

The Need for a Comprehensive Revelation

A Christological Solution to J. L. Schellenberg's Hiddenness of God Argument

Espen Ottosen

Part-time teacher at Fjellhaug International University College, Norway
eottosen@nlm.no

This article discusses J. L. Schellenberg's premise that God could have provided sufficient evidence for his existence for every human being by revealing himself through a religious experience. According to Schellenberg, this would not be an overwhelming and coercive revelation, and this view is challenged. It further seems like Schellenberg takes for granted, when presenting the love of God, a modern, western, and Christian perspective. This is a problem because there may be a large gap between establishing that there is a loving God and determining how he will relate to limited humans. Thus it seems plausible that God would have to bring about a more comprehensive revelation than Schellenberg thinks is necessary.

Keywords: Hiddenness of God, religious epistemology, Schellenberg, arguments for theism, atheism, miracles.

Introduction

J. L. Schellenberg argues that the apparent hiddenness of God is – in itself – an atheistic argument. Although under discussion for a number of years already, his argument seems to be growing in importance in contemporary discussions in the philosophy of religion. Since Schellenberg first presented his argument in 1993, different philosophers of religion have made their responses. A special issue about the topic was presented by *Religious Studies* in 2013, and the argument is specifically discussed even in general textbooks about the philosophy of religion and in books about the problem of evil.¹ Recently, Schellenberg himself presented a new book on the topic called *The*

*Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God.*²

In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Schellenberg takes as his starting premise that “If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.”³ He then tries to show that reasonable nonbelief (also called ‘inculpable nonbelief’) does occur and concludes that he thereby has “an argument of considerable force from the reasonableness of nonbelief to the nonexistence of God” (83). In this article I will challenge a vital yet often overlooked part of his argument: his suggestion that an existing God could reveal himself personally to each individual through a religious experience that would be neither overwhelming nor limiting to

the freedom of humans (47–50).

Theistic thinkers in recent years have chosen many different approaches to the question of the hiddenness of God. Some reject that God is hidden and thereby that it is, in fact, reasonable to deny the existence of God. They consequently reject Schellenberg's premise that arguments for and against the existence of God are fairly balanced.⁴ Another kind of rejection, that may be combined with the first, is to underline that God seems hidden because human beings are hiding from God and don't want to recognize his existence.⁵ Yet another important rejection, which I will touch upon, is concerned with the freedom of humans. Some suggest that God would coerce people into believing in him if he revealed himself in a more obvious manner.⁶

I think these aforementioned objections carry some weight – when carefully presented and defended. Nevertheless, my approach in this article is somewhat different. I will mainly discuss the specific suggestion by Schellenberg that God could bring about a strong epistemic situation regarding his existence – and simultaneously avoid coercing people into belief. I will demonstrate that his account at this point does not cohere. Then I will argue that it is plausible that what God needs to reveal, if a person should have a genuine relationship with him, is much more extensive than Schellenberg acknowledges. This is an important issue that has been overlooked, at least to a large extent, in the discussion. It presents a substantial problem for the argument of Schellenberg if what he specifically suggests an existing God should (and could) do to avoid being hidden, is not sufficient for bringing about genuine belief in God. Further, this leads me to conclude that the Christian perspective on revelation seems

rational. It means that God became man and revealed himself in a comprehensive way through Jesus Christ, and that this kind of revelation was – and is – needed to lead people into genuine and saving relationship with God.

What Is Sufficient Evidence for Believing in the Existence of God?

To conclude that a loving God would avoid the occurrence of reasonable non-belief, which is in the core of Schellenberg's argument, it is necessary “to state with some precision why we might expect stronger evidence for theism to be available if God exists, and what sort of evidence God might be expected to provide” (2). Schellenberg's starting point is that God is love. “The notion of ‘reasonable nonbelief’ *emerges* from reflection on Divine love” (vii).⁷ The love of God implies that he seeks an “*explicit, reciprocal* relationship with us” (18). Because God wants a relationship with every person capable of this, it is not possible to explain why he – if he exists – seems so hidden. “A being who did not seek to relate himself to us explicitly in this life – who elected to remain elusive, distant, hidden, even in the absence of any culpable activity on our part – would not properly be viewed as perfectly loving” (29). Therefore, God would bring about an epistemic situation where there is no doubt, at least substantial doubt, regarding his existence.

