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## **Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy**

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### ***1. General background to the arguments***

Planet Earth has been hosting life for about 3.5 billion years now. Anatomically modern humans arose some 200,000 years ago; behaviourally modern humans practicing something we might recognize as religion probably a good deal later, perhaps as recently as 50,000 years ago. And only a few thousand years ago – in the final tenth of that 50,000 years – did the Earth's current religious traditions and systematic inquiry in philosophy and science come into being.

At 200,000 years of age, *Homo sapiens* is still a fairly young and spry species – its ancestor *Homo erectus* endured more than seven times as long. And the consensus view in science is that Earth will remain habitable for at least another billion years. So especially if we put our much vaunted inventiveness to work in the right way, our species may just be starting out on its evolutionary journey. Even if our staying power only matches that of *H. erectus*, if religion survives as long as we do we have just completed *1/30th* of the total lifespan of human religion. And if we think of that future billion years instead, and allow our imaginations to contemplate intelligent species that may follow us and out-do us in every way, we will see that we *may* have just completed the first and also the least mature *20,000th* of the total history of religion on our planet.

Applying scientific timescales in this way does rather put things in perspective! There is a Great Disparity here between past and potential future that – given our humbly evolved brains

and the timescales they can comfortably manage – we ignore all too easily.<sup>1</sup> Suppose we now bring human philosophy into the discussion. Science has produced intellectual wonders, given our inventiveness and despite those limited brains, though often only by resisting what seems natural or intuitive. But philosophy has in its sights even more fundamental and much tougher questions, for which nothing analogous to scientific methods has yet been devised. And here our results are, it must be admitted, less spectacular. At least so far. Certainly this is the case if the inability of many minds to achieve anything close to reasoned consensus on answers to these questions is taken as dimming the light of achievement.

Among the questions philosophy has addressed in its extremely short life, even shorter than religion's, are of course questions *about* religion, which offers its own (quite divergent) answers to fundamental questions – usually ones featuring ideas of realities beyond nature and of the special experiences and practices involved in coming to know them. Given the temporal context I have set out, and its own modest track record, philosophy's task could hardly be regarded as complete before it has thoroughly examined a representative set of the distinctive ideas about fundamental questions to be found in religion as we know it today around the world, and sought to determine their intellectual status. This has not yet occurred. And that is not all. For given the (epistemically) possible primitivity of the species, philosophy clearly ought also to be open to important variations on religious themes that haven't been thought of yet – willing to stretch the religious imagination to see what else it may yield.

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<sup>1</sup>Notice that I speak only of what *may* be the case, and so nothing said here implies what is sometimes called a progressive view of evolution – a view that sees evolutionary processes as inherently such as to lead to improvement over time. Whether we or other intelligent species can help to *make* evolution progressive is another question.

These parts of philosophy's task clearly fall to what we call *philosophy of religion*. But in the west – and I expect I am writing mainly for western readers – philosophy of religion has been largely preoccupied with one religious idea, that of theism, and it looks to be moving into a narrower and deeper version of this preoccupation, one focused on specifically Christian ideas, rather than broadening out and coming to grips with its full task.<sup>2</sup> Though distressing, given the temporal context as I have set it out, this is perhaps not surprising. Religion has a powerful hold on many human beings, including human thinkers. And the nascent field of study known as cognitive science of religion (CSR) has already provided striking evidence of the powerful hold *agential* religious ideas – ideas of personal gods or of a personal God – might be expected to have on our minds, given our evolutionary heritage.<sup>3</sup>

Here the fact of metaphysically naturalistic approaches in philosophy, flushed with the success of natural explanations in science, might seem to push in another direction. But it is interesting to see that it does not. For most naturalists too assume that theistic *God*-centered religion must succeed if any does. Naturalism or theism. These seem to be the only options that many see. The harshest critics of religion, including philosophers such as Daniel Dennett, seem to think *their* job is done when they have, to their own satisfaction, criticized personalistic,

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<sup>2</sup>I take it that the recent rise of 'analytic theology' is symptomatic here – and this primarily because its proponents and practitioners appear to think it doesn't matter whether what they are doing is called theology or philosophy. See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible Within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy," in Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Without properly taking account of our place in time, many theistic thinkers appear to regard these developments as possibly spelling an advantage for their view. See, for example, Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (New York: Altamira Press, 2004).

*agential* conceptions of a divine reality. Dennett, specifically, tells us that “religion without *God* or *gods* is like a vertebrate without a backbone” (emphasis in the original).<sup>4</sup>

Now it may not be enough here to point Dennett in the direction of non-theistic non-western religious ideas. Perhaps because of the sorts of cognitive factors emphasized by CSR, even non-theistic traditions like Buddhism and Taoism, *at the popular level*, still involve much urgent worship of and supplication to god-like personal beings. Dennett has a point, and early CSR results may support it. It takes work for human beings to think of the divine as something other than or more than personal. That – or certain special experiences often called mystical. The presence of the latter gives the lie to the notion that our brains must inevitably configure apparent divine revelations personally. Experiences appearing to be of a very different and altogether more mysterious and puzzling divine reality also occur throughout the world, even if their number is relatively small; and those who have them include some of the most profoundly good and wise among us.<sup>5</sup>

Such is the (most general) background I need for the arguments I will make and entertain. Much of this background will be common knowledge for my readers. All of it should be.

## ***2. Ultimate hiddenness***

As already suggested, in human philosophy’s engagement with religion there have over time –

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>For some interesting and relevant evidence acquired by a religion journalist, see Winifred Gallagher: *Spiritual Genius: The Mastery of Life’s Meaning* (New York: Random House, 2002).

