

SHELLENBERG'S NOSEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT NONRESISTANT NONBELIEF

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Abstract. In this article, I outline a strategy for challenging J.L. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument, and specifically the premise within the argument that asserts the existence of what Schellenberg calls nonresistant nonbelief. Drawing on some of the philosophical resources of skeptical theism, I show how this premise is based on a particular "noseum assumption" — what I call Schellenberg's Noseum Assumption — that underwrites a particular "noseum argument." This assumption is that, regarding putative nonresistant nonbelievers, *more likely than not we'd detect these nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any.* I give reasons for thinking that it is not more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming Schellenberg's Noseum Assumption, and so reason to think that the hiddenness argument is not a good argument for atheism. I also defend the strategy I outline against several objections.

I. INTRODUCTION

A key premise in J.L. Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness asserts the existence of what Schellenberg calls "nonresistant nonbelief" in God — that is, "nonbelief that doesn't arise from any resistance toward God on the part of the nonbeliever."¹ The idea is that if a perfectly loving God open to a personal relationship with any finite person existed, then there would be no finite persons who would persist in a state of nonresistant nonbelief: God would ensure that persons at least open to being in relationship with God would possess the belief in God necessary for participating in personal relationship with God. But since these persons do exist, then God must not exist.²

In what follows, I outline and defend a particular strategy, which hitherto has not been fully explored, for challenging the hiddenness argument, and specifically the premise within the argument that asserts that "[s]ome finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists."³ Drawing on some of the philosophical resources of skeptical theism, I show how this premise is based on a particular "noseum assumption" that underwrites a particular "noseum argument": more likely than not, we'd see these putative nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any (the assumption); so, since we don't see such resistance (we don't see 'um, or it), then more likely than not it isn't there (the argument).⁴ However, one could argue that since it is not more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming this particular assumption, then the hiddenness argument in which the assumption is embedded does not constitute a good argument for atheism.

1 J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 17.

2 Schellenberg clearly thinks that his hiddenness argument succeeds as a deductive argument for the non-existence of God. See *Ibid.*, 113.

3 *Ibid.*, 74.

4 The general idea driving a noseum argument is "we don't see 'um, so they ain't there" (Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann, "Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism", in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. VanArragon (Blackwell, 2004), 15). Steven Wykstra introduced the noseum phraseology in Stephen J. Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseum Arguments from Evil", in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Indiana Univ. Press, 1996).

To be clear, then, my main goal in this paper is not to defend skeptical theism, or even to show how skeptical theism offers the best resources for challenging the hiddenness argument, but only to show how it is possible to employ some of the resources of skeptical theism in order to expose and challenge a particular noseem assumption embedded in Schellenberg's hiddenness argument, thereby also providing a reason to think that the hiddenness argument is not a good argument for atheism.

II. NOSEEM ARGUMENTS

According to Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann, noseem arguments follow a general form:

So far as we can tell (detect), there is no x.

So, it is more likely than not (perhaps significantly so) that

There is no x.⁵

In its general form, the noseem premise (so far as we can tell, there is no x—the item in question) does not by itself make the conclusion (there is no x) more likely than not. The noseem premise makes its conclusion more likely than not only if *more likely than not we'd detect (see, discern) x if it existed*.⁶ Howard-Snyder and Bergmann call this italicized claim the *Noseem Assumption*. If it is more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming this assumption, then the noseem argument is a good argument. For example, it seems clear that it is more reasonable for me to affirm than refrain from affirming the noseem assumption, *more likely than not, I'd see a milk carton in my refrigerator if it were there*. Accordingly, when I do not see a milk carton in the refrigerator (assuming I've inspected it thoroughly), it is reasonable for me to infer that more likely than not *there is no milk carton in the refrigerator*.

