

2011 St. Thomas Summer Seminar
HIDDENNESS ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM

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SESSION 2: 'THE' HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

The love connection: what personal ultimism's axiological component entails

The Ultimate, if a person, would have to be an *unsurpassably great* person. I'm assuming we have got our present idea of a person in view at least for the purpose of this elaboration of ultimism; otherwise all bets are off. Now, the value of power and knowledge are commonly highlighted by philosophers. But the value of love in persons is certainly no less obvious. So we have to say that an unsurpassably great person could not be other than *unsurpassably loving* toward other persons. (Harmony with at least Christian theology, though not taken on board in philosophy on that account.) Indeed, power and knowledge we might expect to be mobilized on behalf of love – a deep sharing with other persons.

Starting point of the hiddenness argument, roughly but intuitively stated.

Unsurpassable love is more than just goodness (whether that be construed as moral impeccability or as supreme benevolence), and the 'more' here has indeed to do with a deep sharing, which is tied to relationship. An unsurpassable love, for many reasons, would seek meaningful conscious relationship with the beloved; it would always at least be *open* to sharing *itself* in such relationship.

The 'fit' between an emphasis on love and personal ultimism's soteriological component: relationship with God

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 and the world, if we're working with a religious notion. Easy to see how this could be the case if positive transformation were brought about through what is commonly called 'personal relationship' with the person who is Divine.

Now, 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 God's love as entailing openness to relationship.

On the importance of starting 'far enough back' or reasoning 'from above', and of using necessary truths as premises

The strongest hiddenness reasoning will *be* thus grounded, instead of reasoning 'from below', perhaps with an unwarranted demand of signs and wonders for religious seekers. By starting 'from above' we can discover the needed warrant as we work out what hiddenness-related facts would be absent from the world if unsurpassable love were present in it, allowing the problematic phenomenon to *emerge* and receive its shape from reflection on the idea of God.

By seeking to have as premises only necessary truths about persons and love of the sorts in question (or evident empirical facts), the argument can furthermore hope to find a hearing even in a climate of evolutionary skepticism.

THE BASIC ARGUMENT, AND HOW IT MAY BE DEFENDED

(1) If God exists, then God is unsurpassably loving toward such finite persons as there may be. [Premise]

Follows from (personal) axiological and soteriological ultimacy, as we've seen. A necessary truth – at least given 'such finite persons as there may be.' (Perhaps there are possible worlds in which God exists but creates nothing, or creates no finite persons.)

(2) If God is unsurpassably loving toward such finite persons as there may be, then any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and not resistantly disposed toward God (hereafter: nonresistant) is at *t* also in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with God (i.e., able to exercise the relevant capacities). [Premise]

A conscious relationship is a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in. The relevant capacities are cognitive and affective capacities sufficient to be able at the time in question to be in a meaningful conscious relationship with God: such things as a capacity then 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. The relevant resistance: at least desire to not be thus related to God. If instantiated prior to *t*, and reinforced in action, it could lead to a person being self-disqualified here: closed off from God and thus unable to notice the Divine overtures because of her own resistant activity. (But notice that nothing in this premise entails that finite persons created by God *would* be free to resist, and the nonresistance clause is idle if God would only create persons who are *unfree* in the relevant respect.) 'In a position to': one must not confuse this with the idea of somehow being *forced* into such relationship or being in a position to *feel the presence* of God. (A feeling of the presence of God may be one part of such relationship but the claim is not that it would always be instantiated.) The more one considers this condition of 'being in a position' to participate in relationship with God, the more weak or minimal it should appear.

Again we have a necessary truth. Even with 'conscious' relationship? Yes, especially so. God could show great *benevolence* toward finite creatures without being open to such relationship. But what's distinctive about love, what makes us say that an unsurpassably great person must be loving as well as benevolent, is the willingness of a loving person to come close, allowing us explicitly to share in her life – both for our benefit and for its own sake. Everyone will agree that Divine love at some time must involve openness to a sharing relationship of this sort. But if such openness has a distinctive love-related value, then presumably it *always* does, other things being equal. Moreover, an unsurpassably loving God must love finite creatures at *every time* when they exist. It follows that an unsurpassably loving God must, other things being equal (unless other value considerations intrude sufficiently to induce contrary behaviour), always be thus open to those loved. Finally, to deal with the 'other things being equal' clause, we need only notice that the same loving impulse entails favouring a situation in which indeed other things are equal! Human love cannot always ensure this. The soldier who feels he must join the war effort cannot ensure that his child back home will never be in doubt as to whether he is still alive and thus unable to recognize herself as in a relationship presupposing that he is. The mother who because of unfitness gives up her beloved child to the care of another may shrink from later revealing herself if she thinks great harm for the child will come of it. But precisely because of their love such individuals would find some way to make other things equal, if only they could do so. And God, as omnipotent creator and an infinitely rich personal reality *can* do so. If also unsurpassably loving, God *will* do so. How? By ensuring that in the created world all pursuable goods are *relationship-compatible goods*. In any world that God creates with finite creatures bearing the relevant capacities, such an impulse must have 'framework' status: other things God does are done within this framework and the world is structured by it.

This may sound radical, but only if we forget the meaning of 'ultimate.' In philosophy it should be an open question whether God would create at all, given the limitless richness God *alone* embodies, if God is ultimate. But if we suppose that God is a person who will create, and will create finite persons, and thus that unlimited

and unsurpassable love is to come their way, then in effect we have a statement being made about *what sort of world the actual world shall be*. Think of the analogy of a single man who marries and has children: Does this rightly constrain the goods he is willing to pursue? Now, the suggestion here may still seem limiting with regard to producible goods. But if we remember that God would be infinitely rich and so could hardly be more benevolent than by sharing *God* with us, it may occur to us that no more valuable state of affairs *could* be given up here! (The alternative view forgets that all good is in God; it presupposes a limited God.) All things are equal here, and necessarily so. It follows that an unsurpassably loving God could not permit the possibility of explicit conscious relationship with God from ever being denied to nonresistant finite creatures, and that (2) is necessarily true.

