

The hiddenness argument revisited (I)

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Abstract: More than a few philosophers have sought to answer the atheistic argument from reasonable non-belief (a.k.a. the argument from divine hiddenness or the hiddenness argument) presented in my 1993 book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. In this first of two essays in response, I focus on objections sharing the defect – sometimes well-hidden – of irrelevance, using their shortcomings to highlight important features of the argument that are commonly overlooked.

Ten years have passed since my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (hereafter *DH*) was published.¹ In that time a considerable number of writers have replied to the argument I developed and defended there. Most recently, Cambridge has brought out a collection of papers on its theme, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (hereafter *NE*).² Many of these papers address the reasoning of *DH*. In view of all this interesting criticism of the hiddenness argument, it has seemed desirable to respond, and to say something about how things in this part of the terrain look to me ten years on.³ That is what I do in the present essay, and in a second essay that will follow.

Now the criticisms that have emerged are very diverse. But some organization can be brought to our discussion of them as follows. First we may note that there is little evidence of any inclination among philosophers to question the argument's claim that perfect love is an essential property of God (where by 'God' is meant the personal God of traditional theism). I shall therefore give little attention to that claim. But, second, we will very readily note, if we have any acquaintance with the literature at all, that rather many – clearly the majority – of the available criticisms attack the premise of the argument claiming that a perfectly loving God would prevent reasonable non-belief (where by 'reasonable non-belief' is meant *inculpable* non-belief, non-belief that exists through no fault of the non-believer). It may be observed, third, that a relatively small number of criticisms, ones reflecting a Calvinist influence on philosophy, are clustered about the premise claiming that there occurs in the world non-belief of this

reasonable sort. These latter criticisms I have answered elsewhere,⁴ and so the claim that reasonable non-belief occurs will also receive little attention here. That leaves us with the claim that a perfectly loving God would prevent reasonable non-belief, and it is the many and varied criticisms of this claim that will be my focus in these two essays.

Such criticisms appear upon reflection to fall into two main categories: relevant and irrelevant. I know that it is a disturbingly common event for a philosopher to claim that criticisms of his or her argument reflect misunderstanding or in some other way are irrelevant, and I have diligently sought, in each case, to avoid such an assessment. (Some criticisms, indeed, I have found to be irrelevant after initially, misled by an optimistic spirit, thinking them relevant.) But where such an assessment cannot be avoided, I do not hesitate to defend it. That is the concern of this first instalment in my two-part revisitation of hiddenness themes. Here I begin by depicting, in broad strokes, but with a little more detail than in the previous paragraph, the essential structure and content of the hiddenness argument, and also some of the reasoning by which its premises may be supported, and then I display how it is that so many criticisms, in failing properly to appreciate one or another of the elements involved in the depiction, turn out to miss their mark.

The argument laid bare

The hiddenness argument, properly understood, is its own best defence in the face of many of the points that have been raised against it. To see how, let us consider more closely what it claims.

There is, first of all, the claim that if there is a personal God who is perfectly loving, creatures capable of explicit and positively meaningful relationship with God, who have not freely shut themselves off from God, are always in a position to participate in such relationship – able to do so just by trying to. (And hereafter it may be assumed that, unless otherwise indicated, by ‘relationship’ or ‘interaction’ or ‘contact’ with God is *meant* explicit and positively meaningful relationship.) At the dawn of the relevant cognitive and affective capacities, the conditions required to be in a position to exercise those capacities will also be there, and will remain in place unless the creature herself chooses to dismantle them.

Why should we suppose that this will be so if a perfectly loving God exists? Well, there are many reasons, having to do with such things as access to enormous spiritual benefits for creatures, and also – importantly – a loving creator’s valuing of relationship for its own sake. But the central point here is more general: it may be observed that situations of human interaction and discussions of human interaction are the contexts in which such concepts as those of ‘closeness’, ‘care’, and ‘love’ are used and acquire their meanings. Thus, 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. Now it is obvious that the most admirably loving spouse, or friend, or sibling, or parent will never, insofar as she can help it, allow anything she does to make contact with herself impossible for the one she loves. The perfectly loving parent, for example, from the time the child can first respond to her at all until death separates them, will, insofar as she can help it, see to it that nothing *she* does ever puts relationship with herself out of reach for her child. She may, to be sure, occasionally stand to one side and let her child take some responsibility for the relationship's development, and she will refuse to suffocate him with her attention, and now and then may even withdraw for a time to make a point. But it is important to notice that these are moments *within* the relationship, which add to its meaning. She may also reluctantly accept the fact that the child is (at least for the moment) unwilling to participate in relationship or has taken deliberate steps that (at least until his attitudes change) put it out of reach for him, respecting his decision. But she will never take such steps herself, and thus, if her child does not do so, he will always (insofar as she is able to ensure it) be in a position to interact with her. As we might also put it, the possibility of some form of contact with his parent will always be there for him. What loving parent would ever willingly allow this possibility to be taken completely away? And in reflecting on these facts, we should be able to see, if we had any doubt before, how the nature of divine love for created beings capable of relationship with God must be thought to include the same feature. (Our inclination to say so will only be strengthened when we notice that God would love such creatures with a love that is more steadfast and unailing than the love of any human parent, and that creatures would stand to benefit far more from relationship with God than from any other relationship.) Of course, in the case of God, the qualifier 'insofar as she is able to ensure it' falls away, given that God is *always* able to ensure that the possibility of relationship exists for those who are not contrarily disposed.

