*Religious Studies* **41**, 287–303 © 2005 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0034412505007791 Printed in the United Kingdom

# The hiddenness argument revisited (II)

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**Abstract:** **In this second of two essays responding to critical discussion of my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, I show how an 'accommodationist' strategy can be used to defuse objections that were not exposed as irrelevant by the first essay. This strategy involves showing that the dominant concern of reasons for divine withdrawal can be met or accommodated within the framework of divine–human relationship envisaged by the hiddenness argument. I conclude that critical discussion leaves the argument very much alive and kicking, and indeed strengthened as it moves into its second decade of life.**

In a previous essay on hiddenness themes published in this journal, I argued that many of the objections that have been raised against the claim that a perfectly loving God would prevent reasonable non-belief fail due to irrelevance.[1] When the essential content of the hiddenness argument is laid bare, we can see how many such objections simply miss the mark by failing properly to appreciate one or another of the elements involved in the depiction–in particular those concerned with the nature and implications of divine–human relationship. Having thus dealt with criticisms that are wrong because irrelevant, we come in this essay to those that are wrong despite being relevant.

It might seem that these criticisms would possibly be of many different kinds, for that is quite compatible with their all possessing the general property of relevance. On one way of looking at the matter, this is indeed the case, but on another, the one that will concern us, it is not. For all of these criticisms, as it turns out, succumb to the very same general strategy of response – though this must be tailored to their individual peculiarities. I call it the 'accommodationist' strategy, since in employing it we show how goods emphasized by the critic can be accommodated within divine–human relationship, and so would not be viewed by a loving God as providing reasons for leaving us without it. This strategy unifies the discussion of the present essay, and it is to a depiction of its fundamental lineaments that I now turn.

## The accommodationist strategy described and illustrated

Any critic who has begun seriously to reflect on divine love (and such reflection is what the previous essay was meant to inspire and inform) will immediately allow that hiddenness would at any rate not be a 'take it or leave it' matter for a perfectly loving God: that such a God would, as it were, have to be *convinced* that there was reason to deprive us of the evidence for belief which an opportunity to enter into personal relationship with God requires. But if so, the critic must also concede that any reason God finds appealing as a reason for remaining withdrawn from human beings must be one whose dominant concern cannot be met *within* the framework of divine–human interaction sketched in our first essay. For otherwise God would not be convinced by it in the relevant way – after all, then God would be able to achieve both of the relevant desiderata, but only by *not* withdrawing. I think these points have at least as much force as anything else that might be said on this subject; any sensitive critic has more than sufficient reason to accept them going into this discussion.[2]

But if we pay careful attention to these points, we will start to see how very difficult it must be to find a way of defeating the justification we have for the claim at the heart of the hiddenness argument by suggesting a reason for hiddenness. For now any such defeater must show that God might possibly be unable to procure the desideratum in question (supposing it to be one) or something functionally equivalent or something that would be deemed an adequate substitute while acting on that natural disposition of divine love to express itself, and so it comes up against the unsurpassable immensity of the divine resourcefulness.

To see how this 'accommodationist' strategy works, consider part of Richard Swinburne's response to my argument, in his recent *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.[3] Having outlined what he takes to be the great goods of individual and co-operative investigation of the question whether God exists (being able to find out for ourselves the 'ultimate truth about the Universe'[4]) and of helping others who are ignorant to discover the answer to this question, he writes as follows:

> [Not everyone will] have that opportunity [to learn of God's existence] until after death, but I see no adequate grounds for supposing that God would ensure that they have it at every moment of time, in view of the benefits that flow from their not having it for some time.[5]

This sort of reasoning can seem quite persuasive. Others, including William Wainwright[6] and Laura Garcia,[7] have also found it appealing. But I submit that to be persuaded by it we must ignore the divine bias toward relationship (i.e. toward making relationship possible). We must suppose that God would have an indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward relationship with human beings – that observing certain good things which might flow from remaining withdrawn, God

would *readily* be moved to withdraw. And this is a false picture, as we have seen. Rather than acquiescing in such suppositions, we must ask ourselves whether there is some way in which the goods Swinburne mentions can be satisfactorily achieved or made up for by God in a scenario involving the banishment of reasonable non-belief. And the answer is clearly 'Yes'.

