


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is there non-resistant non-belief?

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Abstract

Most commentators on the argument from divine hiddenness agree that there exists non-resistant non-belief. This article challenges this orthodoxy by arguing that on closer inspection, this premise is problematic. The putative categories of non-resistant non-belief are really instances of resistance, or non-resistant non-belief of the sort that is not incongruent with what a good and loving God would allow (or could prevent). One of the central critiques offered here is that Schellenberg's argument against the veridicality of religious experience, if true, calls into question the importance of having conscious apprehension of God. The absence of conscious apprehension of God is taken by Schellenberg as evidence of hiddenness. But if religious experience is as epistemically tenuous as he argues it is (as against the veridicality of religious experience) then God would not be interested in bequeathing it. So, there is an internal tension within the hiddenness argument that defeats one of its key premises. Non-belief is either resistant or non-resistant, but not of the sort incompatible with what a loving God would allow.

Keywords: hiddenness; naturalism; religious experience

Introduction

Nothing you can point to in the world is God. Most of what we experience daily is not *obvious* evidence for God's existence except for the direct religious experiences that many purport to have. Even religious people have this sense sometimes that God is distant or untouchable. But if God is supposedly good and loving, would not God make His existence more apparent? Presumably, if God (on the traditional conception) creates us, the purpose is to love us. And loving us involves giving the beloved what is good. If a relationship with the divine being is good, and arguably the highest good, then God should disclose His existence in an apparent manner so as to make available this relationship to anyone who seeks it. Defenders of the argument from divine hiddenness argue that there are open-minded seekers who are deprived of a conscious apprehension of God's being. Using J. L. Schellenberg's language, there is non-resistant non-belief. There are seekers who would not resist a disclosure of God's being. If non-resistant non-belief occurs, it would be a fact incongruent with what we would expect of a good and loving God.

The argument from divine hiddenness consists of at least two claims: a factual claim to the effect that there is non-resistant non-belief, and a moral principle (or a set of plausible moral and spiritual reflections) to the effect that non-resistant non-belief is

incongruent with what a good and loving God would allow. Strategies in responding to the argument have argued that the set of moral or spiritual reflections upon which the hiddenness argument is based are narrow, lack subtlety, or are not spiritually informed (Howard-Snyder and Green (2016)). Few argue that non-resistant non-belief does not or cannot exist.¹

This article argues that non-resistant non-belief does not occur, or if it does occur, it is not the sort that would be incongruent with what a good and loving God would allow. Before proceeding, such a conclusion must be disaggregated from similar conclusions that are obvious non-starters; for instance, I grant that evidentially supported non-belief exists.

I understand the argument from divine hiddenness as an independent argument for atheism. By independent I mean that the evidence it adverts to is a distinct set of evidence from, for example, putative gratuitous evils (van Inwagen (2006)). If the divine hiddenness argument were parasitic on arguments for naturalism or other arguments for atheism, it is redundant. It would not add any epistemic value over those other arguments. It may be that Schellenberg is offering his argument to fellow atheists, but then, its dialectical importance loses significance. In any case, if the argument from divine hiddenness were parasitic upon the failure of natural theology, a much more comprehensive articulation of the argument would be needed than what we have presently – Schellenberg does not fastidiously dissect such arguments, except for the argument from religious experience, which is addressed in this article.

Even if such a comprehensive critique of natural theology could be mounted, it is unclear what follows vis-à-vis non-resistant non-belief. First, no one thinks that a ‘successful’ argument for God’s existence will bequeath knowledge of God in the first place.² At best, such arguments can bequeath belief about God. So, nothing of interest follows from the observation that natural theological arguments may only deliver evidential parity or worse. Knowledge of God is what is at stake in the hiddenness argument. Second, religious sages and practitioners in most of the world’s religious traditions recommend certain spiritual practices and corporal works of mercy as epistemic portals by which to access knowledge of God. John the evangelist notes, ‘no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us’ (1 Jn. 4:12). So, parity regarding arguments for and against God’s existence does not give one reason to withhold engaging in such practices. Again, the existence of non-resistant non-belief incongruent with God’s existence does not follow from evidential parity.

