

SCHELLENBERG'S MISUNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S OPENNESS AND OPTIMAL RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract: J. L. Schellenberg argues that an all-loving God does not exist because of the existence of nonresistant nonbelievers. These are people who are open to believing in God but are unable to believe for whatever reason. Schellenberg says that an all-loving God would never permit this kind of nonbelief in the life of a nonresister. I will be arguing against Schellenberg's hiddenness argument and propose that there are two good reasons why nonresistant nonbelievers exist: The first involves our epistemic awareness of the existence of God, and the second focuses on the nonresister's spiritual condition. I begin by focusing on what I call the Corrupt Creature Defense. This says that God's first creation (i.e., non-human spiritual creatures) became morally corrupt by their own volition and are responsible for the nonbelief of nonresisters. Thus, in this way, God is not blameworthy for the existence of nonresisters. My next argument says that even if one rejects the Corrupt Creature Defense, nonresister S would *not* be open to a relationship with God at a given time *t* when God provides some stronger evidence *e* of His existence. I call this the Cold Feet objection.

Keywords: divine hiddenness, nonresistant nonbelief, divine-human relationship, Schellenberg's hiddenness argument, free will, divine determinism, Corrupt Creature Defense, optimal relationship

1. *Introduction*

The problem of divine hiddenness is that, if God is all-loving and desires a relationship with all capable human persons, then we should not see any nonbelievers that are in some nonresistant state of nonbelief towards the proposition that God exists. However, J. L. Schellenberg argues that there are nonresistant nonbelievers that desire a relationship with God but cannot believe because God

is not open to being in a relationship with them. He takes this to be evidence that an all-loving God does not exist. I argue that Schellenberg's hiddenness argument fails to undermine Christian theism because it is based on a misunderstanding concerning the nature of divine-human relationships and what it means for a non-resistant nonbeliever to be open.

2. *Definitions and Terms*

I take God to be a maximally great being (or a being than which no greater is metaphysically possible) who possesses all great-making properties to a maximal degree of intensity, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence.¹ I take the Christian God to be this maximally great being and hereafter refer to such being as "God." Further, I stipulate that God's omniscience includes knowing what will happen (or at least will likely happen with great certainty via exhaustive probabilistic knowledge) in the future. This also includes counterfactuals concerning his creatures; for instance, God knows (or knows with a great degree of certainty) what every creature would freely do in any given circumstance.² To say God is hidden simply means that God has not revealed himself in such a way that allows some person S to have a constant direct awareness of his presence despite S believing that God exists. As Schellenberg notes, "If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists."³

What does it mean to be "open" to a relationship with God? Schellenberg interprets openness to mean that "it will be possible for creatures who haven't made it impossible themselves through their own God-obscuring resistance of the divine, to participate in relationship with God; if they want to, they will be able to do so

1. Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 9–10.

2. This understanding of God's omniscience is compatible with Molinism (middle knowledge) or open theism (exhaustive probabilistic knowledge). See Flint, *Divine Providence*; Sanders, *God Who Risks*; Craig, *Only Wise God*; Ware, ed., *Perspectives*; Hasker et al., eds., *God in an Open Universe*; Laing, *Middle Knowledge*.

3. Schellenberg, *Hiddenness Argument*, 60.

simply by trying to do so.”⁴ In other words, God is going to make a way for those who want a relationship with him to be in a relationship with him which obviously requires belief that God exists. Hence, he believes that God is not open to being in a relationship with these nonbelievers; that is, God is closed to them. These individuals that do not believe in God and whom God is closed to are referred to as “nonresistant nonbelievers,” and Schellenberg defines nonresistant nonbelief by stating that “some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.”⁵

To say that someone has free will is to say that one is morally responsible for the choices and actions they make.⁶ Theological determinism is the idea that God is causally or providentially determining all one’s beliefs, thoughts, and desires; hence, these are necessitated by prior conditions (natural or supernatural).⁷ With these terms explained, we can now review Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument.

3. *Schellenberg's Argument*

Schellenberg formulates his deductive argument as follows:

- (1) If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward persons.
- (2) If God is perfectly loving, then God will be always open for a personal relationship with persons.
- (3) If God exists, then for any person, God will be always open to a personal relationship.
- (4) If for any person, God is open to being in a personal relationship, then it is not the case that any person at any time is nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to God’s existence.
- (5) If God exists, then it is not the case that any nonresistant person at any time will be in a state of nonbelief.
- (6) There has existed at some point in time at least one person that is a nonresistant nonbeliever.