However, if it is not more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming a given noseem assumption, then the noseem argument is not a good argument, since a good argument requires that “[e]very premise, inference, and assumption on which the argument depends must be more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming.”⁷ Also, note that for Howard-Snyder and Bergmann, in order to show that it is not more reasonable to affirm a certain Noseem Assumption about the greater likelihood of detecting a certain item x (if it existed), all one needs to show is that it is not reasonable to make *any* judgment about the probability of detecting x (if it existed).

So, say x = extraterrestrial life forms. A noseem argument for the non-existence of extraterrestrial life forms would go as follows:

So far as we can tell (detect), there are no extraterrestrial life forms.

So, it is more likely than not (perhaps significantly so) that

There are no extraterrestrial life forms.

The noseem premise about the non-existence of extraterrestrial life forms makes its conclusion more likely than not only if *more likely than not we'd detect extraterrestrial life forms if there were any*.⁸ However, Howard-Snyder and Bergmann argue, none of us have a very good idea how to determine with even a minimal degree of confidence what the probabilities are concerning the ability and willingness of these life forms—if they existed—to contact us, which means that it is not more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming that *more likely than not we'd detect extraterrestrial life forms if there were any*. Consequently, we should hold that the noseem argument in support of their non-existence is not a good one.

5 Howard-Snyder and Bergmann, “Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism”, 15.

6 Ibid., 16.

7 Ibid., 14. I suppose one could dispute whether a good argument must meet this “minimal standard”, but it seems reasonable, so I will not say more about it here.

8 Ibid.

Howard-Snyder and Bergmann claim that the standard atheistic argument from evil is not a good one because it is based on a noseum assumption that is unreasonable to accept: *more likely than not we'd detect reasons that would justify God in permitting certain instances of intense suffering if there were any*. Similarly, the skeptical theist could argue that the hiddenness argument is based on a noseum assumption that is unreasonable to accept: *more likely than not we'd detect reasons that would justify God in hiding from nonresistant nonbelievers if there were any*. While I do not deny that there may be merit in pursuing this line of skeptical response to the hiddenness argument, I am going to chart a different line of skeptical response.

III. SCHELLENBERG'S NOSEUM ASSUMPTION AND PUTATIVE INSTANCES OF NONRESISTANT NONBELIEF

Schellenberg defends the premise that nonresistant nonbelief exists by appealing to what he considers to be a wide evidential base of finite persons who putatively did possess or do possess nonresistant nonbelief: most notably, “isolated nontheists” who did not or do not engage in the kind of thinking about God needed in order to resist God; “former believers” who “lost” belief in God because they came to possess and reflect on new information which called their previously held belief in God into question; and “life-long seekers” who remain open to “finding and being found” by God, or a “Divine Parent”, but never do find or are found by God.⁹ In all of these cases, Schellenberg thinks, it certainly looks like nonbelief in God is not caused by any resistance toward God.¹⁰ None of these persons, it seems, freely have “shut the door” on God and so relationship with God; they do not seem to possess (or did not possess) a “desire not to be in relationship with God, or else to be in a condition incompatible with relationship with God”, which in turn would explain their nonbelief.¹¹ Nor does their resistance involve “actions or omissions (at least mental ones) in support of such desire.”¹²

The argument that Schellenberg seems to be offering, then, goes as follows:

So far as we can tell (detect), some nonbelievers did not or do not possess any resistance toward God.

So, it is more likely than not (perhaps significantly so) that

Some nonbelievers did not or do not possess any resistance toward God.

And so,

Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

However, this is a noseum argument with its own noseum assumption. The noseum premise (so far as we can tell, some nonbelievers did not or do not possess any resistance toward God) makes its conclusion (some nonbelievers did not or do not possess any resistance toward God) more likely than not only if *more likely than not we'd detect these nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any*. Call this italicized claim *Schellenberg's Noseum Assumption*. If it is more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming this assumption, then the noseum argument on behalf of the premise that nonresistant nonbelief exists is a good argument. If it is not more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming this assumption, then the noseum argument on behalf of this premise is not a good argument. And this also means that the hiddenness argument, which contains this premise, is not a good argument for atheism.