For consider the goods Swinburne mentions more closely. What, at bottom, is at stake here? Presumably it is dedication to a supremely worthwhile intellectual cause, perhaps in co-operation with others; being responsible for and caring deeply about the intellectual and spiritual wellbeing of others; and being helped by others in such an important matter, knowing that they have risked life and limb to provide such help for you. These are good things. But they can be realized in a variety of ways. What we are really looking at here are good *types*, of which the specific goods associated with the acquisition of theistic belief are but tokens. But then if there are other tokens of these types, would not a God desiring to make explicit relationship possible be moved in their direction? More to the point, is not a plethora of such goods already going to be present in any world at all like ours, created by God? In an evolving world in which humans have free will, and in which the directions of the world's development are to some extent determined by how they use it, there must *always* be occasion for dedication and great discoveries to be made, great investigations and co-operative endeavours to be undertaken, great responsibility for how things work out, great opportunities to be of use and to be experienced as such. What need then for the doubtfulness of theism?

But, it will be said, much more *hangs* on whether *God* is discovered, and so the responsibility made possible by doubtfulness is much deeper; also the achievement represented by transcending doubtfulness about this matter through a discovery of evidence for belief is much greater and more valuable than other intellectual achievements.

There are a number of serious problems here for the theist, however. First, even if the value of responsibility may sometimes be affected by its depth, it does not follow that it is *directly proportional* to its depth, or that the degree of divine motivation to permit responsibility will be directly proportional to its depth. What is more, at least the latter principle seems false. Whether God is moved to permit a certain form of responsibility will depend on far more than its depth, and indeed, some of the factors working against God being thus moved will be the greater and the more influential the greater the depth of the responsibility. Why? Well, for one thing, because the deeper the responsibility, the more scope for harm if the responsibility is not fulfilled; and that it will not be fulfilled must always be significantly possible in an evolving world of limited human beings – indeed the chances of this occurring will tend to increase with the depth of the responsibility, because often the deeper the responsibility the harder it is to remain dedicated to carrying it out. Thus no straightforward

path exists from the idea that much more hangs on whether humans discover God than on other things to the conclusion that responsibility of the sort in question would be more attractive to God than other sorts.

Second, and moving deeper into the question of the depth of responsibility, it would seem that whether and how depth contributes to value here depends on whether and how it contributes to even more fundamental determinants of the value of responsibility. For what really makes responsibility given to me by God valuable? Is it not the dignity I thereby acquire, the trust of my creator, the share I have in the tasks of creation? A certain degree of depth is needed for these things – if *nothing* hangs on what I do then I am not given much dignity etc. by being made capable of doing it. But it seems that beyond a certain point a further increase in depth will not much or at all affect the value-enhancing properties of dignity, trust, and divine sharing. At a certain point I *have* these gifts, and a deeper responsibility will not make them better. (Indeed, as suggested above, it might make my overall condition worse.)

Now Swinburne might want to add depth – the degree of important difference I can make to the world – as an *independent factor* in the above list (the list referring to dignity, etc.). But here we have to be careful, for such power to make a difference may seem appealing to us more because of ego-related influences we ought to bring under control than because of any intrinsic value in it – and this even when we are talking about power to make things better. In any case, no matter how much power to do good we are given, we will always be profoundly limited in this respect by comparison with God or other possible beings more exalted than ourselves; so what reason is there to expect that a God seeking to make divine–human relationship possible would draw the line *here* rather than *there* – at the capacity to withhold evidence for theistic belief from others or to bring it to them, instead of at some other significant capacity not including this one – as long as the power that is given to us *is* significant, and significant enough to underwrite dignity, trust, etc.?

A third problem here is this: how *can* so much hang on the discovery of God if, as Swinburne and any fair-minded theist supposes, an opportunity to come to know of God will be made available in the next life to those who miss out on it in this one? Even if humans fail to discover God in this life, or to share their discovery with others, no-one's deepest wellbeing in the future is ever imperilled. Might it be, then, that it is knowing God (or being able to know God) in *this* life that is so important? But as the hiddenness discussion reveals, many a theist still needs to be convinced of this, and is indeed inclined to deny it by saying that not much is lost if God is hidden and we are bereft of theistic belief for the period of a human life on earth! It seems that a dilemma is looming: either one says that not much is lost if we are bereft of theistic belief in this life, in which case it is hard to see how the responsibility in question can be so deep as to warrant singling it out from others, *or* one admits that much is indeed lost, in which

case – especially given our first and second sets of points above – there will be little inclination to accept that a perfectly loving God could be moved to think of the responsibility in question as being worth what it costs.

So the 'depth of responsibility' point does not seem to have any weight that counteracts the combined force of previous points about the divine bias toward relationship, and about the ever-present possibility of many other deeply significant forms of responsibility. What about the alleged distinctively great value of the discovery, through investigation, that theism is true? Here again, because of the emphasis on achievement, we must beware of being unduly influenced by ego-related concerns. And if instead of achievement we focus on all the goods to which we can only have access if we believe that God exists, valuing the discovery in question because of the opportunities to which it gives rise, then we are back to a reason for God not to make *this* question one that we have to investigate in order to answer!