So, the principal clarification on my conclusion is that I do not challenge the position that one can fairly assess the natural theological arguments as bequeathing evidential parity. That is, I agree that there are those who have non-belief, or outright disbelief, and such doxastic states can be evidentially supported. What remains tenuous, I argue, is the claim that such states exemplify non-resistance of the type that is clearly incongruent with what a good and loving God would allow. My conclusion tolerates the existence of non-resistant non-belief, but it is not of the sort incompatible with what God would allow. I argue that the categories of putative non-resistant non-belief Schellenberg adverts to either do not exude non-resistance upon closer inspection, or if they do, such non-resistance is congruent with the existence of a good and loving God. I focus attention on Schellenberg’s handling of religious experiences, since a centrepiece of his argument is that God would disclose ‘conscious apprehension’ of Himself to non-resistant seekers.

The next section explains in more detail Schellenberg’s argument from divine hiddenness. Two aspects of his argument are singled out for particular attention. The first is his notion of non-resistance. The second is his claim that a good and loving God would bequeath conscious apprehension of Himself. The third section considers the dialectic on religious experience. The key point in this section is that Schellenberg’s argument

against the evidence from religious experience functions also as an argument that any instance of a putative conscious apprehension of God would also not have evidential value – since conscious apprehension of God is arguably a species of religious experience. So, if any religious experience, however powerful or veridical it may feel, *can* be interpreted naturalistically, then its epistemic worth is tenuous – it is not a source of justified belief in God. If the epistemic worth of a religious experience is so tenuous, God would not be interested in bequeathing it. So, if Schellenberg’s argument against the epistemic value of religious experience is correct, then the requirement to provide conscious apprehension is not what God would be interested in bequeathing. Therefore, its absence is not evidence against God’s existence. The fourth section concludes with a rejoinder to various objections including that the conclusion reached here is either surprising or pejorative. I argue that it is neither.

The Divine Hiddenness Argument

Though Schellenberg’s argument has experienced permutations, the version outlined in his *The Wisdom to Doubt* (2011) fruitfully focuses on what would be the highest good in a universe in which a good and loving God exists. He rightly observes that ‘the Divine creation must express not just the love involved in creative delight and the love involved in valuing other good things created but a *relational-personal* love as well’ (Schellenberg (2011), 199). Here he is echoing the reflections of most religious philosophers to the effect that the highest good is to be in loving relationship with persons, and the more being the Person has, the more important and fulfilling that relationship is. Of course, for there to be a loving relationship, reciprocity is required, and so, a necessary condition for this loving union is knowing that God exists.³ Schellenberg comments, ‘[the experience of nature] would be richer and fuller if it were experienced as the creation of God and as reflecting the fullest and richest value of all, existing in God’ (*ibid.*, 200). He explains further:

And of course the next insight must be that if there could be *direct* – subject to Subject – experience of an unsurpassably rich and wondrous God, leading the finite subject to ever more fully apprehend and to be progressively transformed in the direction of the life of the infinite Subject, the opportunity to have such experience would be the greatest gift of all . . . (*ibid.*, 200–201)

From these observations, Schellenberg infers that God would make available conscious experience of God’s existence. ‘[I]t seems that a God would certainly make available to finite personal creatures who are capable of experiencing it the *gift* of conscious apprehension of God’ (*ibid.*, 200; emphasis mine).

Previous iterations of his argument focused on evidence and reasons, namely, that there exists *reasonable* non-belief. The truth of this premise requires assessing the project of natural theology as delivering epistemic parity at best.⁴ The current permutation focuses instead on what would be one’s *summum bonum* in a world in which one is created by a good and loving God. The highest good is intimate union with divine reality. And since one cannot have intimate union without conscious awareness, the absence of conscious awareness is evidence that God does not exist.

So, the outline of his argument is as follows:⁵

- (1) If God exists, then God perfectly loves finite persons.
- (2) If God perfectly loves finite persons, God is open to and desires meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with such persons.

- (3) If God desires meaningful relationship with persons, then if any such person is capable of a meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship with God, that person would not be in a state of non-resistant non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (4) There is at least one capable finite person who is in a state of non-resistant non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (5) So, it is not the case that God exists.

I think that Schellenberg's argument as outlined in (2011) is an improvement in some respects over his (1993); for example, his discussion in Part I on the different kinds of evidence and corresponding sources of defeat was very informative and belongs as a principal contribution to applied epistemology. The focus on the concept of non-resistance gives the argument more mileage and clarity than reasonable non-belief, non-culpable doubt, and non-neglectfully held parity belief (Schellenberg (2005), 335ff.). Furthermore, it is important to understand Schellenberg's notion of non-belief as including both disbelief and doubt, or a state of non-assent. This is important because a good and loving God would, according to some of our intuitions, expunge even doubt.