This does not mean that Schellenberg argues that if the existence of God were more evident, every person would have a relationship with God. He maintains that God would preserve the freedom of humans, and they consequently should be granted the possibility to reject the love of God (27). But God should do whatever it

takes to give anyone the possibility to enter into a relationship with him. “If there is a perfectly loving God, anyone capable of explicit and positively meaningful relationship with God who is not resisting relationship with God is in a position to participate in such a relationship” (viii–ix).⁸

Schellenberg’s argument further relies on the premise that an existing God would have chosen, and could have chosen, to reveal himself more clearly. But what kind of evidence would lead to the conclusion that God exists – and makes any nonbelief unreasonable? I will now discuss how God could (and, according to Schellenberg, should) bring about such a situation.

The Limitations of Miracles

Some have argued that Schellenberg’s argument implies that “we should see certain things that we do not see: sign and wonders.”⁹ But this seems off the mark.¹⁰ Schellenberg finds it irrelevant when critics – he mentions especially Paul K. Moser and Peter Van Inwagen – talk “of difficulties associated with an alleged atheistic ‘demand’ for spectacular ‘signs and wonders’ ... But no such demand or expectation is to be associated with the argument stated above and its claim that God would prevent reasonable non-belief.”¹¹

The problem with expecting God to bring about more signs and wonders, according to Schellenberg, is that “miracles are by definition rare events, and so it is not easy to see how the sort of evidence they might provide could be generally and at all times available, as a strong epistemic situation requires” (48). But is it true that God could not provide a miracle that was “generally and at all times available”? What if God made his existence

obvious by writing in the stars or by putting “made by God” on every atom in the universe? – a suggestion put forward by van Inwagen.¹² Schellenberg does not comment on examples like this, but the philosopher Kai Nielsen explains that he would be a skeptic also in light of these kinds of miracles:

We are no better off with the stars in the heavens spelling out GOD EXISTS than with their spelling out PROCRASTINATION DRINKS MELANCHOLY. We know that something has shaken our world, but we know not what; we know – or think we know, how could we tell which it was in such a circumstance? – that we heard a voice coming out of the sky and we know – or again think that we know – that the stars rearranged themselves right before our eyes and on several occasions to spell out GOD EXISTS. But are we wiser by observing this about what “God” refers to or what a pure disembodied spirit transcendent to the universe is or could be? At most we might think that maybe those religious people have something – something we know not what – going for them. But we also might think it was some kind of big trick or some mass delusion. The point is that we wouldn’t know what to think.¹³

I think that Nielsen underlines an important perspective. Whatever we experience needs to be interpreted and put into some context. That also goes for what seems to be a miracle or a sign from what someone calls “God.” N. H. Hanson therefore writes: “There is no single natural happening, nor any constellation of such happenings, which establishes God’s existence.”¹⁴ Also Paul K. Moser argues that God cannot put his existence beyond reasonable unbelief through more signs and

wonders. “Miracles, like ordinary events, are interpretively flexible. They logically admit of various coherent (not to be confused with *correct*) interpretations, including naturalistic, non-miraculous interpretations. Miraculous events do not impose their interpretations on us.”¹⁵

These perspectives echo to some extent what Hume famously had to say about miracles:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.¹⁶

Todd M. Furman argues that Hume thinks it is unreasonable to believe in miracles “even if we think that we have seen one with our own two eyes, because the entirety of our experiences (save this one) tells us that the sort of event that we think we have seen does not actually happen.”¹⁷

The point in our context is not to evaluate how Hume and his supporters think about miracles, but to underline that experiencing a miracle does not necessarily imply that holding onto nonbelief is unreasonable. This also seems to be Schellenberg’s conclusion.

Schellenberg’s Suggestion: A Powerful Religious Experience

So how could an existing God remove reasonable nonbelief? Schellenberg argues that God could provide a religious experience for everyone and thinks that a common religious experience would bring about a strong epistemic situation.

Suppose, then, that the world is one in which all human beings who evince a capacity for personal rela-

tionship with God have an experience as of God presenting himself to them, which they take to be caused by God and which actually is caused by God presenting himself to their experience. (48–49)

It seems that Schellenberg thinks there is a substantial difference between experiencing a miracle and having this kind of religious experience – the first cannot remove reasonable nonbelief, but the second can. I do not share that perspective. I believe that the aforementioned objection from Kai Nielsen – that not even a voice from heaven would convince him of the existence of God – also targets the kind of religious experience that Schellenberg envisions.

