

Another look at divine hiddenness

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Abstract: In his fine book *The Wisdom to Doubt*, J. L. Schellenberg builds a case for religious scepticism by advancing a version of the Hiddenness Argument. This argument rests on the claim that God could not love, in an admirable way, those who seek God while also remaining hidden from them. In this article, I distinguish two arguments for this claim. Neither argument succeeds, I contend, as each rests on an unsatisfactory understanding of the nature of admirable love, whether human or divine.

In a passage appealed to frequently by homilists but rarely by philosophers, the author of the Gospel of Matthew attributes the following words to Jesus:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand,

‘Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me’.

‘Then the just will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

‘And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”’ (Matt. 25: 34–40)

Those familiar with this text know that its context is one in which Jesus is presenting his teaching regarding the Great Day of Judgement. Jesus is informing his listeners, among other things, that they will be judged on the basis, not of such things as their degree of conformance to cultic requirements, but rather of how they have treated ‘the least of these’. Indeed, under a natural reading, this passage tells us that the Great Judgment will be rendered primarily on the basis of how we have treated the hungry, the alienated, and the sick.

Like so many passages from the Gospels, this passage from Matthew is at once gripping and puzzling. It is also, I want to suggest, important to take into account when thinking through the phenomenon of divine hiddenness, at least from the perspective of traditional Christian theism. My task in this article is to explain why.

What Jesus is saying

What exactly is Jesus saying in the passage just quoted? Jesus is presumably saying something more than that he approves of feeding the hungry, housing the stranger, and visiting the sick. After all, who wouldn't? The pivotal sentence is the one in which Jesus says that inasmuch as a person does such things as visit the sick she does these things to him. The performance of such actions, Jesus claims, *counts as* actions taken towards him. Those of us who are reading this passage as philosophers, however, want to know which actions Jesus is claiming we are performing towards him by doing such things as visiting the sick. A flat-footed reading might have it that Jesus is claiming that, by visiting a sick person, you thereby visit Jesus, who is also sick. But this cannot be what Jesus means. If Jesus is among the persons with whom we can visit, then presumably he is not also sick.

We needn't cast about much, however, to see what Jesus is getting at, for analogies are close at hand. When I was a child, my grandmother would tell us the story of how her family fled from their Russian homeland to Estonia to escape the October Revolution. As family lore has it, while in Estonia, on a cold winter's night, the family took in a total stranger in a park who had nowhere to go. Out of gratitude, this woman pledged to be their sponsor in America if the family wished to immigrate; she told them that she had the right connections to provide work for my great-grandfather. When the family eventually decided to immigrate, this virtual stranger did as she promised, sponsoring my great-grandfather. By doing this, she had thereby performed an act of great kindness towards the entire family. Things, of course, could have gone very differently. Had this stranger returned the hospitality shown her by breaking her promise upon my great-grandfather's arrival in America, she would have thereby wronged the entire family.

When understood in the light of such analogies, Jesus' pronouncement comes into focus: by doing such things as feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, Jesus claims, we thereby bless and honour him. Conversely, by doing such things as ignoring or harming the least of these, we thereby wrong and dishonour him. In this respect, Jesus is noting a striking difference between the relationship that he bears to the least of these and the ones that we typically do. I cannot bring it about that providing food for a Haitian refugee counts as my having performed an act of kindness towards John Schellenberg. Nor can I bring it about that my having failed to visit a stranger in prison counts as my having wronged Schellenberg. Neither I nor Schellenberg bear the right sort of relationship to these people for this to be the case. Under a natural reading, Jesus claims that he does, however. If the

passage from Matthew is to be believed, a person's having fed the hungry counts as her having blessed or honoured Jesus. Her failing to do so, by contrast, counts as her having wronged or dishonoured him (see Matt. 25: 41–46). Suppose one now adds to the mix the traditional Christian claims regarding the divinity of Christ. If so, then Jesus' claim is that a person's having fed the hungry counts as her having blessed God, while her failing to do so counts as her having wronged God.¹

On this occasion, I won't pause to reflect on what it is about Jesus' relationship with the least of these that brings it about that a person's performing actions of one sort towards them counts as performing actions of another sort towards God. Suffice it to say that in the passage quoted, Jesus himself indicates that it is because he bears something akin to an intimate familial relation to the least of these. Most important for my purposes is to highlight the following implication of Jesus' words, at least when they are understood against the backdrop of traditional Christian theology: it is in virtue of an agent's having behaved or failed to behave in certain ways towards the least of these that she bears morally freighted relations with God, including, if the text is to be believed, being a friend of God. According to the biblical text, then, these actions and omissions are such that they bring her into a meaningful relationship with God in a perfectly ordinary English sense of the phrase 'meaningful relationship'. Because of her actions or omissions with respect to the least of these, she can, for example, be the object of divine approbation or disapprobation, as the case may be.