9 J. L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 233.

10 Schellenberg is clear that the kind of resistance toward God he has in mind is incompatible with (and specifically removes) belief in God. He admits that “resistance to God doesn't *always* lead to nonbelief” (*The Hiddenness Argument*, 82; italics in the original text).

11 *Ibid.*, 55.

12 *Ibid.*, italics in the original text. Schellenberg thinks that resistance toward God has both a “desire component” and this other component that involves (at least mental) actions or omissions in support of the desire. I will be mostly focusing on resistance toward God as a psychological state involving desire (what I take to be the central component of resistance toward God).

There is indeed real reason for thinking that it is *not* more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming Schellenberg's Noseum Assumption, and so to think that the hiddenness argument is not a good argument for atheism. As Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser have pointed out, there is a distinctly *epistemic problem* that we face in determining whether a given nonbeliever is resistant toward God or not: "Human beings are enormously complicated, and it is no easy task to tell whether any particular candidate for inculpable nonbelief possesses or fails to possess those motivations, attitudes, and dispositions that putatively explain their inculpable nonbelief" (which Schellenberg now calls nonresistant nonbelief).¹³ Schellenberg certainly recognizes the *possibility* of finite persons "*resistantly deceiving themselves on whether there is a God, and falling into doubt or disbelief as a result.*"¹⁴ However, as Douglas Henry argues, what Howard-Snyder and Moser are calling our attention to is the *ubiquitous* phenomenon of deception and particularly self-deception.¹⁵ On one level, then, we might question whether the phenomenon of nonresistant nonbelief even exists. But this is an empirical matter, and the strategy I am outlining does not require making and defending the empirical claim that nonresistant nonbelief does not, in fact, exist. Again, the primary problem for Schellenberg is epistemic in nature: one can and should question Schellenberg's unspoken assumption that more likely than not that — particularly in the cases he has in mind — we would *detect* nonbelievers' resistance toward God if it were there.

Why, more specifically, should we question this assumption? To begin with, not only do we sometimes deliberately deceive others regarding what we desire, making it appear that we desire *x* when in fact we don't desire *x*, or even desire not-*x*, but in many ways we can and do deceive ourselves regarding what we desire: believing that we desire *x* when in fact we don't desire *x*, or even desire not-*x*. This is especially apparent with relationships. We can *appear* to want to be reconciled with an estranged family member even though, unbeknownst to ourselves and others, we *really* want not to be reconciled with that family member. Similarly, nonbelievers can *appear* to want a relationship with God, even though, unbeknownst to themselves and others, they *really* want not to have a relationship with God (or be in a condition incompatible with relationship with God).¹⁶ And, for that matter, nonbelievers can appear to lack any desire not to have a relationship with God — thereby appearing to be at least minimally open to having a relationship with God — even though they really want not to have a relationship with God.

Of course, one could argue that what seems to be the case often is the case: nonbelievers who appear to be at least open to being in relationship with God are, in fact, open to being in relationship with God. Schellenberg has claimed that "it seems clear that we can sometimes have good grounds for believing an individual to be honest...and also that some doubters are honest."¹⁷ So let's grant (if only for the sake of argument) that in all of the putative instances of nonresistant nonbelief that Schellenberg cites, there is a genuine desire, however weak or undeveloped, for relationship with God. Given how human psychology works, it still may be the case that on another psychological level a desire not to be in relationship with God is also present. It is reasonable to hold that all of us, at one time or another, have possessed competing desires, or a divided will: a desire for *x* and a desire for not-*x*. I both desire to be reconciled with my estranged family member and desire not to be reconciled. *And* I can be aware of one desire and not the other, and so self-deceptively believe that I only desire *x* when in fact I also desire not-*x*. Similarly, not only can a nonbeliever both desire to have a relationship with God and desire not to have a relationship with God; but she also self-deceptively can believe that she fully desires having a relationship

13 Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, "Introduction: The Hiddenness of God", in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 10–11.

14 Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 54. Italics are in the original text.