*human* time – arisen certain reasoned defences of the claim that the ultimate divine reality is a God, a being unsurpassably great who is a person or very much like a person, possessing all power, all knowledge, all goodness and having created every other concrete thing. Arguments against the existence of such a being have of course also emerged and been discussed. Now in the present climate of ‘theism or naturalism,’ it will easily be assumed that the latter arguments are implicitly arguments for a *naturalistic* picture of ultimate reality. This fits well with awareness of the bias in favour of a science-oriented picture of the fundamental nature of things that was mentioned earlier. (Some theists may see even the content of the previous section of this paper as expressing such a bias.) And given awareness of this bias, one may reasonably ask: why should we privilege *that* ultimate narrative over others, such as our God-centered one, to which much human experience attests?

I have said that this is a reasonable question. And it is. Indeed, I take it that one of the interesting consequences of a temporalist sensitivity of the sort recommended in the previous section is that we come to notice how *science itself helps us see its reasonableness*. At perhaps a very early stage of evolutionary development, we should – as I have already suggested – remain open to learning that nature isn’t all there is. But such temporalism by the same token suggests that any restriction of non-naturalistic alternatives to theism would be an error. It is indeed other, religious pictures of ultimacy *such* as the God-centered one to which we should attend in the philosophy of religion at an early stage of inquiry.

To facilitate my own discussion of such matters (I hope it will also be helpful for others), I have introduced the non-theistic label ‘ultimism’ to stand for the more general religious idea of

a reality that is triply ultimate: metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically.<sup>6</sup> Theism entails ultimism, but the converse does not hold. This means that ultimism provides breathing room for other conceptions of the divine – both those extant and those we may develop in the future. Of course other general conceptions might also be utilized for this purpose. We might, for example, speak somewhat more modestly of triple transcendence rather than of triple ultimacy. But theism is an ultimistic idea, and so ultimism allows us to expose most clearly the idea of alternatives to theism. And a frame of reference sensitive to temporalist considerations may greatly increase our interest in those alternatives. Philosophers of religion should develop and examine *various* elaborations of ultimism, ready to find one or another of them well supported so as to gain great metaphysical and spiritual illumination but equally ready – given our place in time – to learn that each or any is an early and unsuccessful attempt to say what a religious Ultimate would be, or that the notion of a religious Ultimate is incoherent or for some other reason clearly is *not* instantiated in any way. (This allows us to at least begin to see the difference between philosophy of religion and any form of theology. Theology appropriately assumes that there *is* an ultimate divine reality, and typically will take the parameters of *one* detailed conception of such a reality as its own.)

We are ready now to introduce the basic hiddenness idea. Assuming only a temporalist sensitivity and an ultimistic framework for religious investigation, what might we say about the concept of divine hiddenness? It will, I expect, seem very natural to say that the nature of the ultimate divine reality, should there be one, might very well lie far outside the grasp of evolved

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<sup>6</sup>This label was first introduced in my *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), chapter 1.

humans at an early stage of investigation. Even if there is a divine reality, *that* there is and *what* it is might alike be hidden from us, at least in the sense that many lack the belief that there is such a reality and/or a true belief as to what it is. This should not be at all surprising. And the fact that it should not be surprising, properly understood, adds fuel to the religious quest.

Things may however be very different when we turn our attention to this or that *elaborated* ultimism, such as theism. Perhaps the detailed content added by such an elaboration to the general content of ultimism will suffice to – in some sense – make hiddenness *surprising* rather than something that we might well expect to find. Perhaps we will even see that the general or wide availability for such finite persons as there may be of the relevant form of religious belief is *entailed* by some such claim, and, noting that religious belief as found in the world today is not thus configured, rightly conclude that the claim is false.

Just this is what a certain hiddenness argument I have developed alleges in response to theism's elaboration of ultimism – an elaboration that, as we have seen, employs the concept of a *person*. My central question in the present essay is how philosophy should regard this argument for atheism (i.e., for the denial of personal ultimism). It is important to notice that because of the general background filled in by the previous section, if the hiddenness argument is successful in philosophy, the right response will not be to infer that naturalism is true but only that the religious quest continues.

### ***3. Personal love and openness to relationship***

Central to the hiddenness argument is an emphasis on the value in persons of a sort of love involving openness to relationship. Before setting out that argument, it will be good to spend

some time with the concepts and claims involved here.

First, let's notice what theism's (or personal ultimism's) axiological component entails. The Ultimate, if a person, would have to be an *unsurpassably great* person.<sup>7</sup> The value of power and knowledge as well as benevolence in persons is commonly highlighted by philosophers who spell out the content of theism. But, although neglected, the value of love in persons is certainly no less obvious.<sup>8</sup> So we have to say that an unsurpassably great person could not be other than *unsurpassably loving* toward other persons.

But what sort of love are we supposing to be a great-making property if we say this? The first thing to note is implicit in the previous paragraph: love of the sort in question is more than just goodness as commonly construed, which is to say more than just benevolence. This 'more' involves being in some way aimed at relationship – a conscious and reciprocal relationship that is positively meaningful, allowing for a deep sharing. Call such a relationship a *personal* relationship.<sup>9</sup> Even supreme benevolence may be expressible from a distance. But the one who

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<sup>7</sup>I'm assuming we have got our present understanding of a person in view for the purpose of this elaboration of ultimism; otherwise all bets are off. Perhaps the concept of a person will evolve in the future of culture in such a way as to allow for possibilities that our present concept does not allow for, but the theistic elaboration of ultimism I have in mind is built only from materials presently available.