To this point, I have drawn attention to the claim, made by the author of the Gospel of Matthew, that certain actions of ours taken towards the least of these count as actions taken towards God. Because of this, we find ourselves in relationships of various kinds with God, ones for which we can be held accountable. There is, however, another point that bears emphasis, which is this: according to the biblical text, we can be entirely ignorant of the fact that we stand in these relationships in virtue of our actions and omissions. 'When did we see you sick or in prison?', ask the characters in Jesus' story. Remarkably, the biblical text suggests, whether we have correct beliefs regarding God or God's relationship to the least of these does not matter much when it comes to the Great Day. The divine judgement is, at least in large measure, determined by the ways in which we have actually conducted ourselves towards the least of these and, thus, God.

We also have analogies to which we can appeal to understand this. Suppose, in the story I told earlier, the stranger in the park had met, on that cold winter's night, not my grandmother's entire family, but only my great-grandfather. Suppose, for illustration's sake, that she had no idea whether my great-grandfather had a family. If the stranger had done my great-grandfather a favour or harm, she would have thereby brought herself into a meaningful relationship with my grandmother's family. A favour would have formed the basis for gratitude; violence would have been the occasion for rightful resentment. For these things to be true,

it wouldn't matter what beliefs the stranger had about my great-grandfather. If the stranger had returned my great-grandfather's kindness with harm, for example, her ignorance or false beliefs about my great-grandfather's identity would be irrelevant to the issue of whether she had wronged him. Jesus indicates that our relationship to God is similar. To pinch a phrase from Hilary Putnam, Jesus appears to suggest that vitally important components of the divine-human relationship just ain't in the head.

Divine hiddenness

For nearly twenty years, John Schellenberg has pressed a type of argument against traditional theism that he calls the Hiddenness Argument. In his fine book, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, Schellenberg redeploys the argument to advance a version of religious scepticism, this being the view (roughly) that we should withhold judgement regarding whether there is some ultimate and salvific reality whose properties we could apprehend.² In the context of Schellenberg's discussion, the Hiddenness Argument is not supposed to function as an isolated justification for religious scepticism. It is but a single strand of argument that Schellenberg offers for the view. Still, it is an interesting strand of argument, well-deserving of attention. In what follows, I wish to explore it.

Schellenberg formulates the Hiddenness Argument as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of a meaningful conscious relationship with God is also (iii) in a position to participate in such a relationship (able to do so just by trying).
- (2) Necessarily, one is at a time in a position to participate in a meaningful conscious relationship with God only if at that time one believes that God exists.
- (3) Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of a meaningful conscious relationship with God also (iii) believes that God exists.
- (4) There are (and often have been) people who are (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of a meaningful conscious relationship with God *without* also (iii) believing that God exists.
- (5) So, God does not exist.³

There is a great deal to say about this argument. In the interest of brevity, I will assume that we should accept premises (2) and (4). I propose to focus on the argument's first premise, which Schellenberg tells us is the critical one. I shall argue, first, that this premise deserves a different gloss from the one that Schellenberg gives it. I shall then contend that, even when glossed differently, the theist has insufficient reason to accept it.

Let me begin with the first task. Consider a case of a person who in no interesting sense wilfully resists the divine. Suppose, furthermore, that this non-resistance is stable; it doesn't wax and wane. Call such a person a *non-resister*. If God exists, a non-resister, Schellenberg states, is at all times 'in a position to' engage in a meaningful, conscious relationship with God. She can do so just by trying and, apparently, with little effort. Schellenberg takes this to be a very plausible, albeit 'radically democratized', account of the conditions under which we can experience God. For if God were perfectly loving, Schellenberg argues, then some form of conscious awareness of God is 'not the preserve of the spiritually elite'. It should be readily available to any non-resister.⁴

I am dubious. It is one thing to say that awareness of God is not the preserve of the spiritually elite. It is another to suggest that it is for the non-resister extremely easy to achieve, as Schellenberg suggests. After all, through no fault of her own, a person might inhabit social conditions that are fairly hostile to theistic belief. Imagine, for example, that her society's attitude towards religion has been powerfully shaped by the resisters, even though she herself is not among them. As a result, those with whom she regularly interacts tend to fall into two camps: they are either resisters or tend not to think about God at all.