15 See in particular Douglas V. Henry, "Reasonable Doubts about Reasonable Nonbelief", *Faith and Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2008).

16 Throughout the rest of the article, I will simply refer to resistance toward God as the desire not to be in relationship with God; though, I also have in mind the comparable desire to be in a condition incompatible with relationship with God.

17 J. L. Schellenberg, "On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love: Responses to Henry and Lehe", *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2005), 332. This article offers a response to an earlier article by Henry (than the one I cite here, which is a response to Schellenberg).

with God when in fact she does not. The nonbeliever even can act in ways consistent with her manifest desire for relationship with God — seeking out evidence for God, spending some time with those who believe in God, and even engaging in some of the religious practices of those who believe in and worship God — while still retaining an undetectable resistance toward God that holds her back from believing and so causes her to remain in a state of nonbelief.

With all of this in mind, let's now consider some of the major, putative instances of nonresistant nonbelief that Schellenberg claims are actual cases of nonresistant nonbelief. Consider first isolated nontheists — especially human beings who lived thousands of years before the dawn of recorded history — who Schellenberg claims never were in a position to resist God, even though they practiced other, nontheistic forms of religiosity. Against what Schellenberg claims, we cannot assume that these nontheists never had God sufficiently in mind in order to resist him.¹⁸ For all we know, the existence of God-exclusive thought forms throughout our long history signals not a lack of resistance toward God but a positive resistance toward God that in turn manifested itself in the various, God-exclusive beliefs our ancient ancestors possessed and the God-exclusive practices that they engaged in, such as the worship of deities and spirits other than God. Similarly, we cannot assume that those in our contemporary, secular culture who seem never to have thought about God actually never had God sufficiently in mind in order to resist him. For all we know, the widespread absence of belief in God (or existence of belief in God alongside many other, non-theistic philosophical and religious beliefs) in secular societies has been generated by resistance toward God, and continues to be sustained by it. It is yet another, widespread way in which resistance toward God manifests itself.

Next, consider former believers. Even if it is true that intellectual difficulties helped generate doubt within these persons, it is extremely difficult to determine, with any degree of probability, whether their intellectual difficulties were sufficient to cause their doubt. For all we know, in each case a deeper, undetectable resistance toward the divine helped create doubt, making it even more difficult for them to address whatever intellectual difficulties they were having. Similar things can be said about converts to nontheistic religions, who Schellenberg also discusses. For all we know, like former believers, these persons discovered evidence that helped lead them away from theism towards nontheistic religions, but it was their deeper, hidden resistance toward God that played a deciding role in leading them to convert. Or perhaps their deeper, hidden resistance toward God skewed the way they evaluated the evidence for theism that they discovered, and disposed them to assign the evidence for nontheistic religions a greater value than it deserves.

Finally, for all we know, lifelong seekers both want to find God and also want to avoid God, or not to be found by God. Perhaps, given the results of their search, they realize that finding God would require making a radical change to their life, which deep down they resist making.¹⁹ Or, perhaps their resistance toward God takes the form of a debilitating but still undetectable indifference toward God, and so their search, while honest on one level, still lacks the “heart” that it needs in order to be fully successful. And they fail to find God as a result.

I have been assuming, of course, that resistance toward God is like resistance toward other persons. But for all we know, we human beings are much more susceptible to ignoring or suppressing the desire not to be in relationship with God than the desire not to be in relationship with other persons, like an estranged family member, which means that resistance toward God has a much greater likelihood of remaining undetected (and undetectable) both by oneself and others. This very well may not be the case; but I don't know how we could know (or even justifiably believe) that it is not the case.

Accordingly, regarding all putative nonresistance nonbelievers, we should be in doubt as to whether it is *more likely than not we'd detect these nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any*. This does

¹⁸ Henry calls attention to other ethnographic evidence, which suggests that at least a primitive form of monotheism was present amongst primitive cultures. (See “Reasonable Doubts about Reasonable Nonbelief”, 277–79).