Now it is because belief that God exists is one of the aforementioned conditions of being in a position to exercise one's capacity for relationship with God – and because God, in willing a certain state, necessarily wills all of its conditions – that we may infer from the above the further claim that, if there is a perfectly loving God, creatures capable of relationship with God who do not resist God will always be in possession of such belief.⁵ And given the involuntariness of belief, this means that, unless they resist, such creatures will always be in possession of evidence causally sufficient for belief. The presence of God will be for them like a light that – however much the degree of its brightness may fluctuate – remains on unless they close their eyes.

But just by looking around us with *our* eyes open, we can see that this state of affairs does not obtain. In particular, there is plenty of non-belief in the world (instantiated by doubt or disbelief or by the absence of any such mental state due to ignorance of the propositions involved) that is not the fault of non-believers;

and if this is so, then not every instance of non-belief reflects free resistance of evidence that would otherwise have produced belief (indeed, much of it occurs in the context of a search for such evidence). Much non-belief, in other words, is inculpable, or as we might also put it, reaching for a more attractive word, *reasonable*. Utilizing yet another form of expression, one that has become popular, we could say that God is *hidden* from many human creatures; (this expression must of course be taken non-literally and somewhat technically in the context of an atheistic argument, as referring to the absence of evidence putting the existence of God beyond inculpable or reasonable non-belief for the creatures in question). But, as we have seen, if a perfectly loving God exists, then reasonable non-belief does not occur. Then, God is *not* in this sense hidden from anyone. Therefore, we may conclude, no perfectly loving God exists. But it is a necessary truth that if God exists, God is perfectly loving. (How could a personal being be unsurpassably great without unsurpassable love?) Therefore, God does not exist.

This is essentially the argument I gave in *DH*. The only significant change that has occurred in my view as to its nature concerns the modal status of the conditional propositions at its heart. As I see it now, we can plausibly take its claims as to what we would find if there were a perfectly loving God to be not just true but necessarily true. The reasoning developed in support of the idea that God would facilitate relationship and (therefore) prevent reasonable non-belief leaves plenty of room for non-actualized relationship with God, claiming only that such relationship will be *available* in the absence of our culpable resistance if a perfectly loving God exists, and thus seems applicable to any possible world containing human beings created by God who are capable of relationship with God – it strongly suggests that the conditionals in question reflect part of the very meaning of ‘God unsurpassably loves human beings’. Hence that reasoning may be regarded as providing for those propositions a familiar sort of (defeasible) a priori justification.

Irrelevance exposed

Now if we take the *foregoing* as a basis for discussion, we will find that many popular criticisms of hiddenness talk entirely miss their mark. One still hears, now and then, and most recently from Peter van Inwagen and Paul Moser, of difficulties associated with an alleged atheistic ‘demand’ for spectacular ‘signs and wonders’,⁶ or ‘expectations’ that God will ‘entertain us cognitively’, again with ‘signs and wonders’.⁷ But no such demand or expectation is to be associated with the argument stated above and its claim that God would prevent reasonable non-belief. (Paul Moser rather frequently connects the defence of such arguments to a desire to be ‘entertained’ by God and also to ignorance of the need for ‘morally transforming’ relationship with God; but

such comments, sad to say, only trivialize and caricature what is being said here – they erect sizable straw persons that only succeed in distracting attention from the real issues.) The hiddenness argument says that the *belief* that there is a God is required for any sort of explicit commerce with God (commerce which many humans may ardently desire for all the right reasons), and the evidence that God may choose to provide to bring it about need not be overwhelming or crass – stupefying visions or stars forming words! It need only be such as will be causally sufficient for belief in the absence of resistance, and in *DH* I emphasize how this result might be effected through the much more spiritually appropriate means of religious experience, interpreted in the sensitive manner of a Pascal or a Kierkegaard (the value of such experience Moser and other theists extol, but they tend to overlook it, or caricature what is said about it, when the idea of such experience is made use of by non-theists). And I emphasize how such intimations of God might be modulated according to the needs of individuals without losing their force as evidence that puts the existence of God beyond *reasonable* non-belief. In light of all this, I would suggest that it is time – and past time – to put talk of spectacular and overwhelming signs and wonders in this context to rest.