(3) If God exists, then any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant is at *t* also in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with God. [1 & 2, HS]

(4) If any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant is at *t* also in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with God, then any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant *at t* believes that *God exists*. [Premise]

Without believing that God exists one cannot trust in God, be grateful to God, obey God, feel the presence of God, and so on, recognizing in a conscious way how events within a relationship with God are occurring. And of course it is full-blooded belief that is intended here, not some implicit or unconscious substitute.

Should we want a reference to *rational* belief? To get a clear necessary truth – which (4) now is – we should stick with what we've got. (Notice that (4) does not entail or suggest that the belief in question will be *other* than rational.) A reference to rational belief might of course appear in a *further* argument if – contrary to fact – everyone believed but not all did so rationally.

(5) If God exists, then any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant at *t* believes that God exists. [3 & 4, HS]

(6) It is not the case that any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant at *t* believes that God exists. [Premise]

There evidently is (and often has been) nonresistant nonbelief: God is 'hidden' *in that sense*. Of course only one instance is needed. If that seems implausible – how could a single instance of nonresistant nonbelief prove the nonexistence of God? – remember our approach from above. Consider also the analogy of Divine honesty: how could a single tiny lie on the part of some otherwise amazing being prove that it isn't God?

Notice how, given the way we've allowed the argument to unfold 'from above', the human phenomenon in question turns out to be not quite identical to what might independently trouble us – 'honest agnostics' and so on. It is broader. Though we may have needed more 'honest agnosticism' than once existed to be motivated to *notice* Divine hiddenness, the latter has been around for a long time, not just in those who have the relevant concepts and think about the relevant issues but also in those who don't (didn't) and can't (couldn't). Even if you think 'honest agnosticism' deserves the inverted commas, there never having been anything warranting the label, you will still have good reason to believe this premise to be true.

(7) It is not the case that God exists. [5 & 6, MT]

ON AVOIDING THE UNWARRANTED INFLUENCE OF THEOLOGY AT THIS STAGE

Theology has always assumed, as it must, that the world as we find it is compatible with God's love and providence. Various influential views about God and love and Divine-human relationship – some of them onesidedly masculine

– have been shaped by this assumption. Even non-theistic philosophers have been influenced by them. Without distinguishing philosophical and theological agendas as we have done, we might be tempted to go along. But that would be a mistake in a philosophical argument.

IS THE ARGUMENT MADE STRONGER BY THIS QUALIFICATION (AND THE ADDED PREMISE)?

(2*) If God is unsurpassably loving toward such finite persons as there may be, then any finite person who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant is at *t* also in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with God, **unless some finite person's overall or deepest good depends on God's not bringing it about that such is the case.**

New premise after (2*): No finite person's overall or deepest good depends on God's not bringing it about, for some finite person *P* and some time *t*, that *P* is at *t* in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with God.

Remember the points about love as 'framework' and about relationship-compatible goods. Remember the resourcefulness of a personal Ultimate over the long haul of eternity. Remember, above all, that any finite person's overall or deepest good, in a world including God, lies in meaningful conscious relationship with God! With the suggested revisions we would only be allowing these things to be made more explicit within the argument itself, while specifying more clearly what it takes for 'other things' to be equal.

A possible turnaround here. Theists are used to arguing that evil would be permitted so long as all can be well in the long run – and they sometimes want to do the same for hiddenness. But shouldn't we rather say, in line with love's natural self-revelatory quality, that hiddenness will be *prevented* so long as all can be well in the long run?

IS THIS GENERAL PRINCIPLE PLAUSIBLE, AND DOES IT HELP THE ARGUMENT?

For any persons *A* and *B* and time *t*, if *A* at *t* unsurpassably loves *B* and *B* is at *t* relevantly capable and nonresistant, then *A* at *t* does or has done whatever *A* can do, consistent with assurance that no one's overall or deepest good depends on *A*'s doing otherwise, to make it the case that *B* is at *t* in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with *A*.

DOES THE CONTENT ADDED HERE MAKE THE PRINCIPLE STRONGER AND MORE USEFUL?

For any persons *A* and *B* **such that *A* is causally responsible for *B*'s existence** and time *t*, if *A* at *t* unsurpassably loves *B* and *B* is at *t* relevantly capable and nonresistant, then *A* at *t* does or has done whatever *A* can do, consistent with assurance that no one's overall or deepest good depends on *A*'s doing otherwise, to make it the case that *B* is at *t* in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with *A*.

CAN THE ARGUMENT BE DEVELOPED WITHOUT ANY REFERENCE SPECIFICALLY TO LOVE?

(1*) If God exists, then the normative quality of God's dispositions and behavior in relation to any finite person there may be is unsurpassable (more briefly: God is relationally unsurpassable).

(2**) If God is relationally unsurpassable, then any finite person *P* for whose existence God is causally responsible who at a time *t* is relevantly capable and nonresistant is at *t* also in a position to participate in meaningful conscious relationship with God, unless some finite person's overall or deepest good depends on God's not bringing it about that such is the case.

A wide range of other-related qualities, analogues of which (at least) would appear in an unsurpassable Divine person, might enter the discussion here: e.g., generosity, consideration, reliability, kindness, friendliness.