¹⁹ Robert Lehe makes a comparable claim in Robert T. Lehe, “A Response to the Argument From the Reasonableness of Nonbelief”, *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2004).

not mean, however (nor am I claiming), that it is highly likely, or even just more likely than not, that we would *not* detect resistance toward God in putative nonresistant nonbelievers, even if it were there. The reality is *we just don't know enough* (and arguably are incapable of knowing enough) about the respective psychological make-ups, or inner mental lives, of all of these nonbelievers — or, for that matter, resistance toward God as a psychological state — to be able to make any judgment about the probability of our detecting such resistance in them if it were there. And that is all it takes for it *not* to be more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming Schellenberg's Noseeum Assumption.

IV. THE PUTATIVE EXISTENCE OF AT LEAST ONE NONRESISTANT NONBELIEVER

Let's now consider some objections to the argument I have been developing on behalf of the claim that it is not more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming Schellenberg's Noseeum Assumption. First, say that Schellenberg concedes that, regarding all putative nonresistant nonbelievers, we should be in doubt as to whether it is *more likely than not we'd detect these nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any*. Nevertheless, Schellenberg still might hold that the probability that there is at least one actual nonresistant nonbeliever among the entire set of putative nonresistant nonbelievers (historical and current) remains quite high, certainly more likely than not. Especially if human psychology can be as complex — and so varied — as I have claimed that it very well may be, then surely it is highly likely, or at least more likely than not, that amongst *all* of the putative nonresistant nonbelievers that do live and have ever lived there is at least *one* nonbeliever who does not or did not possess any resistance toward God. Thus, it is clearly more reasonable to affirm than deny the existence of at least one genuine nonresistant nonbeliever. And that's all the premise asserting the existence of nonresistant nonbelief really requires.

In response, I don't think that Schellenberg is entitled to make the claim that it is more reasonable to affirm than deny the existence of at least one genuine nonresistant nonbeliever. And to see why, it's worth reflecting once again on the existence of extraterrestrial life forms, and specifically intelligent extraterrestrial life forms. Are we justified in holding that, given the vastness and age of the universe, it is highly likely, or even just more likely than not, that at least one intelligent extraterrestrial life form does exist or did exist? I don't see how. The fact that the universe is a very large place that has existed for a very long time certainly means that it is *possible* that at least one intelligent extraterrestrial life form does exist or did exist, at some point and place in the universe. For all we know, it is true that *many* such life forms do exist or have existed. But we cannot appeal to the immensity and age of the universe — even the fact that the universe currently contains an astoundingly high number of planets on which life has the potential to evolve — in order to justify the claim that it is highly likely or even just more likely than not that at least one such life form exists or has existed.²⁰ Why not? Because currently, at least, we not only lack clear evidence regarding the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life, but we also still don't know enough about the universe — including all of those planets hospitable to the evolution of life — to say one way or another, whether or not it is more likely than not that even just one intelligent extraterrestrial life form exists or has existed.

Similarly, the fact that there are a large, even very large number of putative nonresistant nonbelievers that have existed and do exist certainly means that it is *possible* that at least one of them is a genuine nonresistant nonbeliever. For all we know, it is true, as Schellenberg claims, that *many* genuine nonresistant nonbelievers do exist and have existed. But the sheer existence of a very large number of putative nonresistant nonbelievers, with varying psychological profiles (and so who possess varying beliefs and desires), does not by itself justify our claiming that it is highly likely or even just more likely than not that

²⁰ Astrophysicist Ethan Siegel estimates that there are potentially 1022 planets in the universe with the right conditions for life on them. And yet, given all of the things that must go right — and can go wrong — for intelligent life to evolve, even given the right conditions, we cannot (right now) say one way or another whether it is more likely than not that such life exists. "Life like us could be common, or we could be the only example within the limits of our observable Universe." See Ethan Siegel, "What If It's Just Us?", *Forbes*, April 3, 2019.

at least one of them is or was genuinely nonresistant. Why not? Because, as I have argued, we just don't know enough (and are arguably incapable of knowing enough) about the respective psychologies or inner mental lives of any of these putative nonresistant nonbelievers, or the psychological state of resistance toward God, to say one way or another, with any degree of confidence, whether or not it is more likely than not that even just one genuine nonresistant nonbeliever exists or has existed. Once more, for all we know, all putative nonresistant nonbelievers who ever lived are in fact resistant nonbelievers, which means that for all we know, the phenomenon of nonresistant nonbelief simply never has existed nor does it exist now.