4. Schellenberg, *Hiddenness Argument*, 41.

5. Schellenberg, *Hiddenness Argument*, 74.

6. See Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*.

7. See Pereboom, “Theological Determinism.”

(7) Thus, it is not the case that God exists.⁸

I think the most crucial part of the hiddenness argument is to reflect on the nature of God as revealed in Scripture. For example, 1 Tim 2:3–4 (ESV) says, “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” We are also told in 2 Pet 3:9 (ESV), “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise . . . but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Moreover, God says in Ezek 33:11, “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked . . . and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?”

Schellenberg says God possesses the great-making property of omni-love, arguing that a God with “[a]n unsurpassable love, for various reasons, would seek meaningful, conscious relationship with the beloved; it would always at least be open to sharing itself in such relationship.”⁹ What then should we make of the hiddenness argument with this conception of God in mind? How can an all-loving God permit the existence of people that believe in him, want a relationship with him, and yet are unable to enter such a relationship? Scholars like Jeff Jordan would argue that God is hidden to some because God does not love everyone to the same degree; Jordan writes, “God loves every human but loves some

8. Here is Schellenberg’s argument (“Hiddenness Argument,” 65) in its entirety which I simplified above: (1) *Premise*: If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be; (2) *Premise*: If God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with *S* at *t*; (3) *1, 2 by Hypothetical Syllogism*: If God exists, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a personal relationship with *S* at *t*; (4) *Premise*: If for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a personal relationship with *S* at *t*, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, it is not the case that *S* is at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists; (5) *3, 4 by Hypothetical Syllogism*: If God exists, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, it is not the case that *S* is at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists; (6) *Premise*: There is at least one capable finite person *S* and time *t* such that *S* is or was at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists; (7) *5, 6 by Modus Tollens*: It is not the case that God exists.

9. Schellenberg, *Hiddenness Argument*, 96.

more than others.”¹⁰ I do not think this is how we should view God’s love, and so this makes arguing for divine hiddenness more challenging. It seems that love as a great-making property means that God loves everyone supremely and equally. That is, God loves every human to the highest degree possible.

Although I do not agree with Jordan Wessling’s conclusion that all will enter into a relationship with God, I do share his sentiment concerning God’s love when he says, “It makes sense of the idea that God, on account of His maximal perfection, must respond to each existing candidate for love by loving it as much as it possibly or properly could be loved, given its worth.”¹¹ To better appreciate this kind of supreme love in the divine–human relationship, we need to take a closer look at the meaning of love. When dealing with this conception of God, how should we understand his love? We should probably start by asking, *For what purpose did God create human persons?* Recall the Scripture verses above—God desires for no one to perish but rather *all* enter a genuine relationship with him. I take genuine divine–human relationships to be part of God’s overall purpose in creating us.

I take a relationship to be genuine if it meets two conditions. First, it should involve freedom. That is to say, the beloved (i.e., God’s rational creatures) have the non-controlled capacity and free choice to participate in a relationship with their lover (i.e., God) and would be blameworthy for not doing so.¹² Schellenberg would agree per the assumptions and premises of his own argument that I have already laid out.

If God created a world in which we were all determined to enter a loving relationship with him, then one could argue that we are not truly free because we have been directly infused with these non-controllable desires. If we are not the source of our own decisions pertaining to a relationship with God, then it would appear that God is the one controlling us to participate in such a relationship. As Derk Pereboom notes, “If an action is produced by way of a deterministic process that traces back to causal factors beyond

10. Jordan, “Argument,” 99.

11. Wessling, *Love Divine*, 163.

12. See Ekstrom, *God*, 42–43, 47; “Toward a Plausible Event-Causal Indeterminist Account,” 131–33.

the agent's control, then he will not be morally responsible for it."¹³ A world of creatures controlled to love God does not seem as good as a world of non-controlled creatures that freely choose to love God. We feel the same way about our own human relationships.