To this objection, Schellenberg would perhaps respond by arguing that a specific type of religious experience is more powerful because it is not limited to some rare incidents, like miracles, but is more persistent. At one point, he elaborates on exactly what kind of experience an existing God could provide:

This experience, let us say, is non-sensory – an intense apparent awareness of a reality at once ultimate and loving which (1) produces the belief that God is lovingly present (and ipso facto, that God exists), (2) continues indefinitely in stronger or weaker forms and minimally as a “background awareness” in those who do not resist it, and (3) takes more particular forms in the lives of those who respond to the beliefs to which it gives rise in religiously appropriate ways (for example, the believer who pursues a personal relationship with God may describe his experience as that of the *forgiving*, *comforting*, or *guiding* presence of God). (49)

Would “an intense apparent awareness” of a loving God be sufficient to produce a

religious belief even in a skeptic like Kai Nielsen? I doubt it. Nielsen seems to demand more before he starts to believe in the existence of God than what Schellenberg offers. It seems possible to respond as Hume recommended when facing a possible miracle. Thus, I think the religious experience that Schellenberg describes would fail to convince philosophers who are inspired by a Humean or Kantian epistemology and are hence skeptical on a general basis of human possibilities for knowing if a God, beyond the universe, really exists.¹⁸ It could be objected, of course, that if God provided stronger evidence of his existence, more people would believe in him, even if not every skeptic would be convinced. But an important question persists: Would those who are still skeptical have reasonable nonbelief? It seems like Schellenberg would be forced either to admit that some would have reasonable nonbelief even if God provided more evidence or to reject the reasonableness of strong religious skepticism.

At any rate, it seems like Schellenberg presupposes a less skeptical epistemology than Kant or Hume. I find it interesting to note Schellenberg seems committed to understanding an existing God as less transcendent than many philosophers and theologians. In contrast to Schellenberg, I find it plausible that there are limits regarding how a transcendent, loving, and holy God could come to reveal himself more clearly – and still present himself as an eternal reality *beyond* time and space.

Perhaps more important in our context is to discuss the coherence of the religious experience that Schellenberg envisions. On the one hand, he explicitly denies that a loving God would “provide us with some incontrovertible proof or

overwhelm us with a display of Divine Glory.”¹⁹ On the other hand, he thinks the suggested religious experience implies that every person would “have an experience as of God presenting himself to them” (48). This experience would be an “intense apparent awareness” (49) and would provide “a genuine possibility at all times.”²⁰ It can also be characterized as “generally and at all times available” (48). A person who “do[es] not resist God will always be in possession of such belief” [e.g., that loving God exists].²¹ Schellenberg even says that he does not think any person would reject God, because if a religious experience implies “a direct encounter with an omnipotent love capable of softening even the most self-centered or embittered soul, then it seems that this class of individuals [who would be likely to respond negatively] must be empty.”²²

For a start, let me say that I do not think we can positively establish that God could provide *exactly this*: a presence that can be overridden or ignored and at the same time be intense and always available. Schellenberg thinks that the religious experience he describes is not “overwhelming – ones in which God is present to us *unmistakably* and *continuously* – in such a way as to take our (moral) breath away” (113). His reason seems to be that the religious experience in question is “a general background awareness” that “would not be inordinately intrusive – incapable of being ignored or overridden” (112). He further thinks that there “may well be forms of religious experience that, even in this life, would make self-deception impossible and render us morally unfree” (115), but explains that this is not the kind of experience he is describing.

I agree with Schellenberg that God will

refrain from coercing people into belief. But it is regrettable that he does not elaborate on what kind of religious experience would make self-deception impossible. However, he clearly states that a human being normally could override the kind of religious experience he thinks a loving God would provide and thus engage in self-deception. “A newly acquired belief can be *resisted*” (110) and a reason could be that one finds “the moral implications of a belief distasteful” (*ibid.*).

I find it puzzling that Schellenberg can affirm that a religious experience is both “general and at all times available” and at the same time not “unmistakable.” In his main book, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, he argues that God would provide an “intense awareness,” but later argues that 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 . . .”²³ Is there really a difference between “intense awareness” of God and “constant sense of the presence of God”?

It is also difficult to grasp what Schellenberg means when negating that the religious experience he thinks God could provide is “unmistakable.” Some persons seem to be capable of ignoring, or explaining away, incredibly strong evidence for something (say, the Holocaust). Does this mean that the proof in question is mistakable?

