacet libero arbitrio in ordine ad Deum. Unde actus fidei potest esse meritorius" (ST II-II, 2, 9).

grant us the will to believe without compromising our freedom.

In addition, Aquinas argues that, like the act of faith, the investigation conducted by believers to find arguments for faith is characterized by free choice of the will and responsibility. While wondering whether or not arguments in support of the Christian belief diminish the merit of faith, Aquinas claims that these arguments

may stand in a twofold relation to the will of the believer. First, as preceding the act of the will; as, for instance, when a man either has not the will, or not a prompt will, to believe, unless he be moved by human reasons; and in this way human reason diminishes the merit of faith.... Secondly, human reasons may be consequent to the will of the believer. For when a man's will is ready to believe, he loves the truth he believes, he thinks out and takes to heart whatever reasons he can find in support thereof; and in this way human reason does not exclude the merit of faith but is a sign of greater merit.³⁶

Thomas, therefore, emphasizes the role played by freedom of the will and responsibility not only in the case of the act of faith but also in regard to the arguments for believing. In accordance with a long tradition, he highlights the necessity for the faithful to believe actively and not

³⁶ "Dupliciter potest se habere ad voluntatem credentis. Uno quidem modo, sicut praecedens, puta cum quis aut non haberet voluntatem, aut non haberet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, nisi ratio humana induceretur. Et sic ratio humana inducta diminuit meritum fidei.... Alio modo ratio humana potest se habere ad voluntatem credentis consequenter. Cum enim homo habet promptam voluntatem ad credendum, diligit veritatem creditam, et super ea excogitat et amplectitur si quas rationes ad hoc invenire potest. Et quantum ad hoc ratio humana non excludit meritum fidei, sed est signum maioris meriti" (ST II-II,2, 10).

passively.³⁷ If God is both omnipotent and maximally good, we should expect him to not only make us believe, but to also make us believe actively and responsibly.³⁸

Unlike Aquinas, Schellenberg does not make reference to this crucial aspect of the relationship between God and the prospective believers. The divine hiddenness argument, in fact, requires God's intervention so as to provide human beings with sufficient evidence for belief, but it does not make any reference to the cooperation that this may involve on their part. This treatment manifestly resembles the one that parents are asked to adopt toward a new-born child, which would instead be disrespectful and inappropriate toward adult children, given the duties they are expected to fulfill. Similarly, such a treatment would be disrespectful and inappropriate toward prospective believers: disrespectful because they would be treated like people unable to adhere to faith responsibly; inappropriate because it would become hard to understand how, once become faithful, they could take care of those who are not (yet) able to firmly

³⁷ In a similar way, Moser focuses on responsibility as related to the rational investigation aimed at finding evidence for faith and distinguishes "people *passively* open to belief in God and people *actively* open to belief in God. People passively open to such belief do not put any serious effort into examining whether God has intervened, for example, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such people are 'open' to God with striking indifference. This indifference manifests itself in failure to act in ways that take seriously the availability of evidence for God.... People actively open to belief in God take a *morally serious* interest in the availability of evidence for God. Such an interest has potential morally transforming effects." Moser, 2002, pp. 142f.

³⁸ "When a man's will is ready to believe, *he loves the truth he believes*, he thinks out and takes to heart whatever reasons he can find in support thereof" (ST II-II,2,10, emphasis added). As Eleonore Stump and Brian Davies rightly point out in the beginning of *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, Aquinas "was convinced...that Christian thinkers should be ready to dispute rationally on any topic, especially theological issues, not only among themselves but also with non-Christians of all sorts." B. Davies and E. Stump, "Introduction" in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. B. Davies and E. Stump (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 4.

believe. As Crummett points out describing the core of the so-called responsibility argument, "many religious traditions [the author refers especially to Christianity] suggest that we have been asked with helping one another come to knowledge of and relationship with God, and that helping us fulfill this task is one of the major reasons God has established religious communities."³⁹

One objection may be raised. It may be said that Schellenberg speaks of "reasonable" unbelievers, namely, people who, after due examination of any possible argument, did not find any motive for believing.⁴⁰ However, it remains true that their freedom and responsibility does not play any role in the case here under consideration because, in the light of the divine hiddenness argument, they would believe because of the evidence provided by God -- be it rational or experiential. And this would be disrespectful of their value and dignity and could not be considered a desire that God feels for the best possible good of the beloved. As has been said, God enables "people freely to love, trust, and obey Him; otherwise, we would be coerced in a manner incompatible with love."⁴¹

In conclusion, the concept of God as a perfectly loving being, which is an indispensable feature of the divine hiddenness argument, is

³⁹ D. Crummett, "We Are Here to Help Each Other: Religious Community, Divine Hiddenness, and the Responsibility Argument," *Faith and Philosophy* 32 (2015): 45-62 at p. 46. See above n6.