And finally, Schellenberg's argument is best understood as starting from the 'top down', meaning that we start from expectations about what God would desire and make available to us, and then consider whether the actual world matches such expectations. It is not helpful, on Schellenberg's view, to start from definitions of reasonable non-belief, or non-resistance and work up so to speak. He states, 'It follows that *any* non-belief that is not the fault of the subject . . . must appear problematic if we approach this matter from the perspective afforded by rumination on the love of God' (*ibid.*, 331). What love practically involves is the starting point for the argument. This is probably the most important development in Schellenberg's argument. As explained in more detail below, Schellenberg argues that God's love for us would issue in God's disclosure in the form of conscious apprehension of God's being. The project of natural theology, namely, the construction of propositional evidence for God's existence, could be a resounding success and the hiddenness argument still stands since the orders of evidence are disparate. If there is an absence of conscious apprehension of God to non-resistant seekers, God probably does not exist – at least not a God that desires loving union with one's creatures. So, Schellenberg (2011 and 2015) represent a significant dialectical development.

Non-resistant non-belief

Faultless non-belief in Schellenberg (2005) and reasonable non-belief in Schellenberg (1993) are understood in Schellenberg (2011 and 2015) as non-resistance. Regarding this notion, Schellenberg means to focus attention on the epistemic desires of the agent, namely, the agent must be open to belief in God. Schellenberg states:

Consider, for example, those who have always believed in God and who would *love to go on believing in God* but who have found, as adults, that serious and honest examination of all the evidence of experience and argument they can lay their hands on has unexpectedly had the result of eroding their belief away . . . Perhaps they will be happy again, but the point is that for the time being, it is the *removal* of theistic belief that they are inclined to resist, if anything. (Schellenberg (2011), 205, first emphasis added)

A helpful complement is to consider how Schellenberg describes resistance.

We might imagine a resister wanting to do her own thing without considering God's view of the matter, or wanting to do something she regards as in fact contrary to the values cultivated in a relationship with God . . . Here we might imagine careless investigation of one sort or another in relation to the existence of God, or someone deliberately consorting with people who carelessly fail to believe in God and avoiding those who believe, or just over time mentally drifting, . . . away from any place where she could convincingly be met by evidence of God. (Schellenberg (2015), 55–56, quoted from Howard-Snyder and Green (2016), sect. 2)⁶

From these quotations we might infer that the non-resistant seeker would try to put herself in an epistemic position to receive God's self-disclosure.⁷

He mentions several other categories of non-believers in which monotheism has never been an option, due, in part, to the specific intellectual heritages into which such individuals were born.

Many unreflective nonbelievers have never so much as had the theistic idea in question here squarely before their minds, and so have never been in a position to respond to it at all, whether culpably or inculpably (discriminating investigation of non-western traditions will suffice to show this); and some of those who have heard of the idea have nonetheless, due to formative factors of upbringing and/or culture beyond their control, never been in a position to see the importance of thinking about it. (Schellenberg (2005), 331)

The two categories here share the feature of being born in cultures whose intellectual heritages preclude monotheism, non-Western religious cultures in the first category, and secular humanism in the second. Other examples of non-resistant non-believers include those whose 'basic conceptual conditions' prevent them from 'so much as *entertaining* the idea of a being separate from a created physical universe who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good and loving in relation to it have never been satisfied' (Schellenberg (2011), 205). This third category I take to mean that one's ideological commitments prevent her from even entertaining the idea of a non-physical Being. From such examples, Schellenberg thinks that his empirical premise is satisfactorily supported, namely, there are people who do not resist belief in God, are capable of conscious relationship with God, but do not believe that God exists (*ibid.*, 206).⁸

Non-resistance, conscious apprehension, and naturalism

Schellenberg thinks that it is sufficient to show that non-resistant non-belief exists if there is at least one agent for whom conscious apprehension of God is absent. A good and loving God would not allow epistemic parity to exist; God would create a world in which intellectually virtuous reflection would lead one to favour belief in God. But how much evidence does the proponent of the hiddenness argument want? The principle of credulity in the argument from religious experience is plausible, the principle of sufficient reason is plausible, it is logically possible that a maximally excellent being exists, etc.

Schellenberg is clear that he does not expect God to '*bring us into* divine human relationship' since 'God shouldn't be expected to entertain us with spectacular cosmic performances or overwhelm us with miracles' (*ibid.*, 207). Rather, non-belief could be prevented through 'more subtle and interesting forms of evidence, such as religious experiences whose character and force are modulated according to our intellectual and moral needs' (*ibid.*). Schellenberg concludes that God would 'put in place the conditions necessary for us to be able to *bring ourselves* into such relationship' (*ibid.*).