The possibility of a human being ignoring evidence for the existence of God or engaging in self-deception is complicated by the fact that Schellenberg confirms that “belief is involuntary in the sense that we cannot believe a proposition at a moment’s notice” (9; 30–31; 165). Of course, it is not very controversial to argue that

belief is something involuntarily; for example, William Alston and Daniel Howard-Snyder have the same conviction.²⁴ However, if we do not choose our beliefs, the question is how to present a coherent picture of a person who ignores what he involuntarily believes. Schellenberg seems to think that exactly this can be done. “It seems possible to shut out an *already formed* belief – even belief in God’s existence – as well as to fail to acquire it in the first place,” writes Schellenberg, citing Anthony Kenny who has said “it is all too easy to shut one’s mind to what one knows” (110). Does not this kind of argument imply a rejection of the idea that belief is something completely involuntary? I think so.

If we underline all that Schellenberg writes about the powerful religious experience God could (and should) provide for every person, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that it really would be an overwhelming experience. But if we underline what Schellenberg writes about the possibility to mistake or ignore the (hypothetical) experience, it seems relevant to ask: How to be sure that no one is a reasonable nonbeliever? Therefore, I will conclude that Schellenberg has not justified that the hypothetical religious experience he has described would really remove all reasonable nonbelief. I will also question the coherence of this experience when presented as both forceful and at the same time non-coercive.

The Problem of Probabilifying Evidence for the Existence of God

Schellenberg argues that “there is a possible world in which *stronger* evidence is available – in particular, in which individuals are always in the presence of evidence sufficient for belief” (47). He further thinks “the evidence God would provide

would be probabilifying evidence” (36). Although this evidence would not remove all insecurity, it is sufficient for belief because it will make the probability for the existence of God greater than 0.5. “However weak or strong the belief, if it is a belief, it finds a place in my worldview” (32).

M. Jamie Ferreira is critical of “the probabilistic model underlying Schellenberg’s whole critique.”²⁵ Inspired by the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, Ferreira thinks that believing in God is something different than believing, to some quantifiable degree, in the probability of a proposition (and in this case, the existence of God). He compares belief in God with an explosion or boiling water. It is impossible to say that something is exploding a little or boiling a little. You cannot talk about degrees in these instances. The same goes for belief in God. Either you believe in God, or you do not.

I sympathize with this objection. It is worth considering if Schellenberg’s probabilistic perspective captures what belief in God *really* is. To start with, there are many atheists who reject the idea that belief in God can be quantified in probabilistic terms. They simply don’t believe in God. Some argue that religious belief does not make sense. There are testimonies of people saying that they got into bed as religious believers one night and the next day woke up as atheists, and it is implausible that they view their newly acquired nonbelief as a result of pondering reasons for and against the existence of God. The same can be said about religious believers. Many of them would probably question the relevance in putting a number on their faith – as considering the probability of God’s existence 0.7 or 0.9 – and just say that belief is belief, not something quantifiable.

I find it plausible that a person’s religious belief is due to much more than rational reflection about competing religious propositions (for example, God exists vs. God doesn’t exist). My impression is that when people tell about a religious conversion, or about how they became a disbeliever, they often do not emphasize rational arguments about the existence of God. The trigger, so to say, for changing a belief can be experiences in life – like the loss of a child in cancer (leading to disbelief) or some religious experience (leading to belief). As Pascal famously wrote: “The heart has its reason, which reason does not know.”²⁶

Schellenberg could probably respond to Pascal by saying that he does not limit evidence for the existence of God to philosophical arguments. Quite the opposite, he claims that a religious experience may be an adequate reason for believing. This means that Schellenberg both talks about believing the proposition “God exists” (31) and about experiencing God. But is it not difficult to view an experience as a kind of probabilifying evidence? Let me explain with an example: If my wife whispers in my ear that she loves me, I will be confident that this is a reality. Quantifying the probability for believing the proposition “My wife loves me” (and, even more, the proposition “My wife expressed her love to me”) seems off the mark.

My assessment is that it is difficult to combine a probabilistic notion of belief with Schellenberg’s understanding of “reasonable nonbelief.” It may also seem counterintuitive to say that a change in the probability for God’s existence from 0.5 to 0.6 (or even from 0.5 to 0.51) marks the substantial difference between reasonable nonbelief and a nonbelief that is not reasonable. I think a probabilistic

view of religious belief at best captures just a part of what belief is even though both believers and nonbelievers *can* talk about their belief or lack of belief in terms like having a “firm” belief or being “troubled by doubt.”