Therefore, if persons do not have the capacity to at least partially freely direct their own desires to the right and the good, that is, God, then those persons are not truly free. Why? Because although such persons are the source of those desires, theological determinism entails that they are not the *ultimate* source of those desires—God is. God is the source in the sense that he has determined and created these desires within them. I agree with Christine Korsgaard when she says, "I believe that in order to regard your movements as actions that you can attribute to yourself as their author, you have to see those movements as arising from yourself as a whole, rather than from something working in you or on you."¹⁴

Thus, I take it that God cannot have genuine relationships with human persons if he is somehow controlling or determining their mental decisions in such a way that causes the person to "love" and value him, rather than the person having the volition to love and value God for his own sake.¹⁵ As Robert Kane notes,

The indeterminism involved in free will is not just mere chance, coming from something wholly outside us, from nature or from God. It is coming from our own will, and it arises from our inner struggles, not from external sources alone, and it thereby makes possible self-formation. That is why, though free will is a struggle, it is also a gift, but one that imposes responsibilities upon us.¹⁶

This leads us to our second condition for divine–human genuine relationships.

The second condition necessary is that the lover must love the beloved for their own sake. The lover (e.g., rational creature) can only direct the greatest kind of affection toward the beloved (e.g.,

13. Pereboom, *Living without Free Will*, 3. See also Matheson, "In Defence of the Four-Case Argument."

14. Korsgaard, "Activity of Reason."

15. See Nelkin, *Making Sense of Freedom*. See also Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will."

16. Kane, *Complex Tapestry of Free Will*, 249–50.

God) for the beloved's own sake, if and only if the lover freely chooses to do so. For example, if I were to love someone in order to receive some benefit, then I am not extending the best kind of love possible. Hence, I take genuine divine-human relationships to be the kind that involves God loving us for our own sake and us loving him for his.¹⁷ So, for a genuine divine-human relationship to take place, there must be the possibility of free will in conjunction with loving someone for their own sake while willing their ultimate good.¹⁸ I think it is clear that Schellenberg would agree.

Now that I have spelled out what is required for genuine divine-human relationships to exist, my next move is to show why Schellenberg's hiddenness argument fails to disprove the existence of an all-loving God.

4. *Argument for God's Hiddenness*

My argument in this article for why God is hidden (in the sense that there are nonresistant nonbelievers) is primarily based on two reasons: The first reason has to do with our epistemic awareness of God, and the second focuses on the nonresister's spiritual condition.

First, we need to consider why God created, to begin with. As I explained, part of the purpose for God creating spiritual non-human and human creatures was to have genuine relationships with them.¹⁹ Due to their freedom, these creatures can corrupt themselves and perform evil actions. I take it that spiritual creatures are (mostly) responsible for nonresistant nonbelievers.

17. This second condition also involves a lover willing the ultimate good for their beloved which may involve moments of displeasure (e.g., disciplining a child to teach them important lessons, having a child receive a painful medical procedure to experience a greater-good concerning their health, and so on).

18. See Vacek, "Problematic Love for God," 113. Vacek ("Problematic Love for God," 123) says, "[I]f God loves us, God wills our good, and a major part of our own good is the exercise of our own judgment and freedom." I also agree with Vacek when he says that love for God includes an agapic love which is "directed to God for God's own sake."

19. See Leftow, "Perfect Being Theology"; Mullins, *Eternal in Love*, esp. ch. 6; Todd, "Emotion and Value."

Corrupt Creature Defense

- (1) If an all-loving God exists, then he plausibly creates non-human spiritual creatures with free will.
- (2) Spiritual creatures can become corrupt using their own free will.
- (3) Some spiritual creatures have become corrupt, and they harm human creatures by causing or contributing to nonresistant nonbelief.
- (4) Thus, corrupt creatures are responsible for nonresistant nonbelief.
- (5) If corrupt creatures are mostly responsible for nonresistant nonbelief, then God is not mostly responsible for nonresistant nonbelief.
- (6) Thus, God is not mostly responsible for nonresistant nonbelief.

As for (1), many nontheists, for the sake of argument, will grant that *if* the Christian God does exist, then he has created spiritual creatures (e.g., angels) that possess free will.

As for (2), the idea that these spiritual creatures can use their free will for good or evil is not controversial. This would be similar to how human creatures behave. We know that humans choose to perform good *and* bad actions, and spiritual creatures can do the same.