Schellenberg could argue in response that since the concept of nonresistant nonbelief is clearly intelligible, and since the number of nonbelievers continues to grow, it is at least more likely than not, if not also highly likely, that at some point (perhaps very soon) a genuine nonresistant nonbeliever *will* exist. However, there are problems with this line of response as well. First, the premise in the hiddenness argument that I have been claiming is driven by a particular noseem assumption posits the *actual* existence of persons who are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. So appealing to the *future* existence of nonresistant nonbelievers will not help Schellenberg make his case. Second, we obviously can't know anything about the individual psychologies of putative nonresistant nonbelievers who do not yet exist, and so can't form any reasonable judgment about the probability of there being even just one, future instance of genuine nonresistant nonbelief. And so, it is not more reasonable to affirm than deny the existence of at least one future, genuine nonresistant nonbeliever.

V. SKEPTICISM ABOUT OUR INNER MENTAL LIVES?

Another objection Schellenberg could proffer in response to the argument I have outlined and defended goes as follows. If, regarding all putative nonresistant nonbelievers, we should be in doubt as to whether it is *more likely than not we'd detect these believers' resistance toward God if there were any*, shouldn't we also be in doubt as to whether it is more likely than not we'd detect any number of other mental states in ourselves (and others)? In other words, being skeptical about our ability to detect resistance toward God seems to warrant being skeptical about our ability to detect the other contents of our own (and others') minds. And this sort of wholesale skepticism about our inner mental lives is unwarranted.

In response, I agree that wholesale skepticism regarding our inner mental lives is unwarranted (and, for that matter, undesirable). A sensation such as pain is immediately epistemically accessible by each of us. So, when it seems to me that I am in pain, I have every reason to think (and claim to know) that I am in pain. Furthermore, when it seems to me that I am *not* in pain, there is every reason to think (and claim to know) that I am not actually experiencing pain, since pain is not the sort of mental state that I can ignore or suppress and so be deceived in thinking is not occurring when in fact it is occurring.

However, skepticism regarding our ability to detect other types of mental states — desires in particular — does seem warranted, at least in certain cases. To return to my previous example: let's grant that when it seems to me that I desire to be reconciled with an estranged family member, I am (at least *prima facie*) justified in thinking that (more likely than not) I do, in fact, possess this desire. But when it *also* seems to me that I *lack* any desire *not* to be reconciled with an estranged family member, I am *not* justified in thinking that (more likely than not) I do lack this desire. Why not? Because, as a matter of fact, I am *not* reconciled with this family member, and so, for all I (and others) know, the reason I have not yet reconciled with her is because I possess the real but *unconscious* desire not to be reconciled with her that has imperceptibly impinged upon and curtailed my genuine efforts to be reconciled with her (presuming, again, I also have the real and manifest desire to be reconciled with her). In this case, I (and others) simply don't know enough about my inner mental life, and particularly my unconscious desires, to claim that it is more reasonable to affirm than refrain from affirming the following noseem assumption: *more likely than not I (and others) would detect resistance in myself toward resuming a relationship with this estranged family member if it were there.*