Why the Revelation Has to be Comprehensive

What does a person need to know about God, besides that he exists, to enter a genuine and saving relationship with God? My answer is that we need a comprehensive revelation about the character and will of God and why sending Jesus Christ to the world was necessary for salvation. Thus, I reject the view of Schellenberg that it is sufficient to grasp the existence of a loving God to form a relationship with this God. I will now justify this.

The Necessity of Conversion

Classical Christian Theism emphasizes that a person cannot have a personal relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, without a conversion. This means that until a person admits his sins and his sinfulness and is willing to be changed by the love of God, the kind of reciprocal relationship that God wants to provide will not exist. Schellenberg admits that there may be additional beliefs that God wants people to entertain, but thinks that “each such additional belief will be an event *within* the relationship and not a prerequisite for it” (41).

I find that it is a substantial weakness that Schellenberg rules out the possibility that God presents some demands – such as conversion – as prerequisites for entering into a relationship with him. Without any prerequisites of this type, God could not be assured, for example, that a person entering into relationship with

him would not exploit the relationship. Exploitation could be seeking relationship with an omnipotent God because one only wants to increase the possibility of God answering prayers. Several biblical texts explain that God will hide himself in such circumstances: “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that he cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (Is 59,1–2; see also Prov 1:28; Micah 3:4).²⁷ It seems plausible that God, because his love implies a rejection of all evil and selfish behavior, would present willingness to refrain from evil as a prerequisite for establishing a meaningful relationship.

Paul K. Moser argues that a loving God would insist that only people who are prepared to be transformed by God, would have the possibility to enter into a relationship with God. These people are the only ones to whom God wants to reveal himself.

God cares about *how* we handle evidence of God’s existence, in particular, whether we become more grateful and loving in handling it. Contrary to a typical philosophical attitude, then, knowledge of God is not a spectator sport. It is rather part of a process of God’s thorough makeover of a person. It is, from our side of the process, akin to an active commitment to a morally transforming *personal relationship* rather than to a mere subjective state. We come to know God only as God becomes *our God*, the Lord of our lives, rather than just an object of our contemplation or self-indulgence. God refuses, for our own good, to become a mere idol of our cognition, speculation, or entertainment.²⁸

Moser argues that it serves God's purpose that evidence for his existence would be provided *only* for people who are morally available for it. "It is not belief that God exists per se that is primarily important but rather the attitudes and motivation that accompany belief."²⁹ Moser is not the only one who responds to Schellenberg's argument this way. Laura L. Garcia highlights that "attitude of the heart is more necessary for our ultimate good than simply acquiring true beliefs."³⁰

It should be underlined that Schellenberg is fully aware of the difference between believing the proposition "God exists" and having a relationship with God. But he thinks that a belief that God exists is necessary – a prerequisite, so to speak – for entering a relationship with God. "I cannot love God, be grateful to God, or contemplate God's goodness unless I believe that there *is* a God" (30). He could also, perhaps, point out that even if a prerequisite for relationship with God is conversion – and therefore is based on more than sufficient information that God exists – it is difficult to see why this fact would be a reason for God to hide his existence. Whatever the primary intent of God is, it is necessary that a person believes in God's existence in order to form any relationship with him.

This objection carries some weight, but it is substantial only if it is correct that God could bring about a kind of a two-step procedure in the lives of humans by first making his existence more reasonable and then inviting people to a reciprocal relationship. But if there is a crucial difference between having a propositional belief in the existence of God and forming a relationship with God, it is at least not obvious that more people would enter into a relationship with God simply by acknowledging his existence. I simply

don't think Schellenberg has plausibly explained how the God he thinks could present himself through a modest religious experience *also* would communicate that he is a loving God seeking a reciprocal relationship with humans based on conversion.

The Entailment of the Love of God

Schellenberg writes about the objection to his argument that one "must also believe various other religious propositions" for relating to God (40), and that just knowing the existence of God does not qualify as a relationship with God. He rejects this objection by arguing that other convictions than God exists will follow *automatically* if a person starts to believe in God. "Specifically, if I come to believe that there is a perfectly loving God, I will also believe such propositions as that I owe my existence to God, that my well-being lies in relationship with God, that other individuals are loved and valued by God, that I too should seek to act towards them in loving way" (*ibid.*).