In any case, it is not at all clear why we should suppose that this question is intellectually the *most* significant, and so represents a possibility of intellectual attainment greater than all others. Swinburne says that, given theism, the ultimate truth about the universe is that God exists, and that it is a great privilege to be able to discover this ultimate truth for ourselves. The suggestion is that the privilege of being able to discover – to come to know – this ultimate truth is the greatest privilege of intellectual discovery we can have. If God does not give us this, we can only have what is second-best. But surely there is an important sense in which the ultimate (in the sense of greatest) intellectual discovery possible is not the discovery of the ultimate truth, where this is a lone proposition like 'God exists'. The ultimate discovery, given theism, would be discovery of just exactly what belongs to a huge – perhaps infinitely large – conjunction, of which the proposition 'God exists' is but one conjunct. This conjunction of propositions, including propositions about the nature of God, and God's creative and revelatory activity, and the nature of the universe and ourselves, and about the relations among all these things will perhaps never be known by any of us, even if God exists; but we might nonetheless come to know ever larger significant subsets of the set of conjuncts that make it up – and let us think of a significant subset here as one that generates a unified picture of its subject matter, with all the connections among parts filled in. Surely it is coming to know *such* things, which really amounts to achieving ever deeper levels of *understanding*, as opposed to just individual, unconnected bits of knowledge, that should be our central intellectual goal – a goal which a God concerned for our intellectual wellbeing would certainly wish to help us forward.

And now notice that this is a goal that is quite compatible with, and indeed most generously supported by, having knowledge of the existence of God from the beginning. If we have this knowledge, then the understanding we achieve at any stage along the way will be far richer than it could be otherwise, for the

fact of the existence of God, if it is the ultimate fact, is woven into all the others. Now the state one is in when one is able to move into any one of those deeper and richer levels of understanding seems at least as valuable, intellectually, as is one's state when, so far bereft of that opportunity, one discovers a single truth that is involved in them, even if it is the central or – in that sense – the ultimate truth. Hence, there would appear to be a rather large number of intellectual attainments (and indeed no end to their number) at least as great as that of discovering that God exists which it must be open to us to pursue even if we have achieved knowledge of that proposition. Indeed, these particular attainments are possible *only* if we have discovered that God exists. Accordingly, there is no reason here to think that a God who, because of a bias toward relationship, is looking for something as good, intellectually, to offer us as the opportunity of discovering God's existence, might possibly be disappointed in the quest.

## The accommodationist strategy extended

I have spent some time showing how the acccommodationist strategy defended in this essay can be applied in the case of Swinburne's responsibility argument. But this application is, as it were, a prototype of what we can do in many other cases, for other criticisms succumb to that strategy in much the same way.

Consider, for example, the suggestion that, unless God gives us much weaker desires for the good and much stronger desires for the bad, ruling out reasonable non-belief would have the consequence of introducing such strong incentives to choose the good (deriving from desires to avoid punishment and/or to please God and/or to ensure our future wellbeing) that we would no longer be free to choose the bad instead, and so would be unable to participate in the sort of 'soul-making' that theist and non-theist alike will say God has abundant reason to facilitate. This argument is discussed in connection with Swinburne's work in chapter 5 of my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (*DH*). Since that book was published, Swinburne has refurbished the argument and responded to some of my criticisms of it.[8] He has also been joined by Michael J. Murray, who agrees with Swinburne that there is a successful defeater for the hiddenness argument in this line of reasoning.[9] And Robert Mckim has come out in Swinburne's defence as well.[10]

Now the first thing to be said here, before pointing out how the accommodationist strategy can be brought to bear, is that just by considering the main things said about this appeal to moral freedom in *DH* we can see that there are serious problems in the way of any attempt to apply it, not only to a situation in which God appears *evidently and forcefully present on a continual basis* – where it is moderately persuasive – but also to a situation in which God only provides

evidence causally sufficient for belief in the absence of resistance. McKim recognizes this, suggesting that Swinburne's argument succeeds in the former case but not in the latter.[11] This appears to be on account of his awareness of 'the ease with which we can creatively redescribe what we are doing', representing to ourselves as permissible actions that are in fact wrong and that we should recognize are wrong.[12]