In this case, an agent who is a non-resister and curious about God might find herself puzzled by what she has been taught about God and the attitudes about God that are 'in the air'. In such conditions, it might take some hard work on her part to cut through the prevailing attitudes and teachings to get to such a point where it makes sense from her point of view to think seriously about and be open to a meaningful relationship to the divine.

If this is right, however, then we should understand premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument differently from the way in which Schellenberg does. To be in a position to participate in a meaningful conscious relationship with God might take an honest and extended effort. And because it may require such an effort, I find it implausible to say, as Schellenberg does, that 'all capable creatures would at all times have available to them some form of conscious awareness of God, if there were a God'.⁵ In what follows, then, I shall understand premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument to incorporate this qualification. I shall understand it to say that, if God exists, then a non-resister, who has made an honest effort to engage in a meaningful conscious relationship with God, is in a position to do so. I will assume correlatively that the non-resisters of whom Schellenberg speaks in premise (4) are also of this variety.

So much for the issue of how to understand premise (1) of the argument.⁶ Let me now indicate why I believe a traditional Christian theist will have insufficient reason to accept this premise. The first premise, recall, says:

- (1) Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of a meaningful conscious relationship with God is also (iii) in a position to participate in such a relationship (able to do so just by trying).

Focus for the moment on the phrase ‘meaningful conscious relationship with God’ and, in particular, the qualifier ‘conscious’. The Christian theist who has Matthew 25 in mind will wonder: why suppose that, if God exists, then at all times, a non-resister can participate in a meaningful *conscious* relationship with God just by trying? Why not instead affirm something weaker, viz., if God exists, then at all times, a non-resister can participate in a meaningful relationship with God just by trying, even though she may not be aware of God *as* God?

We can, then, distinguish two versions of the first premise of the Hiddenness Argument. The first is that accepted by Schellenberg, which I have just stated. The second, I am suggesting, is that accepted by a certain range of traditional theists. It says:

(1') Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is (i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of a meaningful relationship with God is also (iii) in a position to participate in such a relationship (able to do so just by trying).

While many traditional theists will be wary of (1), they will not be similarly wary of (1'). In fact, they will embrace not only it, but also two further claims.

In the first place, they will affirm that:

Necessarily, if God exists, anyone who is not resisting God and capable of a meaningful relationship with God is in a position not only to participate in such a relationship, but also to apprehend God's presence and activity.

The idea behind this last claim is that a non-resister needn't remain at a distance from God in this sense: she can apprehend the presence and activity of God inasmuch as she apprehends and positively interacts with the goodness and beauty she finds in the natural world, her activities, and her relations with other human beings. For these qualities, the Christian will maintain, bear particularly intimate relationships with God, such as being manifestations of divine activity or ways in which some aspect of the divine nature discloses itself. The eastern Christian tradition, for example, speaks of these manifestations and disclosures as the *divine energies*. Fundamental to the spiritual life, according to this tradition, is the aim of learning to see the natural world, our activities, and our relationships with others as manifestations of these energies. To be sure, the non-believing non-resister will not think of the goodness and beauty she apprehends as manifestations of divine activity or energies. Still, the important point to see is that traditional Christian theists will grant that, at all times, a non-resister is in a position both to enter into a meaningful relationship with God and to apprehend God's presence and activity.

But, traditional Christian theists will continue, we will not always see through a glass darkly. For it is also true, they will claim, that:

There will be some time in which every non-believing non-resister will be in a position to have a meaningful conscious relationship with God.

Perhaps that time will be at the Great Day of Judgement, as Matthew 25 suggests.

I have distinguished two ways of understanding the first premise of the Hiddenness Argument – a strong and a weak version. From this point forward, I shall understand the weak version to incorporate the claim that every non-resister is in a position not only to have a meaningful relationship with God but also to apprehend God's presence and activity, albeit in some cases only in a veiled manner. Schellenberg needs the strong version of the first premise for his argument to go through. So, why does he think we should accept it?