Another sort of criticism that misses the mark, given what the argument is really saying, is one seeking to justify a divine decision to remain withdrawn by reference to the properties particular inculpable non-believers possess in the midst of life (that is, at some point *after* they reach some measure of cognitive and affective maturity). This sort of criticism in effect asks ‘What if God were to give evidence to inculpable non-believers?’, and the answer it offers is that, were God to do so, some important bad state of affairs might well be permitted or some important good foregone because of properties the inculpable non-believer has acquired over time; and so God might very well not do so. Thus Robert T. Lehe argues that inculpable non-believers might only resist God upon coming to believe, or might not have acquired the degree of longing for God needed to make their belief spiritually effective.⁸ Laura L. Garcia similarly argues that ‘[i]f the belief is unlikely to occasion the desired response ... God may not provide additional evidence for that person’.⁹

The basic idea here is much more fully developed in an earlier article by Daniel Howard-Snyder,¹⁰ and summarized in the Introduction to *NE*, as follows:

Inculpable non-believers are either well-disposed to love God upon believing or they are not. The well-disposed either are responsible for being so disposed or not. If not, God lets them confirm their good disposition through choices in the face of contrary temptations before making Himself known. If so, they are well-disposed for unfitting reasons and He waits for them to confirm their good disposition in a purer source before making Himself known. Inculpable non-believers who are not well-disposed to love God upon believing and who are not responsible for failing to be well-disposed are given the opportunity by God to change before He makes Himself known.¹¹

Howard-Snyder makes it clear in the earlier article that he is thinking of individuals whose relevant characteristics presuppose some considerable experience of life, and indeed, many of his points – for example, that there may be inculpable non-believers who, embittered by suffering, would reject God if they came to believe that God exists – have little plausibility unless this is assumed.

Now why do such points fail to be relevant as replies to the hiddenness argument laid out above? Well, because it does not follow from the fact (if it is a fact) that some bad state of affairs would be permitted, or some good foregone, if God gives evidence for belief to some inculpable non-believer in the midst of life that such would be the case *if God had prevented her from ever being an inculpable non-believer in the first place*; and it is the *latter* state of affairs that the hiddenness argument tells us we will find if there is a God. If that argument is sound, then culpable resistance, shutting God out, is the only source of non-belief in a world created by God. Then there are no inculpable non-believers whose circumstances in the midst of life God might take account of. So to make the sorts of points that are made by Lehe, Garcia, and Howard-Snyder one apparently must assume that the argument is unsound, and thus beg the question.

However, I think the problem here is even more fundamental. To say that these writers have begged the question against the hiddenness argument involves the assumption that they understand it and simply reject it at a point that is inopportune from the perspective of crafting a good counter-argument. But it seems to me that they have not fully understood the argument. I would suggest that what we see in their writing is a confusion of what my argument actually claims – that if God exists, there is no inculpable non-belief – with either ‘If God existed, actual inculpable non-believers would receive evidence sufficient for belief’, or ‘If God existed, inculpable non-believers (whoever they might be) would receive evidence sufficient for belief’. Lehe appears to go for the former *de re* interpretation (he apparently thinks that, on my view, *I, John Schellenberg*, am languishing in inculpable non-belief that, if there were a God, would have been removed by now); and the other writers appear to go for the latter, *de dicto*, one. But on either interpretation we have a confusion, for what the hiddenness argument actually says is that if God exists, there is *never* a time when someone inculpably fails to believe (belief is made available as soon as there is a capacity for relationship with God).

It is because I interpret the criticisms of Lehe, Garcia, and Howard-Snyder – and other points in the literature that share the basic features of their criticisms – as embroiled in this confusion that I include them in the present section on objections that are answered by the argument itself, that will cease to appear convincing or even relevant when that argument is properly understood. Now perhaps some of these points can be massaged *into* something relevant, something more general – perhaps, for example, we can transform the claim that a lack of readiness on the part of individual inculpable non-believers deters God from putting

God's existence beyond reasonable non-belief for them into the claim that a lack of readiness *across the species*, at a certain stage of human development, deters God from putting God's existence beyond reasonable non-belief *for all human beings at that stage of development*. In the next essay I consider such possibilities. But for now I continue with criticisms that depend on a misconstrual of the hiddenness argument.