Swinburne does not explicitly address these possibilities of self-deception, emphasized in *DH*, when he responds to the latter work, though they may be on his mind when he concedes that (as I point out in *DH*) individuals like Paul the apostle seemed to struggle with wrong choices even while believing firmly that there is a God. Here, his claim is that Paul (and presumably other believers) can do 'venial' but not 'mortal' sin, and that it is good for some of us to have the choice to do not only the former but the latter as well.[13] However, this results in a serious weakening of his case, for if the sort of moral struggle we can still relevantly refer to in connection with Paul and other believers is *not removed* by the provision of evidence sufficient for belief, then it will surely be much harder to make persuasive the claim that the need to preserve our ability to be immoral provides any reason at all for God to even consider withdrawing from us. This claim is much more persuasive when we are under the impression that none of us would have any real opportunity to engage in immoral activity at all unless God withdraws. But it is obvious that there is *considerable* scope for immoral activity among believers, even given the actual strength of human desires for the good and for the bad – look at all the moral messes that they (like non-believers) are continually getting into, as ordinary experience of life and sources of information constantly available to all of us in the modern world continually confirm.

Michael Murray, in his own contribution to the discussion, fights a losing battle against this realization, in the end responding to my suggestion, in *DH* and elsewhere, that religious experience can sensitively be provided in a way that removes reasonable non-belief while also leaving open plenty of bad choices by changing the subject. Instead of arguing that there would *not* be enough scope for bad choices under such circumstances, he claims that it is not obvious that such circumstances do not obtain – pointing to the possibility that those who deny they have religious experiences may all be self-deceived![14] But this is to give up the game (such a move concedes defeat on one premise of the hiddenness argument and challenges another instead – the one claiming that there is reasonable non-belief). Moreover, Murray's suggestion here is in tension with his earlier reluctance to take very seriously the idea that self-deception might operate in a freedom-preserving way even in the lives of those provided with evidence sufficient for belief.[15]

So I repeat: it is not at all clear that we need more than the main points made about this matter in *DH* to deal with the moral-freedom argument. Some

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of these already apply something like the accommodationist strategy of this section (take, for example, the suggestion that God can tailor the force of religious experience to our moral needs), but here I want to develop that strategy more explicitly, and in another direction. What I want to show is that, even if everything I have said about their argument so far is inadequate, and Swinburne and Murray are right when they claim that – at least without the aforementioned adjustment in the strength of human desires for good and for bad states of affairs, itself objectionable – evidence sufficient to remove reasonable non-belief would remove the ability to make sufficiently serious bad choices, their argument is still in trouble, because of what is revealed by sufficiently serious attention to the moral freedom it does not remove (and certain new forms of its exercise that are facilitated by such evidence).

To see the main point here, notice that while it may seem that, in order to engage in the sort of difficult-soul-making-resulting-in-good-character-for-which-one-is-responsible so emphasized in contemporary philosophy of religion, one must choose what is good for the sake of the good in the face of serious temptation to choose the bad, a more accurate indication of what is needed would be given by something more general: choosing the good for its own sake in the face of an inclination or propensity *not* to choose the good for its own sake. Now one way of not choosing the good for its own sake involves not choosing it at all, and instead giving in to temptation to do the bad. The opportunity to do this, we are supposing with Swinburne and Murray, would, in the absence of objectionable changes to the strength of human desires for good and for evil, be lost if God were not hidden. But another way of not choosing the good for its own sake involves *choosing it for some other reason*, under the influence of a contrary motive. And the opportunity to do this would *not* be lost if Swinburne and Murray are right. For if they are right, then evidence sufficient for belief would remove our ability to do serious wrong *by giving us strong prudential desires*. Individuals, they say, would inevitably do what is right because they would see that it was obviously in their interest to do so. But in that case individuals would face a new challenge, and new choices: they would have the opportunity to grow *beyond* the purely self-interested motives, and to cultivate a love of the good for its own sake.

This might be difficult to do, in light of (what we are supposing would be) obvious prudential reasons to choose the good. Perhaps the influence of such motives would never disappear, at least to the extent that they would continue to emerge if wrong actions were suggested or thought about. But this would not make impossible the *addition* of non-self-interested motives to an individual's character, and growth toward a situation in which more and more often she does the good for its own sake, and (if there are truths about such matters) would do so even if the special considerations encouraging prudence were absent. If such growth were to occur, the individual would in a very

deep way be responsible for her character, and all without ever being in a position to make seriously wrong choices! While she cannot fail to choose what is good, she can fail to choose the good for a morally admirable reason, and she can make the higher-level choices required to ensure that this situation is avoided (that is, required to ensure that the lower-level choices are of the appropriate sort, motive-wise).

We might even say that what we see here is the possibility of an individual choosing the good in a deeper sense than is realized simply by choosing *what* is good. The phrase 'choosing the good' or 'coming out on the side of the good', to continue this thought, might be said to be ambiguous: in a first sense that – if Swinburne and Murray are right – requires hiddenness to be realized, it means 'choosing what is good instead of what is bad', but in another, deeper, sense it means 'choosing what is good for its own sake instead of for (purely) self-interested reasons'; and this does not require hiddenness to be realized, but rather refers to a sort of freedom that flourishes in its absence.