We should accept it, says Schellenberg, because embracing the alternative is incoherent. What I shall call the *Case from Love* helps us to see why. Both theists and their rivals, Schellenberg claims, should accept:

- (i) If God expresses the most perfect love towards each human being at all times, then there is no time at which non-resisters are not in a position to apprehend God's presence as God's presence.

If, however, premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument were false, then it would be true that:

- (ii) There are times at which non-resisters are not in a position to apprehend God's presence as God's presence.

But theists are also committed to:

- (iii) God expresses the most perfect love towards each human being at all times.

If this last claim were true, however, then theists would be committed to the inconsistent position that God both does and does not express the most perfect love to each human being at all times.⁷

The Case from Love turns on the truth of (i). Yet (i), Schellenberg tells us, is extremely plausible. It is, he says, implied by the following conceptual truth: every case in which a person A loves a person B in an admirable way is such that 'A does whatever she can to ensure that B is always able just by trying to engage in a meaningful conscious relationship with A'. This, Schellenberg maintains, 'is just *part* of love for any admirably loving mother or husband or brother or friend'.⁸ Since God's love would have to be admirable, it follows that God would have to do whatever God could to ensure that humans are always able just by trying to engage in a meaningful conscious relationship with God wherein they apprehend God as God. For ease of reference, let's call this claim regarding what must be true of any admirable love relationship, whether human or divine, the *consciousness constraint*.

We have been exploring the question why we should accept premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument. The pattern of argument that we've uncovered so far is this. Premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument is implied by The Case from Love. The Case from Love, in turn, rests on premise (i). (i), however, is not a stand-alone assumption. It is, says Schellenberg, implied (when combined with some auxiliary

premises) by the consciousness constraint, which is itself a conceptual truth. If this is right, the argument before us has the following distinguishing characteristic: officially, it appeals to claims about what would have to be true of perfect love. But closer inspection reveals that these claims about perfect love are not doing any real work in the argument. For one could replace all instances of the phrase 'most perfect love' with 'admirable love' and the argument would go through. Properly understood, Schellenberg's charge is that if God were hidden, then God's love would not so much as be admirable, let alone perfect.

Is this right? Is it true that anything worth calling admirable love between persons is subject to the consciousness constraint? I believe not. Let me illustrate why by offering a modified version of the stranger-in-the-park story I introduced earlier.

Imagine that, on a wintry evening, you have taken in a person who, to the best of your knowledge, is a complete stranger. Imagine, however, that in reality this person is no stranger at all. She is your benefactor. Because she is your benefactor, she has been and is keenly interested in your long-term flourishing. Unbeknownst to you, it was she who had orchestrated your family's escape from Russia some years ago. Your benefactor, however, does not wish to retain perpetual anonymity. She also wishes to pursue a close friendship with you, partly because you are kin. While the benefactor could easily reveal her identity to you on this wintry evening, she conceals it instead, choosing to remain anonymous for present purposes.

This is for two reasons. First, she knows that there is time for a friendship between you to develop; there is, then, no special urgency attached to revealing her identity here and now. And, second, she knows that entering into a close friendship with you will, in some respects, be difficult. For the benefactor is dedicated to numerous and demanding benevolent purposes, including working in dangerous conditions to emancipate others from political oppression. Close friendship will require that you work together closely on these projects. In fact, if you do form a close friendship, the benefactor will have to depend on you in significant ways, giving you weighty responsibilities. This, she knows, will not be easy for you, as you are rather attached to your own projects, as trivial as they may be. Given the situation, the benefactor knows that the better tactic at this point is to be patient. Being patient does not, however, imply remaining idle. In the meanwhile, the benefactor intends to forge bonds of various sorts with you. She will give you numerous opportunities to dedicate yourself to causes that are important to her, although you will be ignorant of their provenance. If you react well and wisely to these opportunities, you are likely to develop the sorts of characteristics and commitments that will, in the long run, make a close and stable friendship possible.