<sup>8</sup>One philosopher who has not neglected love – who, indeed, has had a lot more to say about it than I have – is Eleonore Stump. See especially chapters 5 and 6 of her recent *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Developing a view held by Aquinas, but with subtle reasoning of her own and attention to competing accounts in the recent philosophical literature, Stump argues that love includes two intertwined desires, a desire for the good of the other and a desire for union. This view is broadly in line with my own emphasis on God being open to personal relationship instead of just exercising benevolence from a distance, discussed below.

<sup>9</sup>Philosophers are very good at distinguishing kinds of things, including kinds of



loves desires to come close to the object of love. The one who loves desires to share *herself* in personal relationship, and is of this disposition so as long as love persists.

This is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in human life. Quite the contrary: the disposition involved here is well known, widely regarded as being of great value in a person. The paradigms of love known to us, such as loving parents or siblings or friends, have no trouble maintaining it always. So why have philosophers of religion tended to ignore it when thinking about the properties that a personal Ultimate would have to possess? I will not enter into this issue here, except to say that it may be recent cultural evolution outside theology – including the work of feminists, and all those who have loosened the grip on us of the ‘strong and solitary male’ which even much traditional theology reflects – that we have to thank here. This makes virtually unavoidable for us in the twenty-first century an important insight concerning the great value of relational love, and forces philosophers who have been visited by this insight to apply it when giving content to personal ultimism.

As my reference to sharing already suggests, love does *entail* benevolence even if it also goes beyond it. At least if we are looking for a great-making property that ought to be built into a personal form of ultimism, we will say that love desires to express benevolence within the context of a personal relationship that is valued for its own sake. Obviously God has a great deal to give within the context of such a relationship – more than any other possible lover! – so the component of benevolence will help us see how relational love must be a great-making property

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relationships, and it may be tempting for some to ignore the specific content I am giving to ‘personal relationship’ here and to suppose it sufficient for the relevant sort of love that *some* kind of relationship be made possible. That temptation should be resisted by anyone who can see that love of the sort I have in mind is a great-making property and intends to take seriously the argument to follow.

in God. But the emphasis on valuing personal relationship ‘for its own sake’ is at least as important, and it arises here for two main reasons.<sup>10</sup>

First, valuing personal relationship for its own sake belongs to the very nature of such love. Robert Adams puts this well: “The ideal of Christian love includes not only benevolence but also desire for certain kinds of personal relationship, for their own sake. Were that not so, it would be strange to call it ‘love.’ It is an abuse of the word ‘love’ to say that one *loves* a person...if one does not care, except instrumentally, about one’s relation to that object.”<sup>11</sup>

Second, if God seeks personal relationship with capable finite persons, God must do so for its own sake since God will value the persons involved in the relationship for *their* own sakes. God’s valuing for its own sake a relationship with a person, in other words, can be seen as a function of God’s valuing each relatum of the relationship for its own sake.

This idea will perhaps be more controversial, so let’s spell it out. If God values a finite person for her own sake then God values for its own sake whatever makes her the person she is as distinct from other persons. This will involve valuing for their own sake whatever central dispositions contribute to making her the person she is as distinct from other persons. But then when the behavioral and other dispositions of that person *express* those central dispositions in a positively meaningful way, as will be the case when they relate her personally to God, God will

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<sup>10</sup>There is also a third which I shall only briefly mention. We are explicating a sort of love that is necessarily tied to the valuing of personal relationship. But where relationship is valued only instrumentally it will only contingently be connected to one’s aims (perhaps in another situation there would be something better I could do for you than seeking to be personally related to you).

<sup>11</sup>Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 187-188.

likewise value for its own sake the former dispositions. Hence if they do relate her personally to God, then God must value this side of the relationship for its own sake. From the other side, and at the same time, if God values God's own being for its own sake then this will in a similar way lead to God valuing for its own sake the dispositions involved should God become personally related to the other individual, which must express God's intrinsically valuable nature, and thus to God valuing this side of the relationship for its own sake. But if God values both sides of the relationship for their own sakes, then God must value the relationship as a whole for its own sake. Now God, being perfect, *will* value God's own being and that of *every* other person for its own sake, recognizing their great intrinsic value. It follows that it is a normative fact about God's relation to finite persons, and not just a fact about the nature of love, that when God loves such persons, God values a relationship with them for its own sake.<sup>12</sup>

The little phrase 'for its own sake' in my earlier statement "love seeks to express benevolence within the context of a personal relationship that is valued for its own sake" is therefore rather important here – much more important than many realize who have discussed the

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<sup>12</sup>A few comments on this reasoning. If God values me for my own sake then it must be me as distinct from other persons that is valued. A generic valuing of me as an instance of humanity, for example, would hardly do. For then if another human were instantaneously substituted for me, nothing would change: an instance of humanity would remain available for valuing. But surely if God values me for my own sake and I ceased to exist, something of value *would be* lost. A problem may also seem to arise for the case where a finite person is evil. How could God value for their own sake the central dispositions of such a person? Well, either the person retains a capacity for relationship with God or not. If not, then the case is irrelevant to our discussion, as will be seen in a moment. If so, then there must be something of redeeming value that remains. We should also not neglect to notice that we cannot infer from the fact that some *actual humans* are evil that God would create or allow to come into existence evil beings, without illegitimately assuming that our world is created by God and thus that God exists. As I shall be emphasizing later on, a philosopher must remain open to the possibility that if God would create persons at all, these would be persons very different from those that actually exist.

hiddenness argument.<sup>13</sup> The distinctive attitude of love is aimed at personal relationship – *benevolently* aimed, to be sure, but still aimed at personal relationship, and, especially in God, for its own sake too. Without being aimed at personal relationship for its own sake, an attitude cannot count as Divine love.