Schellenberg would likely push back on premises (3)–(6). This is the idea that corrupt spiritual creatures are causing or contributing to the nonresistant nonbeliever's unbelief and therefore shifting the responsibility away from God. Nevertheless, if humans through their own volition inflict harm upon others that love them, then it seems plausible that the same could be said of spiritual creatures. If an all-loving God exists, then it should not surprise us that *some* of his creation would intentionally reject him and attempt to inflict harm on him and the things that he cares about.

Further, if human creatures are capable of psychologically manipulative tactics, then it is safe to assume that spiritual creatures who are far superior in intellect, power, and life experience could employ similar tactics to a greater degree. Why is this relevant? As Schellenberg notes, "One clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without believing that the other party exists."²⁰ Hence, if these powerful, corrupt spiritual creatures are able to frustrate a human's belief in God, then these aggressors are harming what God loves. If this is the case, then God is not direct-

20. Schellenberg, "Hiddenness Argument," 64.

ly responsible for the nonresister's nonbelief. Instead, it is the corrupt spiritual creatures who are responsible.²¹ One may object that God is responsible because God knew what these spiritual creatures would freely do. But this objection takes us back to the same problem as why human creatures freely do the bad things that we do. That is, God would rather have a world of non-human and human creatures that are capable of freely choosing to do right or wrong rather than a world of non-free creatures. I now turn to the second reason why nonresistant nonbelievers exist.

The first reason dealt with our epistemic awareness about the existence of God, but the second focuses on the nonresister's spiritual condition. Even if a skeptic were to reject the Corrupt Creature Defense, they still have a larger problem to overcome. To better grasp this next point, we must return to what a genuine relationship entails, and the type of love that is involved. Part of this love stems from the lover's desire for the wellbeing or ultimate good of their beloved. God desires the greatest form of relationship possible, but unfortunately, many of his creatures do not. Thus, this leads to the second reason why nonresistant nonbelievers exist.

Optimal Relationship and Cold Feet

God desires taking genuine relationships with his creatures to the next level. Let us call this an "optimal relationship." I have already laid out two basic criteria for relationships to be genuine. Genuine relationships are a necessary condition for optimal relationships, but they are not sufficient to produce them. I take a relationship to be optimal if it is (i) genuine (e.g., freely given and loving the other for their own sake) and (ii) a relationship that lasts an eternity. The reason why it must last an eternity is because God intended for this kind of relationship to endure forever. God made the heavenly realm for the purpose of perennial and permanent loving relationships with human creatures, not temporary loving relationships ("And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him

21. The limits of the present essay do not allow room to speculate as to how this occurs.

who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” [Rev 5:13 ESV].²²

In premises (4)–(5) of Schellenberg’s argument, he says:

- (4) If for any person, God is open to being in a personal relationship, then it is not the case that any person at any time is nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to God’s existence.
- (5) If God exists, then it is not the case that any nonresistant person at any time will be in a state of nonbelief.

This leads us to the next part of my argument for hiddenness called the Cold Feet objection. It goes something like this: (a) Nonresisters are not resisting belief in God at time t^1 ; (b) Nonresisters come to believe in God at t^2 ; (c) Nonresisters get cold feet and become resistant to God at t^3 ; (d) Thus, nonresisters would freely decline to enter an optimal relationship with God.

As for (a), here we have some nonresister S in a state of nonbelief at time t^1 , given evidence e that is available to them. Schellenberg would obviously agree with this; however, he thinks that God is at fault for not being open to them, hence their nonbelief. As for (b), if nonresister S is given some stronger evidence e at t^2 that affords them belief, then Schellenberg believes the nonresister would remain nonresistant. And this is where he is not so clear and seems mistaken.

In premises (4)–(5) of Schellenberg’s argument, he mistakenly assumes that God is closed and that nonresister S would *remain* nonresistant/open *despite* coming to believe in God at t^2 and would thus enter an optimal relationship with him. This is a big assumption. It could be that every nonresister that desires a relationship with God would become resistant when God somehow afforded them belief. They would get *cold feet* and refuse to enter a relationship optimized for eternity which leads to (c)–(d) in my Cold Feet objection.

