Précis

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I am most grateful to Dr. Lok-Chi Chan for translating my 1993 book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (DHHR) into traditional Chinese.[1] This translation event provided the impetus for the present symposium. And so one might expect that my précis here would be a précis of DHHR. But a lot has happened since 1993. In particular, a good deal more has been said about the hiddenness argument – an embarrassingly large amount of it by me.[2] And so one might also expect that I would have something to say about this more recent work. I certainly do not intend

[1] References herein are to the English version, published by Cornell University Press. As for the translation: I should also mention the Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion in the UK – led by Yujin Nagasawa – which funded Dr. Chan's work, and the John Templeton Foundation in America, on whose support they drew. Then of course there is National Taiwan University Press, which published the translation in 2024. I am grateful to everyone involved.

[2] I actually went and checked. Scanning the 'Dynamic Bibliography on Divine Hiddenness' started by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green (one can gain access to it through their Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry 'Hiddenness of God'), and applying a rigorous criterion of selection, I see that at least 160 publications between 1993 and 2022 (when this bibliography was last updated) were produced in response to the 1993 book or to the issue as raised in that book. 25 of those are mine. So…maybe not quite as embarrassing? (I'd add this, based on a little more poking around: those 25 items represent, with their pages, less than a quarter of what I've written on philosophy overall.)

to ignore it: I shall indeed have something to say about this 'more.' Nevertheless we will find ourselves circling back to DHHR by the end.

If we are going to circle back to DHHR, we had better start with it. And so I shall. The argument extracted from the book, when people first began discussing it, was usually the highly compressed version offered at the beginning of Chapter 4 in terms of a perfectly loving God's prevention of "reasonable nonbelief" (which had earlier been stipulatively defined as nonbelief that is not culpably produced by the nonbeliever). I have often regretted not giving a fuller statement of the argument there, as especially in the absence of careful attention to the previous three chapters – including that stipulative definition – commentators have often misconstrued my intent, skated past subtle qualifications, or missed important support for what I had to say. Here is a better statement:

1. If God exists, then God is perfectly loving.
2. If a perfectly loving God exists, then for any person P and time t, if P is at t capable of participating in a personal relationship with God, P at t is in a position to do so (i.e., can at t do so just by trying), except insofar as P is resistantly in a contrary position at t.
3. One is not in a position to participate in personal relationship with God if one does not believe that God exists.

It follows from 2 and 3 that

4. If a perfectly loving God exists, then for any person P and time t, if P is at t capable of participating in a personal relationship with God, P at t believes that God exists, except insofar as P is resistantly in a contrary position at t.

5. At least one person P and time t are such that P was at t capable of relating personally to God but at t failed to believe that God exists, though not resistantly in a contrary position at t.

It follows from 4 and 5 that

6. No perfectly loving God exists.

It follows from 1 and 6 that

7. God does not exist.

In this statement of the argument I have used only formulations and words/phrases employed in DHHR (see especially pp. 28, 31). This applies even to my substitution of 'resistantly' for 'culpably,' which latter term is frequently seen in Chapter 1. A correction made after DHHR in my formulations of the argument involved referring specifically to resistance. But my mistake in DHHR was not a failure to emphasize the importance of resistance in this connection: readers will find several explicit references to it (e.g. pp. 29, 31). Rather, it was slipping from speaking of this *specific* form of culpability to speaking of culpability *generally* (see, e.g., pp. 38, 39), and ultimately committing the argument to the claim that there is nonbelief that in *no* way features culpability in its history. This is a stronger claim than the argument needs to make, as can be seen by considering 5 above, which quite properly refers only to the sort of culpability that involves resistance. Why did the slip occur? If I had to guess, I'd say that this particular form of culpable behaviour in the formation of nonbelief was so much on my mind that it swelled in my imagination to fill the entire category. In any case, as soon as an opportunity arose I corrected my mistake.

Another, more important change I made after DHHR, which involves the modality of the argument's premises, is invisible in the above formulation. Though I did not in DHHR rule out

the notion that my central premises were necessary truths, I subsequently came to think that this should more definitely be affirmed, and changed what I had to say accordingly. And so I would now say that premises 1 and 2 of this formulation are necessarily true. Independently, I would say the same of premise 3, and so the argument's first conclusion, 4, now comes out as a necessary truth.