Perhaps someone will reply to this by saying that while what we have here is a genuine and serious form of moral freedom, what the scenario I have described still lacks is a serious possibility of *self-determination*. For in it individuals one and all, through an inability to do seriously wrong actions, are unable to determine what their ultimate future will be. By preventing them from being able to do seriously bad things and move in the direction of total corruption, God has taken that choice out of their hands. But several adequate replies are available here.

First, why should we suppose that a perfectly loving God would wish to give us this extra power of self-determination if it is incompatible with having an opportunity to interact with God in this life, and if an alternative and very serious form of moral freedom, sufficient for soul-making, is *compatible* with such an opportunity? The divine bias toward relationship spoken of earlier would surely prevent God from doing so. Second, the critic exaggerates the extent to which what we have here is a power of self-determination in the first place. Even in the proposed scenario, what humans are and are able to become is very much *God's* choice, not their own, since God determines their nature and all the parameters of the choices they make, thus drastically limiting the number of possible 'ultimate futures'. Human choices in favour of evil therefore would not, all things considered, give anyone a dramatically altered status in respect of autonomy. Moreover, our wish to possess that status may, once again, derive more from egoistic concerns than from a perception of value that would have any influence on a perfectly loving God.

Third and last, we can make the very different point that insofar as a 'determination of ultimate fate' can be available to us, it is available to us in the scenario I have described as well as in the critic's. Perhaps in the former scenario

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412505007791 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one could never make choices leading to hell (whether literally or figuratively construed), but one could still fail to 'go to heaven', that is to achieve good character and all the deeper goods that require a love of the good for its own sake; and *someone with the right values* would surely see this as at least as significant a loss as the loss of wellbeing involved in 'going to hell'. So the contrast between a will that is firmly set on the good through one's own efforts and a will that is heteronomously determined also allows us to speak sensibly of 'self-determination'.

I conclude that there is nothing in the Swinburne/Murray moral freedom argument that should prevent us from holding that a perfectly loving God would put the existence of God beyond reasonable non-belief, and this *even if* my original replies to that argument are unsuccessful and (as I do not in fact believe) its proponents are right in their claim that removing hiddenness would remove our freedom to do seriously bad things. Indeed, viewed from the right angle, the moral-freedom argument only allows us to deepen our understanding of the moral benefits and opportunities that are to be associated with the removal of divine hiddenness.

I come now to certain additional points made against the hiddenness argument by Robert McKim in his *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*, which are likewise defeated by the strategy being applied here. McKim writes:

> Even if a personal relationship with God would immeasurably enhance our well-being, perhaps it would be best that we achieve it in the future, such as when we are in a more advanced state of development. It is an intuitively plausible idea that ... the greatest goods [will be] available to us when we are most developed.[16]

Later, McKim adds what he apparently considers an independent reason for relationship with God to be put off until (what is for the human race right now) the future:

> The fact, if it were a fact, that we are not ready for such a relationship even if we are fully capable of it would provide excellent reason for a loving God not to do what is necessary to achieve such a relationship with us now, *whatever* its importance.[17]

Here we have the suggestion mentioned in my first essay (or so I am charitably construing it) 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.

Now it is not easy to see in just what this lack of readiness consists. And McKim does not say, at least not in this context. Elsewhere, though, it becomes apparent that he may have in mind such things as (1) fragile moral autonomy;[18] (2) general deficiency or at least room for improvement in respect of attitudes (humility, attentiveness, openness to God, etc.), the cultivation of which God might appropriately make essential to the discovery of evidence sufficient for belief, so that our discernment of this special truth is our own achievement, the result of

our making ourselves into a certain sort of person;[19] and (3) the appropriateness, at this stage of our development, for us to focus on right relationship with *each other*.[20] And these points are developed in the context of the suggestion that 'to have a personal relationship with God, we would need to be aware in a constant and forceful way of God's relating personally to us; we would need to have a constant and palpable sense of God's presence'.[21] It is apparently of points such as (1) to (3), in conjunction with this suggestion, that he writes the following: 'For such reasons a personal relationship with God may not be such a great good for us *as we are presently constituted*' (my emphasis).[22] McKim's central point seems to be that relationship with God for creatures such as we are would be, as he puts it, 'very invasive'[23] – it would get in the way of forms of development that are *appropriate* to our present state as humans, which God would allow to unfold before becoming revealed to us and relating to us personally and intimately.