Take, for example, Laura Garcia's point that 'it could be that the requisite attitude of heart is more necessary for our ultimate good than simply acquiring true beliefs'. And she continues: 'St James says that the devils believe in God, yet (we assume) they fail to arrive at union with Him'.¹² This suggests that, on my view, nothing is more important for relationship with God than theistic belief, or theistic belief is by itself a sufficient condition of such relationship. Such is not the case. What I have argued is that belief (and thus evidence sufficient for it) is a *necessary* condition of *being in a position* to participate in relationship with God – any 'requisite attitude of heart' one may possess will not put one in such a position if one does not also believe in God – and that this suffices to make it something we would find if there were a perfectly loving and thus relationship-seeking God. Garcia's own phrasing seems to allow for this: whatever it may mean for A to be 'more necessary' than B, it clearly appears compatible with B being necessary!

A point similar to Garcia's is made by Paul Moser,¹³ and also suggested by Paul Draper when he says that the facts that 'belief is not strongly correlated with sanctification', and that the 'moral and spiritual development of every single human being [may not be] best served by belief in this life', count against my view.¹⁴ However, God is not, on my view, to be construed as making belief available because it is a particularly good *means* to anything, but because it is a logically necessary condition of humans having the opportunity to freely choose to participate in relationship with God. That free choice and other choices like it would determine whether the relationship developed and whether 'sanctification' was attained, and God would wish to make them possible even if God did not know what creatures would do with that possibility. (Notice that a loving parent naturally wishes to make relationship with herself possible for her child even if, given the need for the child's free participation, she does not know whether it will become actual, and even if she doubts that it will. Making that choice available to her child is not a matter of calculation – though she naturally hopes that he will respond positively and benefit – but simply the loving thing to do.)

Another set of misconstruals, I would suggest, can be detected in certain criticisms of my argument put forward by William J. Wainwright. Wainwright argues that 'even where the good of theistic belief doesn't exist, God has provided sufficient light to make salvation a real possibility for everyone ... [and] deprives no one of the good of communion with him'.¹⁵ In response to my anticipated objection that relationship with God entails such belief, he says the following: 'But

Schellenberg is mistaken. If I don't believe that God exists, I can't respond to God *under that description*. It doesn't follow that I can't respond *to God*.' What Wainwright has in mind here is that since God is the Good, when the non-believer 'responds to the good she sees, she may ... be responding to God Himself'.¹⁶ She lacks explicit belief, but still has what we might call an implicit belief. And in any case, she may attain to explicit belief and a fuller salvation later on, perhaps in the afterlife. These points are summarized in a footnote:

[I]t isn't obvious to me that God's desire for unrestricted personal communion with us entails more than that (1) all agents will have *some* awareness of God (whether under that description or not), and that (2) all agents who respond appropriately to the light they have will *at some time or other* become explicitly aware of God.¹⁷

But Wainwright has substituted his own notion of relationship between God and human beings for mine here. Given what, both in *DH* and above, I have said I mean by this notion (explicit, reciprocal interaction), it would be a mistake for me *not* to affirm that relationship with God entails theistic belief on the part of human beings! If there is a mistake, then, it is in supposing that God would want us always to be in a position to participate in such explicit relationship. Now Wainwright also argues that this is a mistake, but here too his argument seems to depend on a misconstrual of what I have said. He compares my claim to the claim that God should provide us with 'the best possible lives at all times', and comments: 'What I think is odd here is distributing predicates which properly apply to a whole (a life, or a significant stretch of it) to its parts.'¹⁸ But one only gets an analogue for the mentioned claim and the odd result in my argument if one supposes it to say that God should at all times provide us with a *fully* salvific life, or at all times make the *deepest* possible human–divine communion available, or something along those lines. And I have said nothing of the sort. All I have said is that we might expect at all times to be in possession of *belief*, and to have at all times the opportunity to be involved in *some level of* explicit relationship with God. Indeed, in *DH* I emphasize that 'the relationship I am thinking of is to be understood in developmental terms', that were it to obtain, 'it would admit of change, growth, progression, regression', that it might be 'shallow or deep, depending on the response of the human term of the relation'.¹⁹ Surely there is nothing odd about being in such a relationship at all times, or having the opportunity to be, any more than there is something odd about being in a relationship with a parent all one's life.

Now under the influence of traditional theology (itself in part a response to the hiddenness of God!) we may of course find it quite natural and intellectually congenial to think of relationship with God, and communion with God, and salvation as primarily or wholly an afterlife affair, and then it will sound odd to speak of relationship with God at all times. But my argument challenges this traditional idea, and so to interpret it in terms of that idea can only fail to do it justice, and render one's criticisms of it inapplicable from the start.²⁰