Let us now approach the matter of what the hiddenness argument needs from this account of love by distinguishing certain attitudes toward personal relationship a God might be said to have whose love involved being ‘aimed at’ personal relationship with finite creatures. Notice that if God is unsurpassably loving, then God must always love finite creatures and so the attitude will be one that we should expect God always to display. We might, I suppose, consider a disposition to *force* personal relationship on finite persons – though that can also swiftly be excluded because of its incompatibility with any number of divine attributes, and probably also with the nature of a personal relationship. We might further consider God always *valuing* personal relationship, or *seeking* personal relationship, or *desiring* personal relationship, or *strongly promoting or preserving* personal relationship through such things as signs and wonders or overwhelmingly powerful religious experiences, and also God always *being open* to personal relationship. Seeking presumably would here include both desiring and valuing but could operate subtly and without strong promotion. (Later there will be an emphasis on believing that God exists, but it is very important to distinguish between being in such a state of belief and God being present to one’s experience – let alone overwhelmingly present or displayed through signs and wonders.) Such seeking, at a minimum, seems required by any love that is by its very nature

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent example, see C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 163-164.

aimed at personal relationship, and seeking normally requires openness. (I say ‘normally’ because there are possible and generally unusual circumstances in which a lover may lack the resources to accommodate the possible *consequences* of openness, that is, to make them consistent with the flourishing of all relevant parties and of any relationship that may exist or come to exist between them. But since God is not such a lover, we may ignore this qualification hereafter.<sup>14</sup>) It is this openness to which the hiddenness argument will appeal, so let’s have a closer look at it.

If one is always open in the sense I intend then, even if one does not actively seek or promote personal relationship with another person capable of participating in such relationship (i.e., possessing the cognitive and affective properties required to do so<sup>15</sup>), one makes sure that there is nothing one ever does (in a broad sense including omissions) that would have the result of making such relationship *unavailable* to the other, preventing her from being able to relate personally to one when she tries to do so. So for God to always be open to personal relationship with a relevantly capable finite person P in a manner expressing unsurpassable love is for God to ensure that there is never something *God* does that prevents P from being able, should she seek to do so, to participate in personal relationship with God just by trying. Let us say that if P is thus able, at a time, then P is *in a position* to exercise her relevant capacities at that time and to then participate in personal relationship with God. (Notice that none of this implies that participation

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<sup>14</sup> I have given much argument in support of this latter claim elsewhere. Some of it is summarized toward the end of section 4.

<sup>15</sup> In the case of personal relationship with God, these would involve such things as a capacity at the time in question to feel the presence of God, recognizing it as such; a capacity to exhibit attitudes of trust, gratitude, and obedience to God, and so on.

in personal relationship with God, should P decide in favor of it, would be easy: perhaps it will be hard to relate properly to God.) *P* may not want relationship or even to be reminded of her religious options, and so may through resistance of God, which would have to involve self-deception, herself produce a situation in which she is unable to relate personally to God, just like that, without first undoing the behaviour that led to it. But unless *P* is resistant in this way at a time, *P* will find it possible to to participate in personal relationship with God should she try, and to do so then. Never will *P* find the door to such relationship closed. This, at the very minimum, is required if God unsurpassably loves *P* in a manner aimed at personal relationship with *P*. It would be, to use Adams's word, an "abuse" of the word 'love' to say that God displays unsurpassable love towards finite persons, of the sort distinct from bare benevolence and aimed at personal relationship, if one were to think of God as doing any less.

It may be replied, however, that the word 'open' I am using wins its rhetorical power illicitly, by suggesting that not to be 'open' means to be 'closed' and thus not even *desiring* a personal relationship. There is the possibility of partial openness or quasi-openness – openness need not be an all-or-nothing business. Even if at a certain time I am unable to participate in relationship with God *then*, God may still make it possible for me to do things that will make such a relationship available to me in the future. Wouldn't this count as a sort of openness to personal relationship on the part of God?

But for God's attitude toward personal relationship with you *at the time in question* the word 'closed' is perfectly appropriate. It's important not to get distracted from this point. And if it is hard to see why consistent openness should be built into our idea of God's unsurpassable love, then it may be worthwhile contemplating a bit more the paradigms of loving people in our

experience, mentioned earlier. For such people – parents, siblings, friends, teachers – such consistent openness is taken quite for granted: this is where things *start* in the story of their interaction with us. It would be absurd for someone to take as a *goal* someone else’s openness to relationship with them while holding that they are already unsurpassably loving toward them.

Notice the fit here between such an emphasis on love and personal ultimism’s *soteriological* component. Theism, to count as a religious idea, must have soteriological content: it must be possible for the value of the Ultimate to be in some way communicated to finite persons, if we are working with a religious notion. The concept of ultimism helps us keep this point in focus. And it is natural, when thinking about the soteriological content of theism, to understand it in terms of personal relationship with the person who is Divine. Love seeks just such relationship. So there is a match between axiology and soteriology here, as well as a religious and philosophical grounding for the hiddenness argument’s emphasis on the openness to personal relationship entailed by God’s love.