A further terminological point worth emphasizing in this context concerns the term 'personal relationship.' This is a point that should have been clear from the very beginning, since I have emphasized it over and over, from 1993 on. But analytical philosophers exhibit an inclination, sometimes, to take a concept expressed in print and run with it, on their own, ignoring how the one who expressed it had wanted to use it. This is apparently especially tempting whenever an alternative analysis enables them to dispute ideas found disagreeable! In the present case, as I read the situation, such an inclination has had the consequence that philosophers have read into the term 'personal relationship' all manner of possibilities I have explicitly excluded. What I understand by the term is just what we usually mean by it: an interactive conscious relationship in which each party *recognizes* the other. But this has not prevented commentators from treating as a special insight, applicable in this context, that we could have *some* kind of relationship with God without even knowing it. Now, assuming one could show its relevance and significance, one might use this thought in an objection to premise 2, but people have often used it when objecting to premise 3, and used thus, it involves a straight misreading of what I have said.

There are other subtleties to take note of, but in a précis accurately named one cannot mention them all. So let me offer now a brief indication, against the backdrop of my previous remarks, of the fuller bulk of what I have contributed to the hiddenness discussion, placing this

summary within the framework of some other thoughts about God and the world which I have had since 1993.[3]

A common feature among humans is our tendency to think that the deepest reality must be deeper than the natural world studied by science. Such an enlarged conception of what there is can be either religious or nonreligious. Another division is between *personal* and *nonpersonal* religious conceptions of what is most ultimately real. Now a personal religious ultimate, one an understanding of which can fully be brought under the category of the personal, we may call God. And it is the existence of God that is opposed by hiddenness reasoning.

To argue against the existence of something, it helps to know what that something would be like if it *did* exist. The philosopher cannot long be distracted, when answering this question in the case of God, by the content of ordinary religious beliefs or scriptures such as the Bible. For these may offer only a crude or ill-formed picture of a personal divine reality. The philosopher must examine the general *idea* of God which all such representations entail. And so it helps to know that if what the idea of God conveys is true, then there exists a being who embodies personal perfection. (This is what is required to have a *religious* ultimate before our minds, which might properly evoke religious attitudes such as worship.) Thus a God would have not just power, but all power; not just knowledge but all knowledge; not just goodness and love but all goodness and perfect love.

It is the last of these attributes, the attribute of perfect love, that is central to the hiddenness argument. Often neglected in philosophy of religion is the fact that if there were a

[3] Here I shall borrow liberally from the brief Foreword I wrote for Dr. Chan's translated version of DHHR.

God who loved most perfectly, this God would not just exercise benevolence, doing good things from a distance for created beings like us. Such a God, reflection suggests, would draw close, enabling created beings with a capacity for personal relationship with God to participate in such relationship whenever thus capable. (A question worth pondering here: How could a *perfectly* loving being cause us to have this capacity, evidently so valued by love, but sometimes not permit us to exercise it? Also worthy of notice is that a God would have *ever more* to share, at ever more levels of a developing relationship with God.) When you truly love someone, whether that someone be a child, a spouse or a friend, you are willing to share of yourself in this way. The only thing that could, if God exists, ever prevent us from being able to participate in a relationship with God just by choosing to do so, according to the hiddenness argument, is our own *resistance* of relationship with God that has put us in a contrary position – this qualification is accepted because of the link commonly made between love and freedom.

If all God had to do to be perfectly loving was to heap good things on us from afar, then God might well be intentionally hidden from us. But if divine love is a bigger, richer concept in this way, then we will not find divine hiddenness, if God exists. For then anyone with the requisite capacities who is not resisting relationship with God will be able to participate in such relationship just by choosing to. (Notice the difference between saying this and saying that God would smother us with affection or make life easy for those who respond positively or be constantly present to our experience, interrupting the living of a normal creaturely life.) And this point, as I have sought to display, has an important consequence, namely, that unless their nonbelief is caused by resisting a relationship with God, someone with a capacity for such relationship *will never lack the belief that God exists*. For if you do not believe that God exists, then, for as long as your nonbelief persists, you are not able to participate in a personal

relationship with God just by choosing to: expressing gratitude for what you have experienced as a gift of God's grace or trying to find God's will for your life or experiencing God's gracious presence, recognizing it as such, or doing any of the hundred similar things that would be involved in a personal relationship with God. Belief of the sort at issue, as philosophers have regularly argued, is involuntary, so notice that it's not as though what would be lacking here is something we could produce ourselves at a moment's notice.