I do not accept this assessment. As I see it, a fundamental challenge to the relevance of the traditional arguments for the existence of God – which is also relevant for the hypothetical religious experience presented by Schellenberg – is building a rational bridge between such a proposition and other religious propositions. As Steven Cahn writes, "the proofs for the existence of God provide us with no hint whatsoever as to which actions God wishes us to perform or what we ought to do so as to please or obey him. We may affirm that God is all-good and yet have no way of knowing what the highest moral standards are."³¹

At different points Schellenberg explicitly mentions that he develops his picture of the love of God based on how Chris-

tian theology presents God (23–24). This perspective is obviously derived, at least to a large degree, from the Bible and the Christian tradition. But Schellenberg cannot take for granted that the hypothetical religious experience that he envisions will – to any person in any cultural or historical context – reveal God in concordance with Christian theology.

Therefore, it is an important objection when M. Jamie Ferreira argues that Schellenberg “conflates the ‘existence of God’ which on traditional theology’s terms is available to reason with the belief of traditional theology that God is perfectly loving and just.”³² It is simply difficult to see that every human would be convinced that God is perfectly loving if he were to make his existence more obvious. Neither is it obvious that if God provided more evidence of his existence, any human being would conclude that this God wants a relationship with human beings. This is only correct if we take a Christian tradition as our starting point.

Schellenberg often presents the characteristics of a loving God by comparing divine love to human love. “For only the best human love could serve as an analogy of Divine love, and human love at its best clearly involves reciprocity and mutuality. If I love you and so seek your wellbeing, I wish to make available to you all the resources at my disposal for the overcoming of difficulties in your life” (18). I do not to reject this perspective, but I would claim that how Schellenberg specifically presents what is essential to human love at its best seems to be a modern and westernized perspective. Perhaps anyone at any time would agree that love involves seeking another person’s wellbeing. However, I think the implication of this varies contextually. In many contexts people would say that it is

very important for a person’s wellbeing to build character, which cannot be done if you always help a person to overcome difficulties; sometimes you have to withdraw (and perhaps say explicitly): “You have to fix this yourselves.” The person experiencing this may not see that the one withdrawing really seeks his wellbeing.

When comparing divine love with human love, as Schellenberg often does, we also have to decide what kind of human relationship is most suitable. Schellenberg often compares God to a loving parent.³³ This comparison is often used in the Bible (see Psalms 103:13; Isaiah 66:13; Matthew 5:45–48), and I think each instance says something important about the love of God. Nevertheless, there are limitations to this comparison. First, we should consider that there are differences in cultures and historical epochs when it comes to parental ideals. Second, it is not obvious that a harmonious relationship between a parent and a child is the most proper comparison. Why not think more of that “familiar adult love or the love of a benevolent reconstructive surgeon is more apt”?³⁴ There are also some complicated human relationships where it is common to talk about “tough love,” for example in “groups related to Alcoholics Anonymous and by feminists.”³⁵

As a response, Schellenberg could point out that even if a relationship between God and humans is better compared to a relationship between adults than between a parent and a small child, it does not make sense that God completely hides himself. If God wants to form a relationship with humans, it is necessary that he is accessible for humans. I do not agree that God has hidden himself completely, but I find it possible that God re-

treats – at least for a time or in some specific circumstances – as it might be better understood if we think of humans as independent adults rather than as helpless children.

Also, the term “reciprocal” needs some qualification in this context. A relationship between a baby and a mother is reciprocal in a very different way than a relationship between a man and a wife. Then there are obvious limitations when comparing any human relationship with the relationship between God and humans because the Creator is infinite, fully perfect, and knows everything – and man is just dust in comparison.³⁶ In addition, the general sinfulness of man implies that we cannot presuppose that humans will willingly be guided and transformed by God. Consequently, it is difficult to know with confidence to what extent human love can be compared to love between a transcendent, loving, and holy God and a sinful, limited human being.

Thus, I find it plausible that God wants to present himself to humans as a kind of “package deal” implying that it does not serve his purpose just to establish his existence. In fact, merely establishing his existence may lead to misunderstandings about the importance of realizing who God really is and what he really wants to accomplish. Blaise Pascal seems to have been thinking along these lines when he wrote that it is dangerous “to man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness and to know his own wretchedness without knowing God.”³⁷ In other words, it is important for God that his self-revelation presents his character and his will – and what his loving nature implies. If this is so, the kind of religious experience that Schellenberg envisions that God would provide would perhaps not do the job.