Consider also the response of M. Jamie Ferreira, who draws inspiration from Kierkegaard: here we have the suggestion that my argument fails because it expects the impossible: the existence of God *could not* be put beyond reasonable non-belief, in my sense. This, we are told, is on account of the nature of God as ‘the absolutely different’.²¹ But there is some apparent inconsistency in Ferreira’s account, since occasionally she also wishes to go along with talk of God as possessing the familiar properties of love and justice – indeed, sometimes one finds both notions in the same context: ‘What would it be like for the absolutely different to reveal itself as such? What could count as “a loving and just God” making His presence known in such a way that it would be unreasonable not to believe it?’²² Now Ferreira does encase the reference to a loving and just God in quotation marks, so perhaps we are not to understand these attributes as anything like the corresponding human ones – perhaps, as she elsewhere suggests, they too are subject to human ‘incomprehensibility’.²³

Since it would make for consistency in her account, let us suppose that this is how Ferreira is to be interpreted. It immediately follows that her remarks are irrelevant to the hiddenness argument as sketched above, since in that argument reference is being made not to an incomprehensible God, but to the personal God of traditional theism, whose love and justice, and so on, are conceived as sharing properties with their human counterparts, though of course they are thought of as perfected in various ways, and the *manner* of their instantiation or exercise might well be incomprehensible to us. (The same point applies to some of the comments concerning my argument made by Jacob Joshua Ross²⁴ – though in this case there seems to be more recognition of the fact that such comments do not represent reasons for doubting that the argument succeeds in its own terms. In fact, Ross goes so far as to say ‘I think Schellenberg’s argument regarding the possible implications of God’s hiddenness may well be acceptable’.²⁵) Now perhaps there are other ‘God-concepts’ that are worth reflecting upon; indeed I am certain that there are. But *here* they are not at issue.²⁶

The counter-arguments of Jonathan Kvanvig also fall wide of their mark.²⁷ Kvanvig seems to think that anyone discussing the hiddenness argument who writes both about what it shows, and about what individuals may take it to show, is confusing objective and subjective conceptions of justification.²⁸ But it seems plausible to suppose that a philosopher who rejects an objective conception of justification (and at least some similarly minded readers) might still want to know what the hiddenness argument objectively shows! And such a philosopher might also refer to some of the results of such an investigation in helping persons who arrive at the *same* results determine what they are subjectively justified in believing about the existence of God, given this or that assumption about the objective force of the independent evidence for theism.

However, I will not focus on how all of this is ignored by Kvanvig, and the mischief it causes in his article, or on the ease with which he thinks problems of

subjective justification can be solved where hiddenness is concerned (here he is, I think rightly, criticized as indulging in a ‘somewhat cavalier dismissal’ by the editors of the Cambridge volume²⁹), but rather on his central claim that the hiddenness argument has no *objective* force at all. Kvanvig’s case for this claim, so I want to suggest, centrally involves a mistaken conception of what it is that makes hiddenness problematic, and thus has within its sights something other than the hiddenness argument.

How can this be shown? Well, consider his central move. Fastening on my suggestion that the problem of hiddenness can be construed as a special instance of the problem of evil, and addressing my claim that the hiddenness argument tips the scales toward atheism when the other evidence for and against theism is balanced, Kvanvig reasons as follows. This balance would not exist unless the evidential power of *evil* had been defeated, and so the force of hiddenness too must be defeated, since, after all, it raises but a *special instance* of the problem of evil. In his own words: ‘Since the problem of evil is already present in the balance, adding a new kind of evil to the balance will have no more effect on the balance than adding some new religious experiences to the other side of the scale.’³⁰

The trouble with this is that, as clarified in the Introduction of *DH*, hiddenness can count as evil only when we take ‘evil’ very generally, to refer to whatever is in tension with the moral character of God; and Kvanvig’s argument relies on our taking ‘evil’ in the more usual and much narrower way, as referring to pain and suffering (perhaps together with the human wickedness often lying behind them), which anyone can see are bad, and are bad whether God exists or not. It is only the epistemic problem represented by *these* sorts of badness that is in some way defeated or counterbalanced in the scales bearing the independent evidence for and against theism we are imagining. Here it is very important to remember – to be reminded by what the hiddenness argument actually says – that the problematic nature of hiddenness does *not* consist in the suffering it may occasion (though this can make it worse). It is not, for example, the anguish of doubt and the empathy of God that, in the first instance, should lead us to wonder why there are inculpable doubters. It is rather the natural inclination of any parent to make relationship with herself possible for her children – for their sake, certainly, but also for its own sake, and even where there would be no pain and suffering if it were not made available.