Is the benefactor in this story exercising love of an admirable sort? I would think so. She has your best interests in mind. She is, moreover, pursuing, in a patient and resourceful way, a more intimate relationship with you. Finally, by remaining

anonymous she does not wrong you, demeaning you in any fashion. Yet her care for you fails the consciousness constraint. She is not doing whatever she can to ensure that you can have constant conscious awareness of her true identity just by trying. That, however, is not a reason for believing that the benefactor fails to love you in an admirable and resourceful way. It is, rather, an excellent reason to believe that the consciousness constraint is, far from being a conceptual truth, not even true. But if it is not, then the case Schellenberg offers for premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument is defective. The consciousness constraint does not specify a minimum threshold that anything worth calling admirable love must satisfy. It is possible for one's love of another to be admirable and resourceful and also to fail the consciousness constraint.

Another line of thought

I have presented the official line of argument that Schellenberg offers for the first premise of the Hiddenness Argument, arguing that it rests on a false claim. I suspect, however, that the official line of argument that Schellenberg presents may not be what lies deepest in Schellenberg's thought. In what remains, I would like to offer an alternative interpretation of the consciousness constraint that could be employed to justify the Hiddenness Argument's first premise. I do this with some hesitation, as Schellenberg nowhere explicitly endorses the line of argument that I am about to offer. Still, I think it is a line of argument worth presenting. This is not because I think this argument is better than Schellenberg's official argument. It isn't. Rather, it is because having this line of argument before us should allow us better to see why there is reason to believe that the consciousness constraint, even when modified, fails to apply to God.

It did not require a great feat of imagination to produce counterexamples to the consciousness constraint. Given more space, we could easily present others. Nonetheless, Schellenberg is clearly impressed by the constraint. He presents it as if it were an obvious conceptual truth. Why is that? A clue might lie in a passage that I quoted earlier in which Schellenberg claims that the constraint is true of 'any admirably loving mother or husband or brother or friend'.⁹ This phrase suggests that Schellenberg thinks of the consciousness constraint as being true not of all admirable love relationships but only of admirable love relationships of a certain range, such as that between a parent and a child under ordinary conditions. And that seems plausible. Under ordinary conditions, admirable intimate relationships of these types are subject to the consciousness constraint.

To appreciate this last point, consider another variant of the stranger-in-the-park story. According to this version of the story, you have an anonymous benefactor. While she could easily reveal her true identity to you, she conceals it instead. However, according to this version of the story, you bear the following special relation to your benefactor: you are her *child*. This version of the story, it

might be said, strains the imagination. Unless she had very powerful counter-vailing reasons to remain anonymous, how could she non-defectively love you and fail to reveal her true identity? It might be claimed, however, that it is this version of the story that more nearly approximates what God's relationship to human beings would have to be like, were God to exist. God's love, it might be said, would have to be akin to that which a parent has towards her child in which there is the constant intended availability of some form of conscious relationship, at least under ordinary conditions. If so, advocates of the Hiddenness Argument needn't defend an unqualified version of the consciousness constraint. They need only defend a qualified version of the constraint, arguing that it would have to apply to God.¹⁰

In various places, Schellenberg chastises theists for trimming their conception of God to fit the actual world rather than honestly stating what God would have to be like were God to exist.¹¹ There is, however, an equally dangerous tendency to which religious sceptics may fall prey. And that is to engage in overly simple analogical thinking when characterizing divine love, insisting that God's love would, on the whole, have to resemble that of a human parent (or some other form of familial love) under ordinary conditions. This, arguably, is precisely what the argument we are considering does. But it is a tendency that should be resisted. True enough, in its dogged and unconditional pursuit of our well-being, God's love may be like a parent's love for a child under favourable conditions. And certainly scripture presents God's love in this light (think of the story of the prodigal son in this regard). Still, in so far as genuine intimacy with God is contingent upon our aligning our will and purposes with God's, divine love may be rather unlike a parent's love for a child. In some respects, it may be more akin to the sort of care which a visionary philanthropist has for those to whom he has entrusted the day-to-day operations of his foundation, as scripture also suggests (cf. Matt. 18, 20). At any rate, the point is that we cannot assume that features that are typically true of ordinary parent-child relationships (or familial love in general) would also be true of divine-human relationships, as the argument we are considering does.

This last point, in fact, may understate just how radical the gulf is between divine and human love. Let me try to highlight this difference by reflecting on the consciousness constraint for a moment longer. The consciousness constraint, I have suggested, is probably best understood to apply to a certain range of intimate relationships under ordinary conditions. The reason it applies is this: absent the availability of conscious awareness, we typically cannot form or sustain the bonds of union and intimacy in which love between persons consists, as there typically are no other available means by which to form and sustain these bonds. Think, for example, of friendship under ordinary conditions. Imagine that two people have been fast friends for years but that their relationship has recently deteriorated. While the one friend does all she can to keep in contact, the other does not.