It is a weakness that Schellenberg seems to presuppose that a human being experiencing the presence of God would naturally react with happiness or rejoice, and that the love of God more or less automatically enables the “softening even the most self-centered or embittered soul.”³⁸ Perhaps some people would find it difficult or threatening to realize that God exists. For example, Isaiah tells that he became afraid when he once saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple” (Isaiah 6:1) and says, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (6:5). This biblical story highlights that the love of God can be perceived as something frightening for humans who do not feel worthy of the presence of God. Perhaps this is a reason why Thomas Nagel once said: “It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God . . . I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”³⁹

Rudolf Otto, the scholar of comparative religion, is known for explaining that God is “known primordially as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, as a reality that is at once attractive but which also inspires a kind of fear or dread.”⁴⁰ It goes without saying that this perspective is very different from Schellenberg’s. I think it shows that Schellenberg’s presupposition of how humans would react when exposed to a loving God is not universal. And Moser argues repeatedly that humans normally do not want to experience the love of God in their life because it implies a challenge to step away from all selfish behavior. “Pride and indifference will automatically obstruct our seeing not only God’s evident reality but also our genuine need of a god worthy of

worship... A perfectly loving God would want to give all humans lasting good gifts, but we often cling, selfishly and self-destructively, to lesser goods and thereby block out what we truly need.”⁴¹ Moser thinks that a difference between “philosophical theism” and a classical Christian approach is that the God of the “latter is the gracious but elusive personal God who is a consuming fire against evil.”⁴²

This does not mean that Moser disagrees with Schellenberg that God is perfect love. Nevertheless, where Schellenberg thinks that no human would reject the love of God, Moser thinks that this is exactly what humans normally do. Moser thinks that we would perhaps be interested in receiving comfort and help from a loving God, because of our egoism and sinfulness, but we do not want to sacrifice our own selfishness and work together with the love of God for a better world. What a common person wants, when conducting religious searching, is to be relieved “from temporary pain, suffering, frustration, tragedy, poverty, illness, deformity, or even physical death.”⁴³ But because God primarily wants to change the hearts of people, he will withhold evidence of his existence from those unwilling to experience this kind of change. Accordingly, to Schellenberg the love of God is nothing but what humans want to experience, but to Moser the love of God could be a threat to normal humans. I think the anthropology of Moser is the most plausible, and also more in line with Biblical texts.

I suspect that a lot of what Schellenberg says about the character of God is a consequence of his being a part of a Christian cultural environment. My view is that just knowing that God exists does

not say much about what kind of God exists and what obligations he demands of humans. Even if it is possible to justify philosophically that an existing God has to be perfectly loving, it does not follow how this love would be expressed or how humans in general will respond to this love. Therefore, I reject Schellenberg’s implicit premise that if God’s existence were beyond reasonable doubt, it would lead many more people into a reciprocal and fulfilling relationship with a loving God.

In addition, I find Schellenberg’s rejection of conversion as a possible prerequisite for entering into a relationship with a loving God to be a substantial weakness in his argument. I do think that a loving God wants a reciprocal relationship with humans, but I find it plausible that God needs to communicate substantial information about his character and the kind of relationship a perfectly loving and all-powerful God can establish with a limited human before such a relationship is a real possibility. If this is so, it makes sense that God became man and chose to reveal himself in a comprehensive way through Jesus Christ. This way of revealing himself could be the most appropriate way for God to accomplish what he wanted.

Schellenberg argues that an existing God could bring about a religious experience for every human that “produces the belief that God is lovingly present” (49). My view is that exactly this happened some two thousand years ago. Then God revealed himself in a comprehensive matter, as Jesus Christ, by suffering and dying for every human. This was how he showed real love, real compassion – and explained what it really means to express love.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed J. L. Schellenberg's premise that God could have provided sufficient evidence for his existence for every human being by revealing himself through a religious experience. According to Schellenberg, this would not be an overwhelming and coercive revelation, but anyone failing to believe in the existence of God would have to overlook sufficient evidence. I have challenged the coherence of this view. I find it plausible that Schellenberg in fact describes an overwhelming experience.

I have also looked at how Schellenberg presents the consequences of the love of God, pointing out that he seems to take a modern, western, and Christian perspective for granted. That orientation is a problem for his argument because there may be a large gap between establishing (that

is, through a religious experience) that there is a loving God and determining how he will relate to limited humans. I have also criticized Schellenberg's perspective that a person normally will feel relieved or satisfied when concluding that God exists. The love of God could be perceived as a trembling reality because it highlights the difference between an all-good God and a sinful human.