Some of the points for which McKim wants to win our regard are indeed important ones, but viewing them as such does not necessitate rejecting the hiddenness argument, as I will now show. Notice first that McKim's 'plausible idea' that the greatness of goods available to us might correspond to the extent of our development can be accepted within the framework established by an emphasis on divine–human relationship, so long as we remember that *growth* and *enrichment* and *deepening* of relationship with God are to be expected as creatures become intellectually and spiritually more mature. For then there is indeed a sense in which the good achieved by creatures in a relationship with God is going to be still greater in the future, when they are more developed, no matter *what* it is right now.

As for the readiness argument: here it seems that McKim suddenly forgets the sensitivity so evident in other parts of his book – in particular, his suggestion about the connection between personal relationship with God and a 'constant' and 'palpable' sense of God's presence overlooks the manner in which a relationship with God might be much less overwhelming and much more subtle than this without ceasing to be a relationship. Suddenly it is all or nothing: constant deep intimacy or no relationship at all. Perhaps McKim is conflating the idea of constant *belief*, which, as we have seen, *is* necessary for ongoing relationship with God, with a constant and forceful *sense of the presence of God*. The latter is *not* necessary, and, indeed, it is precisely the felt *absence* of God that could from time to time give an added depth and poignancy to the believer's experience of relationship with God (more on this below).

Whatever the case, it seems evident that something more subtle is required to articulate the relevant relationship possibilities. If, for example, we have persons consciously orienting themselves toward God upon coming to believe that God exists, and if they attribute the experienced effects of this to God's presence in

their lives, however inchoately or intermittently felt, and if, moreover, God really *is* present to them, and they are responding to this, with the nature of their response varying with the nature of the felt presence and vice versa, then we have a clear case of 'explicit and positively meaningful relationship' between humans and God, without any of the more intense qualities McKim says are essential for such relationship. Now this is not to say that the relationship might not *be* more intense from time to time, or even that such occasional intensity might not be a significant part of its meaningfulness, to which the believer could recur in times of spiritual dryness; only that the intensity need not be continual and overwhelming, as McKim suggests.

Now without that suggestion, McKim's other comments have no weight. Consider the reference to 'moral autonomy': as we saw earlier in connection with the Swinburne/Murray moral-freedom argument, this will not fly without the assumption of an overwhelming and continual sense of the presence of God, and even then it can be handled in other ways by applying our accommodationist strategy. Similarly, if McKim's suggestion as to the needs of relationship with God are false, then the idea that relationship with God would somehow cause us to ignore relationships with others, which we have not yet learned to navigate entirely smoothly, loses all plausibility. There is no reason to suppose that the two sorts of relationship are incompatible. Just look at those who in the *actual* world believe and take themselves to be in a relationship with God, with experiences and psychological effects that are at any rate phenomenologically very similar to what the real thing would involve. Are they constantly swooning in the perceived presence of God, with no time for more mundane matters that need addressing? (Indeed, here McKim neglects the point that our handling of relationships with others is often *so* bad that a perfectly loving God might, even if only for that reason, wish to make available to us the resources of divine–human relationship.)

Finally, the point made by (2), concerning an alleged special responsibility and achievement bound up with discovering the existence of God, and a need for the development of certain special attitudes, seems clearly to be covered by what was said earlier in applying our accommodationist strategy to Swinburne's responsibility argument, together with an obvious extrapolation therefrom. The extrapolation would be that there are many *other* truths – for example, moral ones – whose apprehension requires that we 'make ourselves to be a certain sort of person', and that a loving God seeking to make relationship possible could therefore easily have it both ways: making relationship possible while also accommodating the good of a correlation between the discovery of important truths and advancement in self-constitution.

I hope it will be obvious that a general pattern is emerging. Infinite resourcefulness, as even we finite beings can see, would provide many ways for a perfectly loving God to make divine–human relationship a genuine possibility

at all times without failing to meet the dominant concern of any of the reasons for God to remain withdrawn that have been advanced, or seem likely to be advanced. Moral freedom, serious responsibility (both intellectual and non-intellectual), the cultivation of character, a choice of destiny, co-operation with others, spiritually efficacious revelation of moral/spiritual deficiencies, nurturance of a deeper spiritual maturity, occasions for meaningful investigation and intellectual debate – all of these goods and many more can be provided *within* the context of a relationship-conducive set of conditions, with humans left free to decide how to respond to God (indeed, as we have seen, with a *larger* set of options than they would otherwise have). If God exists, then there must at any stage along the way be literally an infinite number of ways of developing in relationship with God that God could facilitate, despite obstacles to continuing relationship of the sort to which reasons for hiddenness often make reference. To say less than this would apparently be to contradict obvious points, emphasized by the theist, concerning the greatness of God. It follows, given that it is a necessary condition for the existence of a reason for God to remain withdrawn that it *not* be thus capable of being accommodated within a relationship-conducive set of conditions, that theistic replies to the hiddenness argument do not provide us with such a reason.

