

Response to Tucker on hiddenness

J. L. SCHELLENBERG

Abstract: Chris Tucker's paper on the hiddenness argument seeks to turn aside a way of defending the latter which he calls the value argument. But the value argument can withstand Tucker's criticisms. In any case, an alternative argument capable of doing the same job is suggested by his own emphasis on free will.

The many ways in which creatures might choose and the little we know about their likely choices are central themes in Chris Tucker's paper. His argument can be summarized as follows. For all we know, there is in some world including God a spiritually capable and non-resistant creature S who likely would at some time *t* fail to relate herself to God despite having the opportunity to do so, and God knows this before *t*. Now God is provided with little reason to act by value that will likely not be realized. Thus if God knows before *t* that the value of relationship with S will likely not be realized at *t*, and knows also that keeping S in the 'relating position' anyway would not improve anyone *else's* spiritual state, God is provided with little reason to keep S in the relating position at *t* by relationship-related value.

Furthermore, in such circumstances even relatively weak competing considerations would override what little reason God has to keep S in the relating position. Now, as Tucker notes, I have sought to deal with various purported competing considerations by means of an accommodationist strategy. Do we know that this countermove works? We do not, says Tucker, for the free choices of various individuals affected by any attempted accommodation need to be made in certain particular ways in order for it to work. And we do not know – or, at least, we do not know without appeal to arguments other than those concerned with the value of divine–creature relationship – that they would likely be made thus. Hence, he concludes, for all we know, the value of divine–creature relationship provides *no reason at all* to keep S in the relating position at *t*, and the argument that we are justified in supposing it necessarily provides *sufficient* reason to do so *always* and for *all* creatures like S is shown to be without force.¹

Tucker's aim in all of this is to assess the prospects of the latter argument, which he calls the value argument. As is evident, he construes this argument as an independent defence of the hiddenness argument's universal claim. I do not myself have a horse in this race, having emphasized in my work on the hiddenness argument not only the benevolence here at issue but also certain important features of divine love distinct from benevolence.² But let us begin by considering how the independent force of the value argument can be defended against Tucker's criticisms.³

I agree, of course, with the idea that if God knows that some relationship that would be valuable cannot be realized, God will not pursue the relationship for the sake of its value. But in trying to press this idea into philosophical service in connection with the hiddenness problem, Tucker overlooks some pretty important contextual facts. For example, even before we decide how much reason the value of possible divine-creature relationship gives God to perform the specific action of keeping someone in the relating position, we need to think about certain *other* actions it gives God reason to perform. Tucker himself allows that God needs to be in a situation where an especially good thing cannot be got 'no matter what He does' before the good thing provides no reason for its pursuit (274). Well then, what might God do to make it more likely that when S is kept in the relating position at *t*, S's response is the desired one which realizes the value of divine-creature relationship at *t*? Surely there is a lot that can be done. After all, we are talking about God here. (Tucker's God, I'm afraid, sometimes sounds like one finite, limited actor among others.)

Just for example, God might ahead of time make experientially accessible for S more of the achingly beautiful divine nature (this can always be done, no matter how susceptible to distraction the subject may be, because there must always be more beauty to be revealed in a divine reality). Thinking about such facilitating actions which God might do, it becomes less and less plausible that, for all we know, there are spiritually capable and also non-resistant creatures who likely would yet at some time be so indifferent to divine overtures as to fail to respond positively to God.⁴ Assuming, as Tucker does, that judgments of likelihood are possible here, we must surely say that the varying degrees and possible contents of religious experience are such that a free positive response on the part of such individuals is not at all unlikely, if God does everything God can do to assure this result. How can we suppose otherwise without either seriously and inappropriately downgrading our conception of divine greatness and beauty or neglecting the import of that phrase 'spiritually capable and non-resistant'?

On these grounds, I suggest, Tucker's criticisms of the value argument must be held to fail. Whatever plausibility they may seem to have comes from giving such points insufficient attention. But let us suppose, for the sake of further argument, that I am mistaken about this. What I want to do next is to show how even if the value argument is unsuccessful, by looking more closely at the very free will

Tucker uses against it we can find a perfectly effective new way of developing the idea of an ‘independent argument’. (Actually, the basic thought here is already suggested in my 1993 book on the hiddenness issue.)⁵ A point Tucker himself makes offers itself to us at this juncture: ‘[God] would create creatures that have libertarian free will concerning a significant range of choices including, at the very least, the choice between doing good or evil and the choice of whom (*God included*) to love’ (269–270, my emphasis). If indeed this latter choice of whether to love God is so valuable, why does Tucker so easily acquiesce in the idea of its ever being taken away from us?

My point is that if we emphasize free will, we should expect that God would want S to have the free choice whether to relate herself to God that, in the scenario Tucker wants to think of as epistemically possible, is cancelled because God sees S likely would not make that choice in the way God desires. And here the value of divine–creature relationship is not irrelevant. That S should have a choice about so great a value is to be expected if God wishes to do justice to the dignity of a spiritually capable creature like S – and this even when the choice can be seen to be one that S will likely make in an undesirable way.

But perhaps it will be replied that precisely because of the significance of the choice involved, God would have reason to prevent it from being made: better to become hidden until a positive reception is more likely and so avoid the perhaps irremediable harms engendered by a negative one.