Perhaps this is because she is no longer invested in the friendship. Or perhaps this is because she is too busy with other matters and will be so for many years. Typically, when something like this happens, the friendship withers and dies; what remains are memories. Given our human condition, this is how things must be.

Contrast this with God's relationship to the world. Christian theists maintain that God bears a relationship to the world of such a kind that not only are the world's beauty and goodness manifestations of the divine life, but also certain actions we perform towards each other count as actions performed towards God. If this is so, then God's relationship to the world is utterly different from ours. The world is and could not be permeated in the same way by whatever goodness and beauty we might have. Earlier I pointed out that this has the implication that non-resisters could, in principle, be aware of God at all times. The point I wish to make now is that, if Christian theism were true, then there would be ways of being aware of God and God's activities that, in general, are and could not be ways of being aware of each other and each other's activities.

Take a case in which I am aware of beauty, such as when I listen to a fine performance of Mahler's Third Symphony. Upon doing so, I could be reminded of the goodness and beauty of your character. But I would not thereby be presented with your goodness and beauty; the beauty of the symphony is not (and ordinarily could not be) a way in which you disclose your goodness and beauty to me. You do not bear the right sort of relationship to the symphony's beauty for this to be so. Theists claim, by contrast, that the beauty of a performance of Mahler's Third is in fact a manifestation of God's goodness and beauty; it is a way in which God discloses God's goodness and beauty to us. It is a commitment to this understanding of God's presence in the world, I take it, that lies at the heart of the sacramental traditions of Christianity. For these traditions maintain that the created order is the primary locus of divine presence and activity, it being the primary means by which we are presented with the divine energies.

With these points in mind, suppose God were not to do everything possible for us to be in a conscious relationship with God at all times. Even if this were so, there would, nonetheless, be untold ways in which God could manifest Godself to us and for us to be aware of God. These manifestations, moreover, could be expressions of divine love, as they could be the means by which God forges and builds bonds of union and intimacy with us, even when we do not recognize them as such. Not only could they be the means by which God forges and builds bonds of union and intimacy, these manifestations could also be *constitutive* of such union and intimacy, even when we do not recognize them as such. Whether they are constitutive of such bonds will depend on how we respond to the goodness, beauty, and need we find in the world.¹² It follows that, even if God were not to do everything possible for us to be in a conscious relationship with God at all times, there could be ample, intimate, and lovely ways of being in relationship with God at those times. In this way, the divine-human relationship enjoys a

multidimensionality and resilience that, in general, is not present in relationships between human persons. It may even be that, as Matthew 25 suggests, what matters most to God is forging and building union and intimacy of this sort. It may be that the importance of our consciously recognizing the true nature of this union and intimacy is for God secondary. However that may be, the upshot is this: the main reason we have to think that the consciousness constraint is true of any case of admirable and intimate human love in ordinary conditions – viz., that typically we have no other available means by which to form and sustain the bonds of union and intimacy – simply is not a reason to think that the constraint is also true of any admirable and intimate case of divine love for human beings.

Let me summarize. The first premise of the Hiddenness Argument, I have claimed, admits of two readings. The strong reading has it that every non-resister would be in a position to be aware of God as God, while a weak reading implies only that every non-resister would be in a position to be aware of God, although not necessarily as God. Schellenberg maintains that we should accept the strong reading. We have seen that his case for this version of the premise turns on the truth of the consciousness constraint. We have also seen that there are excellent reasons to believe that this constraint is false. There are, however, weaker versions of this constraint that could be used to support a strong reading of premise (1) of the Hiddenness Argument. But a weakened version of the constraint could support such a premise only if God's love were, in the relevant respects, like a human parent's love for his children under normal conditions. This last claim, I have said, should also be rejected, as divine-human love may be subject to demands fundamentally different from ordinary cases of parental love (or familial love in general). Finally, we saw that there is reason to believe that there is an even deeper difference between human and divine love. While there are reasons to believe that the consciousness constraint applies to admirable and intimate love relations under ordinary conditions, these reasons are absent when it comes to divine love. For, unlike ordinary cases of human love, God has resources available both to express and communicate God's love and to draw us into and build intimate relationships even when God does not at all times do everything God could for us to recognize God as God. Were a modified understanding of the consciousness constraint true of divine love, then it would not be for the same reason that it is true of the love we have for each other. There would have to be some other reason.