The divine parent’s motivation to make divine–human relationship possible therefore includes much more than do the motives to which we appeal when we argue, if we do, that God would be moved to prevent pain and suffering; and although, in a very general sense, it may be said that there is something ‘bad’ about God not making such relationship possible, leaving many in a state incompatible with such relationship through no fault of their own, clearly this is a very different sort of badness than we are used to talking about. Thus, Kvanvig’s

analogy will not work: it is only if we were to add new instances of pain and suffering to the atheistic side of the scales that what we would be doing would be like adding new religious experiences to the other side. In the absence of more discriminating descriptions, adding the bad thing that is hiddenness is more adequately compared to adding something *positive*, that God might be expected to *value*, to the theistic side. It is clear that the evidential force of something so broadly defined could not legitimately be inferred to be defeated just because the force of *religious experience* is defeated. Independent arguments would be needed.

But perhaps Kvanvig will reply that we already know that the proposed defeaters of the force of hiddenness are not independent, but rather of the same sort as are, in the counterbalanced scenario, sufficient to deal with evil. As he puts it:

If we consider the plausible candidates for such delimiting defeaters – the value of freedom, necessity for a greater good, the importance of soul-making, cognitive limitations, and the like – there is no particular reason to think that such responses succeed only for the general problem of evil but not for the specific problem of divine hiddenness.³¹

And in the same context he suggests that no-one has argued that such candidates might be successful in the case of evil but not in the case of hiddenness.

Now the last point betrays a most surprising oversight, for the second half of *DH* is really one long string of counter-examples to it! What I have argued, and will argue again in the next instalment of this discussion, is that various such proposed defeaters do not work for hiddenness even if they work for evil. It is exactly right to say that the *candidate* defeaters of hiddenness are often of the same sort as in the counterbalanced scenario may be responsible for the defeat of evil's evidential power. But, if my arguments are correct, then these candidate defeaters are defeated candidates. Anyone who ignores all this, and, because of my reference to the problem of evil, straightforwardly infers that the proposed defeaters in question are *successful*, must still (on the most charitable construal) be assuming that we are basically talking about pain and suffering, and thus leaves unscathed and indeed untouched the actual hiddenness argument, whose details clearly distinguish it from other atheistic arguments referring to things 'bad'.

Finally, in this inventory of criticisms that miss their mark, in the sense of being ultimately irrelevant to the hiddenness argument sketched above, we have some additional points put forward by Paul Draper. Draper is an agnostic, and, unlike Kvanvig, willing to grant the distinctiveness and the significance of the evidence reasonable non-belief affords. But, somewhat *like* Kvanvig, he concludes that we are not in a position to judge that it tips the scales towards atheism; and he has, after considering all the evidence, no overall probability estimate to offer those seeking to determine what to believe about theism. According to Draper, we are 'unable to judge whether the conjunction of all the facts [in the independent evidence] is more probable on theism or on naturalism' (which latter position of

course entails the falsity of theism).³² And of the additional evidence represented by hiddenness he says the following: ‘Adding this single new piece of evidence doesn’t change this. There remains significant evidence on both sides, the relative strength of which is hard to assess. And this implies that agnosticism remains the only reasonable stance.’³³

The irrelevance to our argument of these comments can be recognized when we notice that Draper is not considering it as a deductive argument with conditional premises at all, but rather taking the main fact it cites – the fact of reasonable non-belief – and considering how probable this is on (what he views as) the relevant alternative hypotheses. He is rejigging my results to fit his favoured confirmationist approach. Now there is nothing wrong with this in itself; it can be interesting to see what different approaches to the same subject matter may yield. However, there is still no response to the hiddenness argument, as sketched above, in its own right.

But is the *implicit* response that the latter is *unpersuasive as it stands*, while capable of being improved? Earlier, we discussed a criticism put forward by Draper that can be seen as supporting this view, namely that the ‘moral and spiritual development of every single human being [may not be] best served by belief in this life’. Perhaps this idea has led him to think that my conditional premise, ‘If a perfectly loving God exists, there is no reasonable non-belief’, is less plausible than I suppose, and that my argument, like various others to which he alludes, is therefore not a conclusive proof but must be reconceived in probabilistic terms.³⁴ Perhaps, but then he is answered by the *response* to his criticism developed above. And especially given that, on his view, the ‘ambiguity’ of the evidence is *not affected* when the phenomenon of hiddenness is treated in his favoured manner, it is less than clear why we should suppose the force of the argument to be ‘improved’ by such treatment! Maybe we should rather look again at the prospects of reasonably accepting that conditional premise and performing a *modus tollens* operation on it.