These points, as has by now become obvious, open up a way of arguing against God's existence: just find, among people with the capacities that would be evinced by such participation in relationship with God as I have described, some examples of nonbelief that are *not* caused by resistance of relationship with God. We may call such nonbelief *nonresistant nonbelief*. (DHHR, as I have noted, working with an earlier way of describing much the same thing, calls it inculpable or reasonable nonbelief.) Many people today who are not at all resistant toward relationship with God are left in a state of doubt about God, which is a kind of nonbelief, by the battle between other arguments about God's existence. Their doubt is not caused by resistance of God, as it would have to be to count as an instance of resistant nonbelief. So we have the interesting result that their inconclusive feeling about the *other* arguments is itself the basis for a *new* argument, the hiddenness argument, which we may hope will be more conclusive. But we do not need doubt to have nonbelief: there is also, for example, the nonbelief – the *clearly* nonresistant nonbelief – of all those who have never believed in God because they were hunter-gatherers, living at a time before the emergence of monotheism, and so lacking even access to the concept of God.

A final point for this summary: even if the hiddenness argument is successful, it does not follow that the human tendency to think that there is more to reality than the natural world,

mentioned above, is mistaken. The idea that nature is all there we call metaphysical naturalism. So I could also have said: it does not follow that metaphysical naturalism is true. Even if the idea of a personal ultimate is mistaken, some other non-naturalistic idea – perhaps even a religious idea – could be correct. From within a biologically evolutionary frame of reference we have to say that humans have just got started on thinking seriously about these big questions. There may still be a long way to go.

Every decade or so since 1993, I have revisited the hiddenness argument and tinkered with its formulation. When I published a short popular treatment of these issues in 2015,[4] the version I ended up with looked like this:

1. If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.
2. 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.

It follows from 1 and 2 that

3. If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
4. Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

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[4] *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015

It follows from 3 and 4 that

5. No perfectly loving God exists.

6. If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.

It follows from 5 and 6 that

7. God does not exist.

In the tinkering that my participation in this symposium has provoked, I have found myself moving back toward a formulation quite similar to the one that is most faithful to DHHR, found at the beginning of this précis. No doubt this is because Dr. Chan's translation has inspired me to have another look at what I originally wrote! It seems to me that the 2015 version, found just above, would benefit from explicit reference to the capacities that the hiddenness argument is looking to see exercised (the involvement of which is there left tacit) and also from a clearer reference to the role of belief in a relationship with God. That role is all-important, and so should be as clear as it can be. And working a reference to our capacities into the argument will not only, as earlier suggested, highlight the forceful theme of potential unfulfilled but also prompt recognition of a part of the picture of Divine love offered by the hiddenness argument that is often neglected in discussion, also by a number of misguided objections to the argument: namely, that if God is open to personal relationship in the way that perfect love would be, then a divine light appears with the dawn of the relevant capacities, remaining on unless we close our eyes.

So here is yet another attempt to express properly, convincingly the essential ideas. Notice that in it the notion of God's openness to relationship, which I have been emphasizing recently (also in 2015), and by which I mean no more than *not being closed*, is retained.

1. If God exists, then God is perfectly loving.

2. If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is *never closed* to personal relationship with created persons in the sense that nothing apart from their own resistance of God could prevent someone capable of such relationship from being in a position to participate in it (i.e., able to do so just by trying).

3. One is not in a position to participate in personal relationship with God if one does not believe that God exists.

It follows from 2 and 3 that

4. If a perfectly loving God exists, then nothing apart from their own resistance of God could prevent someone capable of personal relationship with God from believing that God exists.

5. People capable of personal relationship with God have sometimes been prevented from believing that God exists by causes entirely distinct from a resistance of God.

It follows from 4 and 5 that

6. No perfectly loving God exists.

It follows from 1 and 6 that

7. God does not exist.

But I would be equally happy if commentators used the very first version of the hiddenness argument stated above, drawn from DHHR.[5]

[5] One virtue is perhaps more clearly possessed by my final formulation, given just above, than by the others. This is that it should make it hard for commentators to forget that the only resistance of God they may relevantly mention is a resistance that *causes the nonbeliever's nonbelief.*