This sort of reply overlooks how hiddenness itself may make a positive reception later on unlikely. Even if objectively S is going to be indifferent, if God doesn’t make this choice possible, S may well wonder *why* the choice is impossible, why God is hidden from her, if God exists, and why her belief is taken away, when she would (so she mistakenly thinks) respond positively to signs of the divine presence. Her non-belief may even evolve into disbelief, as on the basis of a ‘hiddenness argument’ she comes to think that God does not exist. That an absence of communication from the divine might well (likely?) amount to such *misleading* communication is presumably not something a loving God would find appealing – and this in part precisely because of its tendency to frustrate instead of facilitate the successful pursuit of relationship goals.

Moreover, here it is again ignored that S is to be regarded as spiritually *non-resistant*: the worst that can be expected from her (even if we go along with the assumption I am presently accepting for the sake of further argument, which I would otherwise deny – see above) is indeed indifference, a careless attitude. We are not talking about rejection or resistance of God. Even if we were, there would be no problem. For one thing (this is often overlooked or ignored), no creature who ‘rejects God’ can have a full and clear idea of just *what* she is rejecting, and neither can she have a sense of all places and times in her life sufficiently clear for her to competently apply any such rejection to her life *as a whole*.⁶ (This follows simply from our limited nature and God’s nature as the ultimate good.) Thus, a

loving God could never have reason to leave us to our own devices out of respect for a fully deliberate and aware *complete* rejection of God – which is to say that no ‘rejection’ we are capable of mustering can have the irrevocably negative significance here imagined. There must always be new overtures, fresh endeavours, further attempts to produce a clearer picture of the sort that will win a more desirable free response in changed circumstances. Furthermore, as defenders of theism are rightly quick to point out, God must be viewed as capable of turning evil into good and – if existent – is constantly doing so in the lives of creatures. Well then, let us simply apply this insight to the question whether God would have reason timidly to hold back in the scenario in question, afraid to trigger a less than positive free choice.

I conclude that even if, as Tucker stipulates, free will is to be thought of as on the cards and the free-will offence and other, related arguments are to be deemed ‘off limits’ in the present context, and even if the value argument is deemed to fail, we can simply turn our efforts to constructing a free-will defence of the hiddenness argument’s universal claim.

Finally, notice how this move can resist Tucker’s more general sort of criticism phrased in terms of what creatures other than S might freely choose to do, given certain divine actions in pursuit of relationship with S, and the probability judgments God might be able to make about this. Tucker will no doubt be inclined to say that, in becoming hidden, even where that means the prevention of a significant free choice, God may simply be doing what it takes to avoid a world that is probably going to be *worse overall* if God does anything else. To rule out this possibility, we would have to have much more information about how peoples’ choices turn out in various relevant hypothetical scenarios involving God’s action than we in fact possess.

But now, having developed our own free-will argument, we are perhaps allowed to wonder why, even were such a conflict to occur, it should be the deep choice with respect to relationship with God that would end up being cancelled instead of those other choices, causally related thereto, that in the proposed scenario are making all the trouble. Either way, it seems, world-worsening trouble could be avoided; either way, something in the way of freedom is given up; and either way, something in the way of freedom is respected and accommodated.

So what, in Tucker’s terms, is there to choose between these two options? Even if God were required to suspend freedom across a broad range of human activity to deal with recalcitrant choices set in motion by consistently facilitating relationship choices, there would be no problem: no world worse overall because of restrictions on freedom. As I argue in detail in my book *The Wisdom to Doubt* – and this is another important contextualizing point – freedom need not be allowed to continue forever in order to play a significant role in human life, and lives in which a continually unfolding and transforming conscious relationship with God is realized without *unending* freedom cannot, in the nature of the

case, be regarded as worse than ones in which it is realized with freedom ever present. These are just different ways of realizing an ultimate good.⁷ (Notice that the free-will offence need not be accepted and might even be denied while making this point.) World-worsening troubles due to free will are entirely swallowed up by this realization.

I conclude that the value argument is not overturned by Tucker's criticisms, and that even were it to be overturned, we could use Tucker's own emphasis on free will to set up a better alternative. In any case, the health of the hiddenness argument is not in any way placed in jeopardy but rather improved by Tucker's criticisms.⁸

Notes

1. I have here summarized, and will focus on, the version of Tucker's argument that – given worries about God's knowledge of counterfactuals of freedom – I believe to be the strongest. I say 'keep in the relating position' instead of using Tucker's expression 'put into the relating position' because the latter threatens to beg the question against the hiddenness argument, which pictures the opportunity for relationship as always there, from the dawn of the relevant capacities, not as an intrusion in the midst of life. (If Tucker were to think of his duration t to t_1 in PV1 and MV1 as the very *first* stage of relationship capacity, this problem might not arise, but he gives us no reason to suspect that he is construing it thus.)
2. Notice that the latter are kept to one side until his penultimate section, and even there they are taken up only because they might be thought to undermine Tucker's response to the value argument.
3. Many things in his paper invite comment (sometimes criticism), but I have focused here on the more central matters.
4. I made very much the same point in response to Daniel Howard-Snyder's similar (though more wide-ranging) criticisms back in 1996. (See my 'Response to Howard-Snyder', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26 (1996), 460.) Tucker is aware of this piece – see his n.11 – but he misses some of its relevant points.
5. See my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 151–152.
6. On this, see my *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 223–225.
7. *Ibid.*, ch. 9, section 4.
8. Thank you to Chris Tucker for his comments on a draft of this response.