Schellenberg would obviously disagree with (c)–(d), but he needs to provide us an argument or good reasons for thinking that this is the case. He believes that God is the one closed when in reality it is currently the *open-nonresister* that would change and be-

22. See also Rev 22:3–5.

come closed to an optimal relationship with God. Since God's primary objective is to have an optimal relationship—which is better than a genuine one—with creatures rather than having them merely believe that he exists, it would be futile to provide stronger evidence e to nonresister S at t^2 .

It reminds me of a situation when I was a kid. I had a strong desire to attend summer camp and finally convinced my mom to take me. I was nonresistant about venturing off to camp my whole (short) life, and I was excited up to the moment prior to check-in when I suddenly and immediately sensed regret; I became resistant in a single moment. The realization of a commitment for being away from what I was comfortable with was more than I could bear. Although I was nonresistant leading up to registration, my state of mind changed upon the actual experience itself. The camp and camp staff were open to me the whole time; however, I suddenly became “closed” to them.

Similarly, it seems that Schellenberg thinks that God is the one closed to a relationship, but it is really the nonresister's state of mind that would immediately change and become closed and resistant upon the actual experience of an optimal relationship with God. Eternity is much longer than summer camp and it demands much more from an individual.

5. *Schellenberg's Likely Objection and a Brief Response to his Objection*

Schellenberg might object and argue that this shows that God really was closed because God *knew* what would happen after creating the nonresister. If that is the case, then Schellenberg needs to modify his argument to say something like this:

- (4') If for any person, God is open to being in a personal relationship, then it is not the case that any person will be resistant *prior or subsequent* to God providing them evidence e that affords them a state of belief in relation to God's existence.
- (5') If God exists, then it is not the case that any nonresistant person will be resistant prior or subsequent to God affording them belief.

However, by leaving premise (6) the same which says, “There has existed at some point in time at least one person that is a nonre-

sistant nonbeliever,” Schellenberg’s conclusion (7) “Thus, it is not the case that God exists” becomes a non sequitur. This is because God is open at all times *prior and subsequent* to the nonresister coming to believe that God exists. It is the nonresister that changes from being open to closed. The nonresister transitions from a state of nonbelief to belief, but so does their disposition in refraining from entering an optimal relationship.

If God knows everything that creatures will do and would do (or would likely do with great certainty) in any given circumstance, then it does not follow that God must change the state of belief in a nonresister if that person is going to end up resisting him. This is because God’s goal is an optimal relationship, not mere belief. What is the good of more people coming to believe that God exists just for those same people to reject him? We already do this with people that we do believe exist let alone someone’s existence that we are agnostic about.

Schellenberg explains that nonresisters include those remaining nonresistant *after* they come to believe in God:

If A loves B, then A will be open to this kind of relationship with B, insofar as A is able to accommodate the consequences of such openness, bringing them into conformity with the flourishing of both A and B and of any relationship that might come to exist between them.²³

In other words, if God loves nonresister S, then God will be open to this kind of relationship with S, insofar as God is able to accommodate the consequences of such openness, bringing them into conformity with the flourishing of both God and nonresister S, and of any relationship that might come to exist between them.

However, this is no strike against the existence of God because it could be the case that no matter what world God creates (with the creaturely relational conditions I have spelled out) there would still always be nonresistant creatures that would change to resisters after becoming believers. This is similar to the problem of evil in which it could be that any world that God creates with certain features as this one there would always be evil. But that does not entail that an all-loving God does not exist. Likewise, the idea that God could not “accommodate the consequences” of a relationship

23. See “John Schellenberg.”

after the nonresister comes to believe is not God's fault. God is the one that is always *open*—it would be the nonresister who becomes *closed*. Based on God's goals for an optimal relationship, it does not seem to me that this is enough to justify atheism or non-belief that an all-loving God exists.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Schellenberg's hiddenness argument fails to undermine Christian theism because it is based on a misunderstanding concerning the nature of God and what it means for a nonresistant nonbeliever to be open. It could be that God's non-human spiritual creation is interfering or contributing to the nonbelief of nonresisters and would thus remove the blame from God. Additionally, a nonresister would become resistant (cold feet) upon believing that God exists and would refuse to enter an *optimal* relationship. Schellenberg seems to have mistakenly assumed in his initial argument that nonresisters would remain nonresistant *prior and subsequent* to God affording them belief.

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