From these quotations two points follow. First, enquiry is an essential component of non-resistance. Second, and of more pressing importance, putting in place conditions *necessary* for being able to *bring oneself* into relationship with God is compatible with epistemic parity.⁹ Depending on what Schellenberg means by subtle evidence modulated to one's needs (he does not tell us), this too might be compatible with evidential parity. Since non-belief is a proportionate response to epistemic parity, non-belief is compatible with what God is expected to provide on Schellenberg's own understanding.

To be sure, Schellenberg states elsewhere that God would be expected to provide 'causally sufficient' reasons for belief: 'So in thinking about whether the world is as we might expect it to be if a loving God exists, it is useful to consider whether everyone who fails to believe has culpably resisted evidence that *would otherwise have been causally sufficient for belief*' (Schellenberg (2005), 331; emphasis mine). Schellenberg is rightly conflicted about what a divine being would do who loves and respects the free and autonomous minds of created rational beings. This conflict represents a conflict within our own understanding of love: in some respects, we find it intuitively plausible that love would desire union with the beloved, but we also find it intuitively plausible that love would respect the autonomy of another rational being. To the extent that our intuitions on what love demands are labile, so too is the argument from divine hiddenness tenuous. On the one hand, we do not have strong intuitions that God would provide evidence that is causally sufficient for us to form beliefs about him. On the other hand, evidential parity, which arguably reflects the actual world, is compatible with God providing merely necessary conditions for forming belief in him. So, either the argument from divine hiddenness is dialectically inert insofar as it appeals to a controversial intuition, or it references a fact that is not obviously incompatible with what a good and loving God would do.

These opening reflections are hardly devastating critiques of the hiddenness argument. In a way they only set constraints on the dialectic that follows, that is, any riposte to my central critiques (sub-section 'Religious experience and circularity') that entail that God should provide *more* than necessary epistemic conditions or that satisfying necessary epistemic conditions is *not* compatible with parity, would result in an unresolved internal tension within the hiddenness argument.

I suspect that Schellenberg's emphasis on conscious apprehension of God is meant to avoid these troubles. God would disclose Himself to someone whose will and intellect is disposed towards relating to God (premise 3), hence the characterization of non-resistance as being 'open' to believe in God or wanting to believe in God. For such non-resisters, the only thing lacking seems to be God's self-disclosure. Since God would not fail to disclose Himself to one who wants union with God (premise 2), the lack of conscious apprehension of God (premise 4) in such non-resisters is evidence that a good and loving God does not exist. The question of when non-resistant non-belief occurs is not settled by quantifying the evidence ('is the evidence enough?' is the wrong question), but it is a matter of whether God is distributing religious experience 'modulated' to the needs of a non-resistant seeker.

This strategy of avoiding specifications on necessary versus sufficient evidence has important implications in terms of justifying the premise that non-resistant non-belief exists. The category of non-resisters is smaller than Schellenberg suggests. For example, the third category of non-resistant non-belief mentioned above does not satisfy this condition of being open to believe in God. The third category of non-resister is one whose ideological commitments preclude even considering or entertaining belief that a non-physical omnipresent, all-powerful being exists. It is hard to imagine what God could do to make this person's ideological commitments more pliable or porous to consider theism as a live option. Simply putting in place necessary conditions is not enough to change

one's ideological commitments. Not even a dazzling religious experience would plausibly do the trick (see my commentary on Lewis below).

As for non-resistant non-belief by those in non-monotheistic intellectual heritages, there is no reason to think that such believers lack a meaningful relationship with God. Religious experiences are recorded in different religious traditions, and on some interpretations, share important common features (Otto (1958) and Davis (1989)). Furthermore, there is a good argument to the effect that the diversity of religious experience is willed by God to achieve a transcendental unity starting from terrestrial plurality (Schuon (1984)). What we see across religious traditions are practitioners who report deeply *personal* relationship with the divine – as that term is understood within those traditions.

Again, the conclusion that follows is not that the hiddenness argument is bogus, but only that the inductive support for the key premise is smaller than the proponent thinks. But is the inductive support empty? The next two sub-sections outline the core critique of the argument.