Some theistic religious traditions – for example, the Christian tradition – have emphasized love in a similar way, but this alone is not a good reason for philosophers, seeking to understand a personal form of ultimism, to include such an emphasis. Nor should philosophers be influenced by the *ambivalence* about love one will quickly note when one looks beneath the surface of the traditions in question. “Yes, God loves us, but an explicit personal relationship with God may not always be possible because of mysterious divine purposes.” Or: “Yes, God loves us, but an explicit personal relationship with God is often to be enjoyed in heaven not here on Earth.” It is not hard to see why the ambivalence arises: the reason is the very hiddenness problem that this essay is about, combined with theology’s prerogative to assume that the way the world is somehow reflects the purposes of God. It cannot be overstated that philosophy has

no such prerogative. It has no right to say such a thing as that God's love should be interpreted in a limited way because this is all that is compatible with the actual world, and we know that God exists and has created the actual world! Again, this is not philosophy but theology. Philosophy should take the concept of an ultimate divine reality and think for itself about what a *personal* filling out of such a concept amounts to. When it does, it cannot help recognizing and without ambivalence affirming the importance of unsurpassable love. If that should lead, as the hiddenness argument says it does lead, to the conclusion that no personal Ultimate actually exists, then philosophy must give up that idea and move on to consider others.

#### ***4. The hiddenness argument***

The form I shall give to the hiddenness argument in a moment reflects what I regard as the importance of starting 'far enough back' or reasoning 'from above,' using necessary truths as premises wherever possible. The strongest hiddenness reasoning will *be* thus grounded, instead of reasoning 'from below', perhaps with the absence of signs and wonders for religious seekers too swiftly read into hiddenness language by the one who wishes to use it in defense of atheism. The sort of approach most likely to yield durable results involves working out what hiddenness-related facts would be absent from the world if an unsurpassably great person were present in it, allowing the problematic phenomenon to *emerge* and receive its shape from reflection on the idea of God of the sort that is found in the previous section. This is what I mean by starting 'from above.' Furthermore, by seeking to have as premises only necessary truths about persons and about love (or else evident empirical facts), the argument can hope to find a hearing even in a climate of evolutionary skepticism of the sort that might be produced by careful reflection on considerations such as those set out in section 1.



As already stated, the hiddenness argument is focused on a requirement of openness to personal relationship. A doxastic consequence of this requirement is exposed by the following general principle about openness and non-openness. I call it *Not Open* because it identifies a condition in which, at a certain time, a person B clearly is not open to personal relationship with a second person A:

*Not Open*

Necessarily, if a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with a person B, is at some time in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that B exists, *where B at that time knows this and could ensure that A's nonbelief is at that time changed to belief*, then it is not the case that B is open at the time in question to having a personal relationship with A then.

After all, a personal relationship is a conscious, reciprocal relationship, and a conscious relationship is a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in. Given these facts, one clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without *believing that the other party exists*. Now belief, as most contemporary philosophers would agree, is involuntary in the sense that one cannot choose to believe something at a time just by trying to. So by not revealing his existence B is doing something that makes it impossible for A to participate in personal relationship with B at the relevant time even should she try to do so, and this, according to our definition of openness, is precisely what is involved in B's not being open to having such a relationship with A then.

Perhaps someone will still be inclined to resist at this point by saying that *hope* or even a

certain kind of beliefless *faith* could take the place of belief, at least at the start of a meaningful conscious relationship, and so B can be open to such relationship with A even while not enabling the belief in question for A.<sup>16</sup> Applying this to the religious case, if at some later stage belief arose, and at the end of her life the person in question were to be asked when she thinks her personal relationship with God began, would she be *mistaken* if she were to pick the time when her religious hope or faith began, rather than the time when she came to believe?

Well, if she uses the phrase ‘personal relationship’ in the same way we are using it she would be – a conscious relationship is one you recognize yourself to be in as opposed to hoping you’re in. (One can’t solve the hiddenness problem just by noting that the terms it employs and to which it gives certain senses can be used in different senses.) But to get at the deeper issue here: when belief comes to the person in our thought experiment, who had thought there might be no God, the change of her perceived relation to God will be a change not just in degree but in *kind*. It is much different than, say, a move from hoping with intensity  $x$  that God exists to hoping this with intensity  $x + 1$  or even  $x + 20$ . Indeed, in a very real sense now *everything* has changed for her, for what she hoped has (as she sees it) come true! And it is in part because of this difference for the one she loves that the one who loves him will naturally want this to be where things *start* in the story of their interaction, as mentioned before. So from both perspectives, the perspective of the lover and that of the one loved, the relationship made possible by belief is a different relationship than any left to subsist on hope or nonbelieving faith.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>I am grateful to Daniel Howard-Snyder for pressing me on this point.

<sup>17</sup>For those who disagree, I note that, without losing force, the argument about to be stated could be slightly revised to meet their objection. Just revise (4) in such a way that, instead

Against this background, together with the more general background provided by the previous three sections of this paper, the force of the hiddenness argument for philosophers looking to assess a personal elaboration of ultimism may be apparent:

- (1) If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be. [Premise]
- (2) 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. [Premise]
- (3) 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. [1, 2 by Hypothetical Syllogism].
- (4) If for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal

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of referring to nonresistant nonbelief, it refers to *nonresistantly being in a cognitive condition, in relation to the proposition that God exists, that is incompatible with then being able to participate in a personal relationship with God just by trying should one seek to do so*, with this cognitive condition conjunctively construed, cashed out in terms of being nonbelieving *and* without nonbelieving faith *and* without nonbelieving hope. And then also make the appropriate corresponding revisions elsewhere in the argument. I myself think this cognitive condition need not be thus construed, since it clearly is as stated in the text. But even if you disagree, by introducing a conjunctive alternative you will not prevent the hiddenness argument from succeeding, since there are or have been plenty of finite persons, capable of personal relationship with God and nonresistant, who instantiate all of its conjuncts.

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. [Premise]

- (5) 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. [3, 4 by Hypothetical Syllogism]
- (6) 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. [Premise]
- (7) It is not the case that God exists. [5, 6 by Modus Tollens].