Here it is important to recall that the premise in question is being put forward as a conceptual truth. If it can be accepted as such, its effect on any antecedent ‘ambiguity’ in the evidence may be expected to be considerable – certainly that effect might be expected to overwhelm any merely probabilistic considerations. Now to be fair to Draper, it should be underlined that in *DH*, to which he is responding, I did not make so strong a claim for the conditional premise in question, saying only that I would defend the claim that it is true (while not ruling out that it was necessarily true). But even under that interpretation the premise is very strongly supported, and so the argument of which it is a part might still be expected to have quite a strong effect when added to less forceful probabilistic considerations. (Perhaps someone will say here that such a premise could only receive strong support from reasons appealing to what is necessarily true of God, and thus is defensible as a necessary truth or not at all. But as I have argued

elsewhere,³⁵ though reasons of the sort in question commonly refer to properties that a God would necessarily possess, they can be *differentially applicable* – forceful and undefeated in some worlds though not in others. And so we might have good reason to accept the premise in question as true even if it turned out not to be necessarily true.) In any case, I now interpret the argument differently: as argued above, there seems plenty of reason to take the conditional premise in question, when properly understood, as expressing a conceptual truth about divine love; and in the absence of powerful defeating considerations, this is how it should be taken. That it has *not* been so taken in the past shows nothing in the absence of such considerations, since there is reason to believe that that is just how we might expect things to be even if it *is* a conceptual truth. (What I am thinking of here are such things as our familiarity with the hiddenness of God and much theologizing within this context over many years, and also our use of the ‘father’ model together with the commonness in our experience of distant or absent human fathers.)

I close this essay with a speculation about why the Draper confirmationist approach might seem preferable in this context, even if in fact it is not. Perhaps critics of theism who are reluctant to try a *modus tollens* move here are influenced by the fact that the vast majority of evidence that is considered in theistic–atheistic discussion is evidence *for* the existence of God, which – even when expressible as a conditional – does not lend itself to a *modus tollens* (or any similar) argument for theism. Richard Swinburne, for example, has claimed, in effect, that the proposition ‘If God exists and there is a universe, the universe is orderly’ has a probability of 1,³⁶ but no theist is going to try a *modus tollens* move on *that* conditional (and of course affirming the consequent here would be fallacious); the best that can be done with this conditional is to extract its confirmation-friendly content and apply the confirmationist approach to it, as Swinburne famously does. But as we have seen, where atheism is concerned, it is not the case that applying a confirmationist approach is the best that can be done.³⁷

Notes

1. More than ten years, if we are measuring from the publication date of this essay. See my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
2. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
3. Due to space constraints, I will be forced to focus very narrowly on criticisms of the hiddenness argument, and to leave aside much else that is interesting in the papers to which I refer.
4. See my ‘“Breaking down the walls that divide”: virtue and warrant, belief and non-belief’, and ‘Reasonable non-belief and perfect love: replies to Henry and Lehe’, both forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*.
5. It is very important to see that *this is an inference*. Too many critics have treated this inferred claim without reference to the deeper claim about divine–human relationship in which it is grounded.
6. See Peter van Inwagen ‘What is the problem of the hiddenness of God?’, in *NE*, 28–29.
7. See Paul K. Moser ‘Cognitive idolatry and divine hiding’, in *NE*, 121.