It is also dubious that what Schellenberg describes as a kind of limited "awareness" of God may convey extensive information about God and his will. I therefore find it plausible that God would have to bring about a more comprehensive revelation if he shall succeed in establishing a mutual relationship between himself and human beings. I think this was what happened when God chose to reveal himself through Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. Examples that specifically refer to Schellenberg's argument include C. Stephan Evans and R. Zachary Manis, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 180–182; Charles Taliaferro, *Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 104–107; Chad Meister, "Evil and the Hiddenness of God," in *God and Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Dew, Jr. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 138–151; Jeremy A. Evans, *The Problem of Evil* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 61–80.
2. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
3. J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006 [1993]), 83. I will put page numbers for every reference to this specific book in parentheses throughout this article.
4. Schellenberg writes that only "some latter-day Calvinians" have argued that reasonable nonbelief does not exist (82), but there are obviously many theists who find that their Christian faith has a rational advantage (and perhaps even will think that it is unreasonable not to believe). Two examples are the books *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) and *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005). See also Richard Swinburne who concludes in his book *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 328: "The existence of the universe, the pattern of history and the existence of some evidence of miracles, and finally the occurrence of religious experiences, are all such as we have reason to expect if there is a God, and less reason to expect otherwise."
5. This topic has been discussed by contemporary philosophers under the label "the noetic effects of sin." In *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 214, Alvin Plantinga argues that, because of sin, God's presence does not seem obvious.
6. Two very explicit examples of this argument are put forward by C. Stephan Evans, *Why Christian Faith Still Makes Sense* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2015), 25, and Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 211–212.
7. It should be noted that Schellenberg presupposes a lot of different characteristics of the idea of God—like being unsurpassably great, all-knowing, and all powerful – but elaborates only on the idea of God as perfectly loving – an aspect of the nature of God that he thinks any theist would accept, not only Christians (10–11).
8. In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Schellenberg equates the notion "reasonable nonbelief" with "culpable nonbelief," meaning that only persons culpable of rejecting God would fail to believe in him. More recently, Schellenberg has argued that it was a mistake to talk about culpability, writing that he "has been sticking to the narrower focus on resistance"; see Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*, 55.

9. Peter van Inwagen, "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals: A Collaborative Hiddenness," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30
10. This is also noted by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, "Introduction: The Hiddenness of God," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 12.
11. "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 204.
12. See *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 148.
13. *Naturalism and Religion* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 279.
14. N. R. Hanson, *What I Do Not Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 322.
15. "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 142.
16. David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" [1748], in *Modern Philosophy*, ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), 579.
17. Todd M. Furman, "In Praise of Hume," in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. Douglas Groothuis and James F. Sennett, 55.
18. On Kant's rejection that what a person experiences in a world of time and space could reveal anything objectively about objects beyond our universe, and consequently about the world "an sich," see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 5.
19. "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I), 212.
20. "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 288–289.
21. "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (1)," 203.
22. J. L. Schellenberg, "Response to Howard-Snyder" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 460; see also Justin P. McBrayer and Philip Swenson, "Skepticism about the Argument from Divine Hiddenness." *Religious Studies* (2012), 2: 129–150.
23. The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (II), 297.
24. Alston, "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol. 2, Epistemology 1988. Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 433–453.
25. Ferreira, M. Jamie, "A Kierkegaardian View of Divine Hiddenness," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 165
26. Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, 1958), fragment 277.
27. All citations from the Bible are taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (ESV), Crossway Bibles, 2001, Illinois.
28. Paul K. Moser, "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 137–138.
29. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, "Introduction: The Hiddenness of God," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 8.
30. "St. John of the Cross and the Necessity of Divine Hiddenness," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 83–97, here 86.
31. Steven Cahn, "The Irrelevance of Proof to Religion," in *Faith & Reason*, ed. Paul Helm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 358.
32. M. Jamie Ferreira, "A Kierkegaardian View of Divine Hiddenness," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 166.
33. In an emotional story Schellenberg compares an existing God failing to give sufficient evidence with a mother who does not respond to the cry of a child lost in "the middle of vast rain forest, dripping with dangers of various kinds" (2006b, 24). He also points out at one place how absurd it would be for a child to talk about his loving parents and at the same time say they have "never been around" or have been there in sickness (2015, 42).
34. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness."
35. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, "Introduction: The Hiddenness of God," 14.
36. I use the term "dust" deliberately because there is biblical text that compares man to dust (Psalm 103:14).
37. *Pascal's Pensées*, fragment 585.
38. J. L. Schellenberg, "Response to Howard-Snyder," 460.
39. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.
40. See Mark Wynn, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall Edition, 2014), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/phenomenology-religion/>.
41. Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 134.
42. "Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding," in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, 120.
43. Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God*, 71.