Let me close by picking up a loose strand of argument. Earlier I pointed out that Schellenberg's official argument for the first premise of the Hiddenness Argument – the Case from Love – does not hinge essentially on the claim that God's love is perfect. Rather, it turns on the consciousness constraint, which identifies a minimum threshold that anything worth calling admirable love must satisfy. The charge that Schellenberg levels is that God's love fails to satisfy this minimum threshold. Suppose, however, an advocate of the Hiddenness Argument

were to concede that God's love meets the minimum threshold of admirability. This person could still insist that if theism were true, God's love would have to be not only admirable but perfect. And the phenomenon of divine hiddenness, this person might claim, is evidence that God's love is not perfect. For wouldn't it be better – a more fitting expression of love – this person might ask, if God ensured that all non-resisters are in a position vividly to apprehend God's presence as God's presence?

This is a fair question. Let me make one observation in response. Throughout his discussion, Schellenberg repeatedly claims that God could do better than God does (Schellenberg (2007), 200–203). Given God's power and resourcefulness, God could easily bring it about that there are no (or few) non-believing non-resisters. Furthermore, Schellenberg maintains, it is very difficult to see how a world in which there are no (or few) non-believing non-resisters could fail to be better than the actual world, in which there are lots of them. After all, the constant availability of conscious awareness of God would arguably be the greatest gift that God could grant us. Why, then, the stinginess?

We should, I think, be deeply wary of this style of argument. For there is no straightforward inference from the claim that:

actualizing a state of affairs would be better than actualizing its available alternatives,

to the further claim that:

a failure to actualize this state of affairs would count as a defect in the goodness or the love of a person who could actualize it.

If this is so, we cannot infer from the fact that it would be better that there are no non-resisting non-believers the further claim that God's love is somehow deficient, less than perfect. Whether such a failure would count as a defect hangs on the correct answer to deeply contested issues in normative ethics, ones which divide consequentialists from their rivals. It is to these matters, I believe, that further discussion concerning divine love must turn.¹³

References

SHELLENBERG, J. L. (2007) *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).

Notes

1. Recall, also, St Paul's account of his experience on the road to Damascus in which, after having violently persecuted the early Christian church, he reports having been blinded and hearing an audible question posed to him by the risen Christ: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9: 4).
2. Schellenberg (2007).
3. *Ibid.*, 204–206.
4. *Ibid.*, 201.

5. *Ibid.*
6. Does the gloss I have offered of premise (1) beg the question against the proponent of the Hiddenness Argument? It is difficult to see how. This gloss is, after all, consistent with our being able to come into a conscious relationship with God just by trying, which is what (1) says; it simply specifies what the trying might involve. Moreover, the Hiddenness Argument allows that there can be resisters whose actions can have all sorts of deleterious effects on the world. If so, it is difficult to see how the argument could rule out the possibility that among these effects is the creation of inhospitable conditions (for non-resisters and resisters alike) for apprehending God. In fact, I am tempted to say that if the proponent of the Hiddenness Argument were to claim that such a thing is impossible, he has stacked the deck against the theist. For, if I understand the argument correctly, its strategy is to claim that, given what we know about the nature of love and what theists say about God and God's relationship to human beings, God would not actualize a world that included non-resisting non-believers. But if this is so, the proponent of the argument must be prepared to concede, for argument's sake, certain things that theists say about God and God's relation to human beings. Among the things that theists say is this: no one is brought into proper relationship with God, others, and the natural world alone. Your actions may abet or impede my ability to relate rightly to God, you, and the natural world. This is the theme, prominent in the Christian east, of the *solidarity of salvation*.
7. *Ibid.*, 201–203.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*; cf. *ibid.*, 235.
10. In his response to an earlier version of this article, Schellenberg pressed something similar to this line of argument.
11. *Ibid.*, 197–198.
12. A consequence of this way of thinking is that it becomes increasingly difficult to specify what a non-resister is. To the extent that we fail to respond well and wisely to the goodness, beauty, and need we encounter, we are all resisters.
13. Thanks to Dan Howard-Snyder, Steve Layman, and John Schellenberg for their comments on an earlier version of this article.