But there is one last reply that will seem to many – and certainly seems to McKim[24] – to be available and to have considerable force, even given the success of my accommodationist strategy when applied to the known goods we have discussed. This is, of course, a reply referring to the idea that there might well be *unknown* goods that do the job for the theist even if none of the known goods is up to it – that it is at any rate *epistemically possible* that this is so, that nothing we know or justifiably believe rules it out. I want now to deal with this by extending and deepening our accommodationist strategy a bit, and then arguing that the reply is in any case question-begging.

Notice, first of all, one particular form the exercise of God's resourcefulness might take. Though it is often overlooked, there is an important form of 'hiddenness' that is quite compatible with – and indeed requires – a situation in which God's existence is beyond reasonable non-belief. What I have in mind here is analogous to what has traditionally been called 'the dark night of the soul' – a state in which there is evidence for God's existence on which the believer may rely, but in which God is not felt as directly present to her experience, and may indeed feel absent. While not removing the conditions of relationship, such a 'withdrawal' would severely test the believer's faith, and would be capable of facilitating any number of goods that are commonly thought to justify the reasonableness of non-belief. But if this sort of hiddenness can produce the goods in question and is compatible with God being revealed to all who do not

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resist God, what possible reason could we have for insisting that God would leave some in *doubt and non-belief* to further those goods?

Here we see a reason to be non-believing rather about the suggestion that there might be goods, whether known or unknown, justifying the hiddenness that has been our primary concern. For now that amounts to the suggestion that there may be reasons, perhaps unknown to us, why the secondary sort of hiddenness, unlike the primary sort, is insufficient to produce certain important hiddenness-related goods, when we can all see that the two sorts of hiddenness are phenomenologically very similar, and so might be expected to produce similar effects. Indeed, the former sort might be even more effective in promoting such ends as involve the need for a sincere seeking after God, so often emphasized by theistic critics of the hiddenness argument, because of the sense of *loss* attendant upon it.

This point about a 'secondary' sort of hiddenness is prominent in my book,[25] discussed in connection with matters that many of the writers referred to above (in particular Garcia) address, but inexplicably ignored by them, despite my emphasis on it and its obvious tendency to remove the forcefulness of their points. Whatever the explanation for this may be, it seems evident that if we apply the point in question, in conjunction with an understanding of the divine bias toward relationship, it will be hard to imagine there being *any* goods that justify the coexistence of perfect love and reasonable non-belief.

Look at it this way. The choice we face here is basically between (1) a picture in which the self-revelation of God is basic – God's existence is beyond reasonable non-belief – and God withdraws if and when such withdrawal is needed to facilatate hiddenness-related goods but without ever removing the possibility of relationship with God; and (2) a picture in which *withdrawal* is basic – God's existence is *not* beyond reasonable non-belief – and God is selectively revealed to some individuals or to none at all (while allowing many to *think* that God is revealed to them). To which picture should we be drawn, especially in light of our points about a divine bias toward relationship and the divine resourcefulness? Obviously it is (1). Surely this is, in light of all we know about love and the greatness of any God there may be, a more intellectually attractive picture than one in which a personal God is presented to us as not naturally loving in the first place – too much of a 'distant father' to relate easily with children – or as suspicious and controlling or insufficiently equipped to satisfy *both* the impulse to make relationship possible and the desire to nurture human growth and flourishing.

Turning now to the way in which the 'unknown reasons' claim to which McKim resorts is question-begging: carefully phrased, this claim tells us that such unknown reasons are not ruled out by anything we know or justifiably believe, but this *assumes* that belief of the conditional premise that has been our focus in this essay is unjustified instead of showing it; for if belief of that

premise is justified, then there *is* something we are justified in believing that rules out unknown reasons of the sort in question – namely that premise! The central point to take note of here is that the truth of the conditional 'If God exists, then there is no reasonable non-belief' is a sufficient condition for the absence of any reason for God to permit reasonable non-belief, since if there were such a reason, God might freely choose to act on it, and so the unequivocal claim of the conditional would be false. Hence, if we are justified in believing the premise in question, and recognize this point, we are also justified in believing that there are no reasons, known or unknown, for God to permit reasonable non-belief. And this means that anyone who in this context refers *simply* to the epistemic possibility of unknown reasons for hiddenness in an attempt to show that justification for belief of that premise is lacking, as does McKim, must assume the very thing he is trying to prove, and so beg the question.