⁴⁰ Schellenberg, who places himself among them, tells that "I preached the Word as diligently and fervently as anyone. It was only after all this, after I too left home, both literally and metaphorically, discovering all the books about the deeper things of life from which I had been cut off, that religious questions began to arise in me." Schellenberg 2015, pp. 35f.

⁴¹ Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p. 9.

inconsistently treated by Schellenberg. He focuses on the best form of human love so as to subsequently ascribe it to God. He considers, however, only one aspect of human love, which does not require any response and cooperation on the part of the beloved. This aspect insufficiently applies to the relationship between God and prospective believers, as is testified by a long tradition in Christian thought. If God treated us as new-born children, he wouldn't help us flourish, and this is manifestly incompatible with (1).

3. God as an ontologically perfect being

The third aspect of the concept of God that is indispensable to the divine hiddenness argument is God's perfection, i.e., his being the good itself. Since God is the good itself, communion with him is the best for us. As Schellenberg points out, "to be personally related to unsurpassable goodness is a great good in itself."⁴² Furthermore, being related to such a good implies that noticeable ethical benefits would become available, that is, "certain resources for dealing with the moral weakness endemic to humanity."⁴³

According to the divine hiddenness argument, a perfectly loving God should not permit those who do not resist divine revelation to be deprived of the greatest possible good, i.e., the communion with him. If there really were people, who without any resistance on their part, do not believe in God and consequently are prevented from achieving their well-being, God,

⁴² Schellenberg 2006 [1993], p. 21.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 18.

who is omnipotent and omniscient, would be culpable for not preventing them from failing. And since it is not possible to ascribe this to a perfectly loving God, it should be concluded that God does not exist.

The concept of God as the good itself is therefore strictly related to the existence of "non-resistant" unbelievers, which plays a fundamental role in the divine hiddenness argument.⁴⁴ Only the existence of such unbelievers, in fact, leads to atheism, because, if they are "inculpable" for their unbelief, then God is culpable, and this cannot be said of him.

Notice that Schellenberg has recently pointed out that the employment of words such as "culpable" and "blameworthy" dates to the period when he began to develop the hiddenness argument. At that time, so he says,

I was inclined to speak of these things in terms of culpability and inculpability rather than in terms of resistance and nonresistance, as I do today. What I had in mind was that given God's loving openness to relationship, no finite creature would ever fail to believe in God *without it being their own fault*. I was in fact thinking about resistance of God, but I thought that such resistance, which would have to come in the face of evidence of a good and loving Maker to whom one owed everything, would clearly be blameworthy.... I now see **this focus on culpability and inculpability as a mistake.**⁴⁵

⁴⁴ For Daniel Howard-Snyder, Schellenberg's fundamental idea "is that if there is a God, there are no reasonable non-believers, or inculpable non-believers, or non-resistant non-believers (all of these terms have been used); but there are, and so there's no God." D. Howard-Snyder, "Divine Openness and Creaturely Non-Resistant Non-Belief" in A. Green and E. Stump 2016, pp. 126-38 at p. 126.

⁴⁵ Schellenberg 2015, pp. 54f.

If the claim that God would be responsible for the failure of those who are non-resistant unbelievers becomes an argument for atheism, this comes from the fact that being responsible for unbelief is evil, which cannot be ascribed to God. As a result, those who are not responsible for their unbelief can appropriately be said to be "blameless" or "inculpable." There is, furthermore, one more reason for looking at the employment of "inculpability" as well as "unreasonableness" as totally appropriate to Schellenberg's argument. By having recourse to both adjectives, Schellenberg can frontally oppose the "flawed atheist" response to unbelief, i.e., the traditional idea according to which unbelievers are cognitively and/or morally responsible for unbelieving.⁴⁶

At any rate, however convincing the employment of these adjectives may be, I intend now to offer new insights into this matter by taking into consideration how the unbelievers in question who do not resist divine revelation relate to God seen as the greatest possible good.

Is it plausible to expect them to suffer because of their non-belief, which prevents them from thriving? Shouldn't they suffer from the lack of the greatest possible good? Let us focus on the alternative between suffering and lack of suffering:

(3) If they suffer, then they simply cannot consider themselves unbelievers. In fact, one cannot suffer from not having been given a certain good if one believes that the good in question has never

⁴⁶ For more on this, see J. Greco, "No-Fault Atheism" in A. Green and E. Stump 2016, pp. 109-25.

existed.