Similar things can be said about resistance toward God. Say I am a nonbeliever, and it seems to me that I have the desire, however weak or undeveloped, to have a relationship with God. Let's grant that on that basis I am (at least *prima facie*) justified in thinking that (more likely than not) I do, in fact, possess this desire. And say that it also seems to me that I *lack* any desire *not* to have a relationship with God. Here, however, I am *not* justified in thinking that (more likely than not) I lack this desire, even though it seems to me that I lack it. Why not? Because, as a matter of fact, I *don't* believe in God, and so, for all I (and others) know, the reason I don't believe in God is because I also possess the real but *unconscious* desire not to have a relationship with God, which, in competition with my genuine desire for relationship with God, has imperceptibly infected my thinking about God, sustained the doubts I have about the existence of God, hindered my search for God, etc. I (and others) simply don't know enough about my inner mental life, particularly my unconscious desires — and so whether or not I have ignored or suppressed my resistance toward God — to claim that it is more reasonable to affirm than refrain from affirming the following noseem assumption, which is a version of Schellenberg's Noseem Assumption: *more likely than not I (and others) would detect resistance toward God in myself if it were there.*

VI. RESISTANCE TOWARD GOD AND THEISTIC BELIEF

Finally, Schellenberg could argue as follows, in attempt to turn the tables on the theist who advances the skeptical argument I have articulated and been defending in this article. Once the theist admits that all of us can be out of touch with what we desire, and can possess conflicting desires, then he must also admit that he may, for all he (and others) know, possess competing desires in regards to his relationship with God, which means that on at least some level, he is resisting God, and so does not have the relationship with God that he thinks that he has. Accordingly, theists in general should be in doubt as to whether it is *more likely than not they would detect resistance toward God in themselves if there were any there.*

So formulated, however, the reasoning here hardly amounts to an objection or even a worry that theists need to address. First of all, many theists readily would admit that, so far as they can tell, they have been open to God on one level and closed off to — or resistant toward — God on another level, at least in certain phases of their lives: they have experienced the psychological phenomenon of both wanting to do God's will and wanting not to do God's will. Christian theists in particular might say that this is precisely what it is to be sinful or fallen: following God's will is a struggle, and so the desire to follow God's will always can come into competition with the opposing desire not to follow God's will, and follow one's own will instead.

Second of all, many theists readily would embrace skepticism regarding their ability to detect any and all resistance toward God within themselves, if there were any there. Specifically, a theist might reasonably think the following. Even when it seems to me that I do not possess any resistance toward the God in whom I believe, it would be unreasonable for me to conclude that more likely than not that no such resistance is there. For all I (or others) know, resistance toward God is a real but also hidden part of my psychological make-up — an unconscious desire within me — which, in subtle and even undetectable ways, has hindered me from developing my relationship with God and even damaged my relationship with God, although it has not removed my belief in God. Of course, from a theistic perspective, my confronting and exploring this possibility is a good thing, not a bad thing, insofar as it is a good for me to work (as far as I can) to overcome self-deception and eliminate whatever resistance toward God within myself that may remain.

Now, Schellenberg could press his case in another, more forceful way: if we can be deceived about what we desire, we also can be deceived about what we believe. So, consider the following argument a theist might make regarding his belief in God:

So far as I (and others) can tell (detect), I believe in God.

So, it is more likely than not (perhaps significantly so) that

I believe in God.

But once the theist admits that he may be deceived about the amount or level of resistance toward God that is present within him, must he not also admit that he may be deceived about the degree to which he actually believes in God? And perhaps, for all he (or anyone) knows, he does not believe in God *at all*, since the amount or level of resistance toward God that is present within him is actually incompatible with belief in God?

In response, the theist could bite the bullet and grant that, given the power of self-deception, for all he (or anyone) knows, he does not believe in God as strongly as he thinks he does; and perhaps he does not believe in God at all, and so is not a theist after all. In fact, he could grant that, for all he (or anyone) knows, *everyone* who claims to be a theist is, in fact, not a theist, and so lacks belief in God, which is why it behooves those who claim to be theists to overcome whatever self-deception may afflict them and discover, as far as they are able, whether they in fact believe in God or not (supposing, of course, that they desire to believe in God).