The argument is evidently deductively valid, so any assessment will restrict itself to considering whether the premises are true or properly accepted as true. The first premise of the argument records an impression as to what it would take for a personal being to be axiologically ultimate that it will be hard for any philosopher today to reject, whatever may have been the case at earlier stages of cultural evolution. The second premise encapsulates the openness requirement that we have seen to represent the very minimum of what might be associated with unsurpassable love. The third premise ((4) in the argument) learns from the principle that I have called *Not Open* and

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our discussion thereof above. But it may be worth underlining its evident truth by simply asking ourselves: how can anyone express gratitude for what she has experienced as a gift of God's grace or try to find God's will for her life or recognize God's forgiveness and support or know God's encouraging presence or do or experience any of the hundred similar things involved in a conscious, reciprocal relationship with God *if she does not believe that God exists*? It's impossible. To be grateful to someone in the manner of conscious relationship, you have to believe they exist. The same holds for trying to figure out what they favour or recognizing that they've forgiven you, or are offering you moral support and their encouraging presence. So the third premise of the argument, like the others mentioned so far, seems clearly to be a necessary truth. And the last premise of the argument ((6) above), though not a necessary truth, states an evident empirical fact: there are and often have been *nonresistant nonbelievers*.

Those without a true philosophical interest in the argument may look for some way to defeat it instead of considering in a philosophical spirit and for philosophical purposes whether it is on to something, and it may accordingly be hard for them not to misinterpret it in one way or another. (Perhaps this helps to explain at least some of the misinterpretations to which the argument has been subject in its short 25-year history.<sup>18</sup>) It is really a fairly simple and straightforward argument, and it would be ironic if all the efforts I have made to explain its concepts and show how its various moves can be defended should be taken as evidence that it is very complex, or controversial even among non-theists, or that it deals in the obscure: this too

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<sup>18</sup>In a two-part discussion in *Religious Studies* in 2005, the entire first part was devoted to explaining misinterpretations of the argument. See "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41 (2005), 201- 215.

would be a misinterpretation! But because the argument has so often been subject to misinterpretation, let me underline some of the main mistakes that might be made here but should scrupulously be avoided.

(i) The argument does not say, in its first premise, that a God would be unsurpassably loving toward *us* or toward *human beings*. Indeed, that premise is compatible with God not creating any finite persons at all. This is as it should be if the argument is a philosophical and not a theological argument. Only the latter sort of argument could assume that God would create at all, or that when God creates, we are going to be among the results. All of this is more important than it may seem, since if the finite persons referred to by the argument are thought to be human beings, then it may mistakenly be supposed that facts about human beings determine whether God has reason to permit nonresistant nonbelief or not.<sup>19</sup>

(ii) Unsurpassable love, as understood in the argument and as discussed above, is not reducible to unsurpassable benevolence but also involves seeking personal relationship for its own sake.

(iii) Not just any sort of relationship that might merit the label ‘personal’ can be

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<sup>19</sup>A helpful example is provided by the previously mentioned discussion of love in Eleonore Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness*, which we have already found to be in parts relevant to the hiddenness discussion. This discussion also features Stump’s meditations on the negative implications, for easily attained closeness between humans and between humans and God, of what moral psychology reveals about our struggles with psychic integration. But while these meditations may well have important consequences for a *theology* of hiddenness which can assume that God exists and has created human beings, and also that (as Stump suggests) we human beings are dealing with the consequences of the Fall, they are not easily made relevant here without the dubious assumption that no possible finite persons struggle less with psychic integration than we do. In any case, it is indeed *closeness* between persons with which Stump is concerned, and although closeness may be a goal of personal relationship as here construed, it is not a precondition.

substituted for what the argument is talking about: love of the sort that takes us beyond benevolence and is clearly a great-making property seeks for its own sake a conscious, reciprocal relationship with the beloved, as we have seen above.

(iv) Being in a position to participate in a personal relationship with God at a time *t* is not the same as being able at *t* to do things that might *in the future* bring about a personal relationship with God. For what it *is* to be in such a position, see above.

(v) The argument nowhere states or implies that God should *bring about* a personal relationship between God and finite persons but only that God would make it the case that every capable person is always in a position to participate in such relationship – able to do so just by trying (should she seek to do so) -- in so far as he or she is nonresistant.

(vi) The argument nowhere states or implies that God's *presence* would be felt by all, let alone felt overwhelmingly, but only that all who are nonresistant would believe that God exists.

(vii) As suggested above, nothing in the argument gives credence to the idea that what finite persons would be able to do 'just by trying' would be *easy* or, more generally, that participating in personal relationship with God would be a joy ride. More generally still, we should note that there can be innumerable *styles* of personal relationship with God and that it is an error to focus on a single troublesome style, suggesting that the hiddenness argument is committed to it. Eleonore Stump provides a nice example of the resources available to the hiddenness argument here. Noting that a friendship between us and God might be problematic because of the danger that either God will dominate us or we will be spoiled by God, she also offers a solution that doesn't require a lack of openness on the part of God to personal

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relationship or even a lack of friendship: petitionary prayer, which, as she puts it, functions as a kind of “buffer.”<sup>20</sup>

(viii) The argument does not claim that God will intervene in the lives of nonresistant believers to give them evidence sufficient for belief, but rather states (at (5)) that if God exists, *there will never be any nonresistant nonbelievers.*

(ix) It will not suffice, to show (6) false, if one can show that reflective *doubters* in the Western world *today* are all resisting belief in God. I think that’s clearly false too, but what makes the last premise of the argument clearly true, as claimed earlier, is that the category of nonresistant nonbelievers the argument can work with is so broad, including not just reflective doubters but also those who never have had a real chance to *think* about God; and not just people living today but all finite persons capable of believing in God and responding positively to such belief *who have ever lived* – which of course takes us back very far indeed into evolutionary history.