8. See Robert T. Lehe 'A response to the argument from the reasonableness of non-belief', *Faith and Philosophy*, forthcoming.
9. See Laura L. Garcia 'St. John of the Cross and the necessity of divine hiddenness', in *NE*, 88.
10. See Daniel Howard-Snyder 'The argument from divine hiddenness', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26 (1996), 433–453.
11. *NE*, 10.
12. Garcia 'St. John of the Cross', 86.
13. Moser 'Cognitive idolatry', 137–138.
14. See Paul Draper 'Seeking but not believing: confessions of a practicing agnostic', in *NE*, 211.
15. See William J. Wainwright 'Jonathan Edwards and the hiddenness of God', in *NE*, 113.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 118–119, n. 27.
18. *Ibid.*, 118, n. 24.
19. See *DH*, 28.
20. Two additional points on Wainwright. (1) Referring to the plausible view that a loving God might permit 'inequalities' in 'spiritual capacities' (114), illustrated by the notion in certain classical writers of 'inequalities of holiness and happiness in heaven' (*ibid.*), he writes the following: '[I]f the inequalities in holiness that exist in heaven are consistent with God's fairness and love, then so too, presumably, are those existing on earth' (115). But the important point to note here is surely that the inequalities in heaven are all among those who *share* the opportunity to participate, at some level, in *explicit* relationship with God! My argument has no problem with such inequalities, but rather with the different inequality between those 'existing on earth' who have this opportunity and those who lack it. (In this connection it should also be noted that God's love would lead to the provision of such an opportunity for all not only, as Wainwright suggests, because of the 'injury' that might otherwise be experienced by us (115), but because of the natural parental desire for relationship for its own sake.) (2) In n. 24 (118) Wainwright compares my central claim to the claim that a loving God 'would ensure that each non-culpable agent was always as happy as he or she could be', which, he says, is implausible. This argument founders not only because of the maximizing idea ('as happy as she could be'), already criticized as irrelevant in the text, but also because the proper analogue would be a much more plausible claim referring to an *opportunity* to be happy, and because our tendency to see implausibility here is dependent on our awareness of obvious reasons why maximal happiness might sometimes have to be sacrificed in favour of greater goods – reasons of the sort I am saying we are *not* aware of in the case of relationship with God.
21. See M. Jamie Ferreira 'A Kierkegaardian view of divine hiddenness', in *NE*, 177.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 167–168.
24. See Jacob Joshua Ross 'The hiddenness of God – a puzzle or a real problem?', in *NE*, *passim*.
25. *Ibid.*, 188.
26. Two additional points on Ferreira. (1) Referring to my talk of God providing evidence sufficient for belief, she writes: 'Schellenberg ... ignores the fact that an argument which renders G probable and hence makes it reasonable to believe G need not, thereby, make it unreasonable to believe not-G.' Here there is apparently a difference of view as to what is causally sufficient for belief. As I argue in *DH* (and Ferreira nowhere responds to these arguments), so long as one considers G to be probable one will believe it, (belief that G is probable is causally sufficient for belief that G), and so to get oneself to believe not-G in these circumstances one would *have* to resist the evidence of G's probability, which is to say that one's belief would be culpable (and thus unreasonable, given my usage of the latter term). But, of course, anyone who thinks otherwise need only revise upwards the force evidence must have to reach the point at which it *would* be causally sufficient for belief. (2) Ferreira also seems to suppose that to develop a cumulative, probabilistic case for theism, we would need to identify 'several cases of God-giveness' independently, and there would have to be 'degrees of divinity or aspects of divinity such that we can know some independently of others'. But a probabilistic case for theism can identify and refer to its bits and pieces of evidence without identifying them as 'God-given' or as 'aspects of divinity'. Indeed, its task is to ascertain how likely it is that certain phenomena *independently* identified *are* God-given. (Ferreira, for example, appears to suppose that for a flower to be evidence of God it must be *identified* as God-given; but it is identified as a *flower* and there is discussion of how likely it is to *be* God-given.

And there can be degrees of such likelihood even if there cannot, as Ferreira claims, be degrees of the recognition of God, stemming from bits of God being successively exposed to our gaze.)

27. See Jonathan Kvanvig 'Divine hiddenness: what is the problem?', in *NE, passim*. In Kvanvig's article straw persons are set up and knocked down with distressing regularity. Just for example, he treats my specific response to Pascal on the Fall, limited in various ways by the context (see *DH*, 145–147), as an inadequate and lone attempt at a response to the *general* question whether the doctrine of the Fall has anything to offer an epistemic subjectivist seeking to reconcile her beliefs (151–152), meanwhile ignoring everything I say about views based on human 'fallenness' in chapter 3 of *DH*; and he reads my argument for the claim that belief begins with any degree of perceived probability, a response to the suggestion that only a *high degree* of perceived probability would be causally sufficient for belief (see *DH*, 36–38), as entailing the implausible view that if belief is as I describe it, the believer will be less likely to get the *objective* quality of the evidence wrong (154–155). Despite the question of his title, and the suggestion that he is mining my work for an answer, Kvanvig pays no attention at all to the details of the problem I have developed, and sketched above. No clear indication of what 'hiddenness' refers to in this context is ever given (sometimes it seems to be a 'counterbalanced' evidential situation (153, 158); sometimes 'reasonable non-belief' (156); sometimes the absence of evidence for God that is *objectively* adequate (157)). Such an approach makes misunderstanding virtually inevitable.
28. See Kvanvig 'Divine hiddenness', esp. 150, 152.
29. See 'Introduction', in *NE*, 18.
30. Kvanvig 'Divine hiddenness', 160.
31. *Ibid.*, 162.
32. Draper, 'Seeking but not believing', 206.
33. *Ibid.*, 210.
34. See *ibid.*, 198–199.
35. See my 'Stalemate and strategy: rethinking the evidential argument from evil', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (2000), 413.
36. See Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. 8.
37. In his *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Press, 1998), Theodore Drange puts forward a number of criticisms of my argument. Space constraints, combined with the fact that Drange is not really opposed to my project, but develops and defends an argument similar to mine, lead me to leave detailed consideration of his work aside on this occasion. But it may be mentioned that the views Drange defends and needs to be *able* to defend in order to maintain a distinctive argument – namely that God might not be perfectly loving, that even a perfectly loving God might have no inclination at all to make divine–human relationship possible, and that if God were to make belief possible, God would override any resistance we might put up to this, making non-belief impossible for everyone – seem quite implausible, for reasons mentioned above and/or developed in detail in *DH*. Too often, in my view, Drange responds to such reasons with the autobiographical comment that he cannot understand them, mistakenly treating this comment as though it were an objection.