Or, instead, while acknowledging that it is at least (both logically and psychologically) possible that he is self-deceived concerning his belief in God, the theist also could hold that the fact that it seems to him that he believes in God provides him a real (albeit defeasible) reason to think that (more likely than not) he does, in fact, believe in God. And the fact that it seems to others that they possess belief in God gives them a real (albeit defeasible) reason to think that (more likely than not) they do, in fact, believe in God. Generally speaking, when I believe that p , I not only am confident that p is true, but also act in ways that reflect my belief that p , or are consistent with my belief that p , and so on this basis am (at least *prima facie*) justified in thinking that (more likely than not) I do, in fact, believe that p .²¹ (And others are justified in thinking that I believe that p as well, even if they don't have immediate epistemic access to my inner mental life, in the way that I do). Accordingly, the theist need not deny that he is (at least *prima facie*) justified in thinking that (more likely than not) he believes in God, given that it seems to him (and others) that he believes in God.

However, is the fact that it *also* seems to the theist that he doesn't believe that God doesn't exist afford him a real reason for thinking that he doesn't, in fact, believe that God doesn't exist? Perhaps, for all theist knows, given the power of self-deception, he both believes that God exists and believes that God doesn't exist. If, as I've argued throughout this article, it's possible to possess conflicting desires, even if one is not aware that one possesses conflicting desires — like both desiring to be in relationship to God and desiring not to be in relationship with God — then is it not also possible to possess conflicting beliefs, even if one is not aware that one possesses such beliefs?

In response, while it clearly seems possible for me to possess inconsistent beliefs, such that my belief that p is inconsistent with my belief that q , it does not seem possible for me to possess beliefs that are directly contradictory, such that I simultaneously believe that p and not- p . And that is because, as I already suggested, believing that p entails being confident that p is true, and there is something clearly directly contradictory about being confident that both p and not- p are true (or, for that matter, being confident that not- p is true but not being aware that one is confident that not- p is true). So, it seems that a person who forms and holds the belief that God exists would not also, unbeknownst to her, believe that God doesn't exist, unless (perhaps) she was suffering from some kind of cognitive schizophrenia — of the sort that would cause her to believe that p and believe that not- p at the same time. But insofar as theists have good reason, based on how they are conducting their cognitive lives, that they are not suffering from this sort of radical cognitive malfunction, then they have every reason to think that they do not, unbeknownst to themselves and others, believe it to be true that God doesn't exist in addition to believing it to be true that God does exist.

21 I also think that there are degrees of belief, which means that one can believe that p with greater and lesser degrees of confidence; though surely, believing that p entails being confident that p on some level.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the main goal of this article has not been to show that there is real reason to doubt that nonresistant nonbelief in God actually exists (though, some may indeed harbor this doubt). My main goal instead has been to show that, regarding putative nonresistant nonbelievers, there is real reason to doubt Schellenberg's Noseeum Assumption: *more likely than not we'd detect these nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any*. I have shown that there is real reason to think that we just don't know enough (and arguably are incapable of knowing enough) about the respective psychological make-ups, or inner mental lives, of all of these nonbelievers — or, for that matter, resistance toward God as a psychological state — to be able to make any judgment about the probability of our detecting such resistance in them if it were there. It is therefore not more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming Schellenberg's Noseeum Assumption; and, accordingly, Schellenberg's hiddenness argument containing the premise based on this noseeum assumption is not a good argument for atheism.

I also have defended these claims against multiple objections. If we should be in doubt as to whether it is *more likely than not we'd detect putative nonresistant nonbelievers' resistance toward God if there were any*, we also should be in doubt as to whether it is more likely than not that there is (or has been) even just one genuine nonresistant nonbeliever. We need not, however, be in doubt regarding our ability to know some, even many, of the contents of our own (and others') minds. Instead, we — theists and nontheists alike — should adopt what is arguably a healthy skepticism (or robust epistemic humility) about our ability to know all of the contents of our minds, and in particular, all that we desire. So, in the end, while I recognize that the argument I have developed and defended here can be developed and defended further, I think that I have shown that it constitutes a viable strategy for challenging Schellenberg's hiddenness argument for atheism.²²

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