If the argument is approached in a true philosophical spirit, and such interpretive errors are avoided, then I think it will be seen to constitute a formidable philosophical challenge to the belief that ultimism is personally exemplified. But are there also formidable challenges *to the argument* that might be raised, when mistaken approaches are avoided? In my view, the best that can be done against the argument is to reason that there are or may be *other* properties of God – properties other than unsurpassable love – that receive due acknowledgment in what we say *overall* about the unsurpassable greatness of God only if we moderate what the argument is

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<sup>20</sup>Eleonore Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), 81-91.



asking us to accept about love. In particular, it may be argued that there are or may be *great goods* that an unsurpassably great personal Divine would wish to have but cannot have without permitting, at least for someone and for some time, nonresistant nonbelief. In emphasizing this, the critic must either say that the idea of truly unsurpassable love in God has to be given up or is cast into question *or* that we should change our understanding of what unsurpassable love requires in order to accommodate the thought of such goods. Either way, our attention is turned to that idea of a ‘greater goods’ defense against the hiddenness problem.

Here we see one way in which someone might think the hiddenness problem to be very close to the problem of evil.<sup>21</sup> There is no room in this paper for detailed discussion of particular such defenses. But, as it turns out, that may not be needed. A greater goods defense is less impressive in hiddenness terrain than it is in relation to the problem of evil – and this in large part precisely because of what can be done with the emphasis on personal relationship that is central to the hiddenness argument. For example, free will may be a greater good of considerable significance when the question is whether a *supremely benevolent* God might permit *pain and suffering*. But the free will defense is much harder to apply to the hiddenness problem. Free will could be exercised in many ways even if everyone believed in God from their first reflective moment. Indeed, free will could be exercised precisely in response to God’s loving openness, since one would still have to decide whether to participate in personal relationship with God or

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<sup>21</sup>There are other ways too, but I have elsewhere argued that none is sufficient to show that the hiddenness challenge is not importantly distinct from the challenge presented by the problem of evil. For my most recent work on this topic, see “Evil, Hiddenness, and Atheism,” a chapter in Paul Moser and Chad Meister, *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, forthcoming.

not, and also how. And such a choice would be newly available at various points along the way, in one's relationship with God, because one would be growing and maturing, and encountering new environments. Here I must issue a reminder that belief in God need not be produced through some brilliant display of celestial pyrotechnics. Religious experience, subtly modulated so as to meet the needs of every moment and the psychological quirks of individuals, is also possible. Thus the free will of those who always believe in God need not be compromised.

This approach can be turned into a general strategy which takes the idea of personal relationship with God and runs with it. Consider an *unending, evergrowing* personal relationship with God. This would be commodious enough to allow for the realization, *within such relationship*, of the very goods that God is said to be unable to achieve without preventing it from even getting started, or of other goods belonging to the same type. For example, if the idea is that we must be able to make, not just any old free choices, but *seriously wrong* choices in order to be responsible for our characters, and that being thus responsible is a great good for which the permission of nonresistant nonbelief is necessary, it may be observed that character can be moulded not only by choosing what is good instead of what is bad but by choosing what is good *for its own sake instead of for purely self-interested reasons*, and that the moral freedom to make or cultivate the latter sort of choice does not require one to be unable to be in a relationship with God but rather is a sort of freedom that flourishes within it.

Likewise, if the good that we are asked to consider is the good of searching after God, displaying a deep yearning for the Ultimate Good, we can again reply that an instance of the type of goodness to which this good belongs is available within personal relationship with God: given the infinite richness of the divine, such relationship would be multi-dimensional, potentially

moving from one level to another everlastingly and continually calling forth a deeper yearning for the Good that is God.<sup>22</sup> This can be seen just by reflection on the concept of God. But if the same goods or goods of the same type as the critic appeals to are in this way available within personal relationship with God, then given that openness to such relationship would have to be compromised for them to be made available otherwise, the hiddenness arguer has a powerful reason to deny that God would choose the latter course. Indeed, since theists will accept that in an important sense every good is in God, it is hard to see how a greater goods defense against the hiddenness problem could succeed: instances of any good to which the critic will or could appeal may be brought within the purview of finite persons experiencing an endless encounter with the richness of the Divine Person, even if the encounter begins more modestly and with more modest goods.

A special instance of this subversive relationship strategy is also noteworthy. It points us again to the fact that belief in God and experience of God must be distinguished; one might have good reason to believe in the existence of God even when God feels far away. There is therefore the possibility, within a personal relationship with God, of something like what mystics have called ‘the dark night of the soul’ – a kind of *secondary* hiddenness that could make for whatever goods of testing or courage or difficult choice (and so on) are thought to require God to be hidden in the *primary* way that would involve nonresistant nonbelief. Now it may be that this point, focused on what is available within a personal relationship with God, could also be used by

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<sup>22</sup>These arguments are developed more fully, together with several similar arguments, in my *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 210-216.

advocates of the argument from evil. But it will be seen that it emerges more ‘organically’ in the context of the hiddenness argument, given the latter’s emphasis on relationship with God, and it may leave the hiddenness arguer in a good position in relation to ‘greater good’ arguments, even if the argument from evil should remain vulnerable to them.<sup>23</sup>

### ***5. Belief or acceptance?***

There are no easy demonstrations in philosophy, and few swift moves forward. (Seeing ourselves as being at an early stage in the evolution of inquiry helps to make this understandable. It does not make it more pleasant.) All one can do is to develop one’s arguments as clearly and forcefully as possible, and then propose them for the acceptance of one’s peers in the field. My hiddenness argument, together with all the explicative material surrounding it, is such a proposal.