(4) If they do not suffer, then they should not consider God "culpable" and, given the divine hiddenness argument, nonexistent. In fact, people suffer if they believe that an opportunity of flourishing has been denied to them. If they do not suffer because of the lack in question, they cannot see God as culpable for having deprived them of the opportunity in question, and this, consequently, does not lead to atheism.

As a result, neither (3) or (4) support the belief that God does not exist. The divine hiddenness argument, therefore, erroneously argues for atheism by employing the concept of God seen as the good itself. Two noticeable objections can be raised against (3) and (4), respectively.

First, one suffers from an illness or lack of health whether or not one thinks that the medicine for the lack in question exists. *Mutatis mutandis*, one suffers from one's lack of belief in God whether or not one believes that God exists. In response, it must be noticed that in the former case it is plausible for one to suffer from an illness whether or not one believes that the medicine for that illness exists. In the latter case, however, one can suffer from lack of religious belief *only* if one holds that religious belief is something good, and one holds that religious belief is something good *only* if one believes that God exists. True, one may hold both that religious belief is something good and that God does not exist. Pascal famously argued that wagering that God exists dominates if God exists, and if God does not exist. This, however, cannot be said from the

point of view of the divine hiddenness argument, on the basis of which religious belief is something good to the extent that it allows one to achieve communion with God. Consequently, if one holds that God does not exist, then one cannot sensibly hold that religious belief is something good. Therefore, (3) is confirmed. In line with the divine hiddenness argument, one sensibly suffers from lack of belief in God only if one believes that God exists.

Second, Schellenberg maintains that hiddenness need not cause any suffering on the part of unbelievers. For him, confusing the divine hiddenness argument with the problem of suffering should accurately be avoided.⁴⁷ Even if unbelievers do not suffer from their lack of belief, their lack of belief is still something a good God would not permit if He really existed.

In response, let me emphasize that this objection holds that lack of belief is something evil. ~~As I have already said, From the point of view of Schellenberg,~~ however, lack of belief is something evil only if God exists. According to the divine hiddenness argument, in fact, unbelief is evil because it makes us unable to achieve communion with God. As a result, the objection at hand falls into contradiction. On the one hand, it claims that God does not exist since he permits lack of belief, which is evil; on the other hand, it implies that God exists, because only if he exists

⁴⁷ He argues that, although various interesting relations can be seen between the hiddenness problem and the problem of evil, "none suggests that the former...is subsumable under the latter." J.L. Schellenberg, "The Hiddenness Problem and the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010): 45-60 at p. 60.

lack of belief is evil. (4), therefore, seems to be confirmed.⁴⁸

One final observation: (3) and (4) put aside the "flawed atheist" response to which I have already referred (see above, n46). As I said, this response is a theistic traditional stance according to which atheism signals a cognitive and/or moral flaw in the unbelievers. Obviously enough, the divine hiddenness argument manifestly opposes this response, since it claims that there are people who unbelieve inculpably and reasonably. By formulating (3) and (4), I assumed the existence of such unbelievers, which implies that I put aside the flawed atheist response. Nevertheless, both (3) and (4) show that, if one accepts the existence of inculpable and reasonable unbelievers as well as the concept of God involved by the divine hiddenness argument, unbelief cannot plausibly be held.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the way the divine hiddenness argument employs the concept of God is inconsistent and that this undermines it. The omnipotence of God, his being perfectly loving, and his being ontologically perfect, are all indispensable elements of the divine hiddenness argument. As a consequence, once the inconsistency at hand is shown, the argument in question proves to be unsustainable.

God's omnipotence is arbitrarily limited by the divine hiddenness argument, which claims that God has to grant us sufficient evidence for belief. An omnipotent God, however, may decide to follow a different method

⁴⁸ For more on how to oppose the divine hiddenness argument with a "suffering unbeliever argument," see R. Di Ceglie, "Divine Hiddenness and the Suffering Unbeliever Argument," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming).

to allow us to believe in him, as Aquinas's reflection on the necessity of God's will shows.

The morally perfect God, as seen from the viewpoint of the divine hiddenness argument, does not pursue our greatest possible good. He treats us as if we were new-born children and lacked freedom and responsibility. This, however, prevents us from flourishing and is therefore incompatible with our best possible good.

Communion with an ontologically perfect being, as the divine hiddenness argument rightly claims, is the greatest possible good for us. Those who are "inculpable," "reasonable" or "non-resistant" unbelievers should suffer for not achieving such a good. As I have argued, however, they do not suffer and this ends up confirming that God is not culpable, from which it follows that, given the divine hiddenness argument, God exists.⁴⁹

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