Now perhaps McKim can avoid this trap by giving an *argument* for his suggestion that there may be unknown reasons of a relevant sort that does not depend for its force on denying force to ours. But there is precious little that can be seen as developing this idea in his book.[26] And there is good reason to deny that anyone else can do better. For what could they refer to without begging the question? That there may be good states of affairs we cannot so much as conceive of? That it is likely that if there *is* a reason for reasonable non-belief, it involves just such states of affairs? At least the second of these is already a bold claim, and it is hard to see how it could be adequately supported. But even if we *knew both* of these claims to be true, nothing interesting could be done with them in this context. What we need are not just unknowable good states of affairs, but unknowable good states of affairs that provide a reason – or undefeated support for believing that there is a reason – for God to permit reasonable non-belief. But, as we have seen, no argument can make the claim that there are such unknowable good states of affairs in this context without begging the question. And what we need is not just the fact that *if* there were a reason for reasonable non-belief, it would involve unknowable good states of affairs, but undefeated support for the antecedent of this conditional; and none has been provided, or could be assumed to be available, despite being unknown to us, or likely or even (epistemically) possible without begging the question. Thus, even on an optimistic assessment, it seems clear that from what *can* be affirmed concerning unknown goods and reasonable non-belief, McKim's conclusion does not follow; and where that conclusion does follow, the argument is also question-begging, and thus ultimately irrelevant.[27]

In this recognition we come full circle – back to such irrelevant criticisms of the hiddenness argument as were discussed in our first essay. I suspect that the circle is tight: all significant criticisms of the idea that God would prevent reasonable non-belief will be found somewhere along its circumference, proving

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either to be ultimately irrelevant and answered by the argument itself, or else capable of being dealt with by our accommodationist strategy. That, at any rate, is my interim assessment. To think 'outside the circle' and prove that some other conclusion is in order, critics of the hiddenness argument will be required to seek criticisms much more subtle and sophisticated – and more attentive to the actual structure and content of that argument – than any we have seen to date.

## Notes

1. See my 'The hiddenness argument revisited (I)', in *Religious Studies*, **41** (2005), 201–215. The claim in question was developed in my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), hereafter *DH*. Much critical discussion of it appears in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), hereafter *NE*.
2. Notice very carefully that I am not saying that it is the basic claim of the hiddenness argument, that God would not leave us in the dark about the existence of God, which has this force – I will not simply be reiterating an intuition to that effect – but rather the weaker claim that *if* God can have *both* revelation and the so-called goods of hiddenness, we should not expect divine withdrawal.
3. Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
4. *Ibid*., 210.
5. *Ibid*., 257–258.
6. In Willaim Wainwright 'Jonathan Edwards and the hiddenness of God', in *NE*, 112.
7. In Laura Garcia 'St John of the Cross and the necessity of divine hiddenness', in *ibid*., 87, 94.
8. See Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, ch. 11.
9. See Michael J. Murray, 'Deus absconditus', in *NE*, 62–82.
10. See Robert McKim *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 34–48.
11. *Ibid*., 42.
12. *Ibid*., 38.
13. Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 209.
14. Murray 'Deus absconditus', 79.
15. *Ibid*., 74–76.
16. McKim *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*, 100.
17. *Ibid*., 101.
18. *Ibid*., 102.
19. *Ibid*., 102, 70.
20. *Ibid*., 102.
21. *Ibid*.
22. *Ibid*.
23. *Ibid*.
24. See *ibid*., esp. 87–91, 104.
25. See *DH*, 203–204.
26. The closest he comes to this is when he recognizes that if there may be unknown goods justifying hiddenness, there may also be unknown goods justifying the provision of evidence sufficient to put God's existence beyond reasonable non-belief. Here, he argues that the former are *more likely*, since the reason for hiddenness could not be revealed to us without God ceasing to be hidden, but only by conflating (1) the idea of goods we know to justify hiddenness because we can see how they do so; and (2) the idea of goods we know to justify hiddenness because we know, on the authority of God, that they are God's actual reasons. Only (2) will help McKim in his argument, but I am at a loss to see how it represents the only way unknown goods justifying hiddenness could be made known to us. Isn't it precisely when connections of the sort represented by (1) 'just occur' to someone that the great discoveries of philosophy and science take place? In any case, it would not follow from the fact, if it

were a fact, that unknown goods justifying hiddenness are more likely than the alternative sort of unknown goods that their obtaining has any significant degree of likelihood at all (both sorts of unknown goods might be unlikely); and it is the latter claim that is needed here.

27. For more details on the sort of move I am utilizing here, see my 'Stalemate and strategy: rethinking the evidential argument from evil', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **37** (2000), 415–417.

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