It is important to see just what is going on here, and what is not. I am not proposing that all theists who become aware of the argument should lose their theistic belief and have it replaced by the belief that there is no God. Indeed, there is a sense in which *belief* – what all of us should believe about God – has very little to do with my proposal. I have come to think, especially in light of the evolutionary considerations sketched in section 1 of this paper, that inquiry in philosophy and perhaps in many other areas too should learn to subsist on acceptance rather than

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<sup>23</sup>Opponents of the hiddenness argument sometimes also develop the objection that there might very well be goods *unknown* to us that require hiddenness, for the sake of which God would permit it, but if one has been led to accept the hiddenness argument’s premises, then this move fails. That’s because from what some of those premises allow us to conclude, namely, that a loving God *would not* permit nonresistant nonbelief, it deductively follows that there are no goods, known or unknown, such that for their sake God *might* do so. So *that* becomes acceptable too – after all, it evidently follows from what one views thus – and the present objection is shown to beg the question.

belief. The basic distinction here between acceptance and belief I take over from L. Jonathan Cohen's marvelous little treatise on the subject, though on details I differ with him.<sup>24</sup> The fundamental idea is that acceptance is voluntary while belief is not. To accept that p is to, as a matter of policy, employ that proposition as a premise in relevant reasoning, whereas believing that p is or includes an involuntary disposition to (as one might say) be appeared to p-ly. My proposal is that, however things may be for them at the level of belief, researchers in *philosophy* should accept that ultimism filled out personalistically (that is to say, theistically) is false because of the case that can be made for the soundness of a hiddenness argument, and move on to consider other ways in which ultimism may be true.

This proposal is still ambiguous, and purposely so, in virtue of how it uses that word 'because.' One reason to move on would be provided if all of the available evidence suggested that the hiddenness argument we have considered, taken on its own, is sound. But another would be provided if all of the available relevant evidence suggested to a researcher that the hiddenness argument, *taken together with all of the other available support for atheism*, brings us to a tipping point of the sort suggested by my proposal. Either way, the acceptance of atheism (of the falsehood of personal ultimism) would come *because* of the force of the case that can be made for the soundness of a hiddenness argument.

Obviously not everything that should be noted about support for atheism, or even about the case that can be made for the soundness of a hiddenness argument, can be detailed in a paper

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<sup>24</sup>See L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). My understanding of acceptance is in some ways closer to that of Gregory W. Dawes in "Belief is not the Issue: A Defense of Inference to the Best Explanation," *Ratio* 26 (2013), 62-78.

like this one. To some extent, I count on my readers' understanding of what is in the broader literature. But let us consider some facts that might help to prevent my proposal from appearing unrealistic, at least among philosophers. (1) Inquiry about religion in western philosophy has been going on for more than two thousand years, and for most of that time has been squarely focused on theistic ideas, giving very little time to non-theistic ones. (2) According to the latest report, 73% of contemporary philosophers favour atheism.<sup>25</sup> Now the figure would surely be lower if we consulted philosophers *of religion*, who are predominantly believing theists. But while it might be said that philosophers of religion are the experts on religion in philosophy, we would have to note again the fact that most of these philosophers of religion have not taken their investigations beyond theism, and also that (3) many of them see themselves as working on behalf of their religious communities, and so should perhaps be viewed as doing theology – even if *philosophical* theology – not philosophy. Let me emphasize that I intend no disrespect to theology – I hold many theologians in high regard. But one need not dislike theology to notice that it is different from philosophy. Finally, we need to note that (4) acceptance of atheism does not in any way imply (as those suppose who erroneously accept the ‘theism or naturalism’ disjunction) that we are ruling out the truth of religious claims. Indeed, we are opening the door to religion more widely than has ever been done before!

What should a philosopher qua philosopher say who seeks to be alert to all these facts – while sensitive also to our temporal position and forsaking a focus on beliefs – and then notices the forcefulness of the hiddenness argument? I think she should favour the *acceptance* of atheism

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<sup>25</sup>See David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, “What do Philosophers Believe?” *Philosophical Studies* 168 (2013), 1- 36.

in philosophy.

Now such judgments are difficult: When do you accept a proposition and when do you say we should wait for more evidence? Many today would say that we are getting ahead of ourselves if we accept that theism is false. I would suggest that we know enough to do so. The details theistic ideas bring to ultimism allow the relevant inference to be made. And it isn't philosophy's task to try to reconcile existing religious beliefs with seemingly inconsistent facts in the world – that, again, belongs to the work of theology. (Of course, it isn't philosophy's task, either, to try to find *inconsistency*.) I say we should get on with exploring other fillings for ultimism, leaving open the possibility that *ultimism* is true and so neither believing nor accepting that it is false. Even at an early stage of religious investigation we should draw conclusions where we can, to help keep inquiry moving, while being very careful not to shut off inquiry where we shouldn't. The distinction suggested between the epistemic status of ultimism, which says only that there is a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate reality of *some* kind, and that of ultimism personally elaborated seems to me to get this balance right and also to respond appropriately to the needs of religious inquiry in philosophy. But if so, then the acceptance of atheism in philosophy is justified. The 73% are right.<sup>26 27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Or at least they have got things basically right. Philosophers today are often not entitled to their religious views or to the confidence with which they hold them. So what I am attributing to them here is little more impressive than a lucky guess!

<sup>27</sup>For their helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper, I offer my grateful thanks to Eleonore Stump, Adam Green, and Alexander Pruss.

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