Testimony and the selection of belief-forming practices

The first problem with focusing on conscious awareness is that religious practitioners report conscious awareness of God. The reason this is a problem for Schellenberg is that testimony is an established socially accepted practice (which Schellenberg (2011, 170 ff.) accepts), and in many contexts can confer justification and knowledge. To assert that it does not confer justification in the religious case is to prejudge the truth of such claims. To treat religious claims prejudicially threatens non-resistance. To be fair, Schellenberg's reason for discounting the testimony of others is based on his argument for discounting the legitimacy of the religious believer's first-person experiences. Aside from the problems I note in the next sub-section, this claim puts Schellenberg in the odd position of telling others which of their seemings are justified and which ones are not.

The first stage of the argument aimed to defeat the veridicality of religious experience is to consider which belief-forming processes we should trust. In general, we should trust only those sources of belief formation that are innocent until proven guilty. Epistemic processes that include religious practices, such as prayer, are not innocent for Schellenberg. He states, 'if we really are would-be investigators concerned for the truth and seeking understanding, then we will ascribe epistemic innocence . . . *only where we have to*' (*ibid.*, 170). And we only have to rely on sensation, introspection, memory, reasoning, and intuition. On Schellenberg's view, religious belief-forming practices do not make the cut 'since the outputs of religious experiential belief-forming practices conflict, and thus not all such practices can be reliable' (*ibid.*, 171). Because some religious practices are epistemically unreliable, religious practices fail Schellenberg's universality requirement, which states that we choose belief-forming practices that are universally accepted as not unreliable (we cannot know they are reliable without circularity (Alston (1993), ch. 3)).

On this reasoning, however, we should not trust our moral reasoning since our moral belief-forming practices yield incompatible beliefs. We should not trust those epistemic practices and faculties that yield philosophical beliefs either since they too conflict. The scientific method might not be a faculty, but it is a belief-forming process that yields different empirically testable conclusions. We should not cease using it though. We should distinguish between whether a faculty or practice is overall reliable, and whether we have a choice in using it. It can be the case that a cognitive faculty, such as our moral faculty, is not impressively reliable, but we must use it just the same when and always when we engage in moral enquiry.

Schellenberg is correct that disagreement can exert epistemic effects, specifically, peer disagreement provides metacognitive evidence that either I or my peer have made a

processing error. It does not follow, however, that I should not use that same faculty in my enquiry. If I discover that someone comes to a different position on, for example, progressive taxation, I should enquire further into that issue using the very same faculties that I have been using. I just use those faculties more carefully and comprehensively. So, neither supposed unreliability nor peer disagreement justify not using religious belief-forming practices.

Schellenberg is also correct to point out that in the setting of conflicting religious beliefs, all that follows is that *not all* the religious belief-forming practices are reliable. Here again, it does not follow from this claim that religious belief-forming practices should not be used at all.¹⁰

There are, of course, reasons for using religious belief-forming practices when the domain of enquiry concerns personal knowledge of God. That argument is this: we tailor our epistemic practices to the nature of the domain of enquiry. If my enquiry concerns what we morally ought to do, I will use epistemic practices ordered to sharpen my intuitions on one's moral obligations. If my enquiry concerns what people's moral beliefs are, I will use epistemic practices ordered to survey what their beliefs are. If the domain of enquiry is a wholly other divine being whose nature is non-physical, Personal, and the ground of all being Who has purportedly revealed Himself through certain religious traditions, then I would conform my belief-forming practices to what these traditions recommend. This is not a random choice of epistemic methods. Religious practitioners are submitting to what God purports to have established. And we have every reason to think that God would prescribe certain practices as means to bequeath reverence and humility. James Cutsinger explains that union with God is certainly possible, but we should expect that such a union is achieved through a framework *willed by God*, and not by our own initiatives 'for our liberation from the ego and the world can take place only by means of what enters into that world from above, and not by the necessarily individual initiatives of the ego itself' (Cutsinger (1994), 193). And most religious traditions recommend prayer, participation in liturgical practices, etc.

So, the preclusion of religious belief-forming practices is biased from the start. The argument for such preclusion does not follow from the arguments Schellenberg gives. In general, it is hard to argue prior to one's enquiry that whole belief-forming practices should be precluded without assuming that the beliefs they produce are false (and all belief-forming practices cannot be proven reliable without circularity, as argued by Alston (1993)). The next section descends closer to the core critique I wish to offer according to which either non-resistant non-belief does not exist, or if it does, it is not of the sort that is incompatible with God.

Religious experience and circularity

The problem highlighted in the previous sub-section is that Schellenberg's selection of belief-forming practices is biased or entails counter-intuitive results. The problem highlighted in this sub-section is even more severe, namely, his argument against the epistemic worth of religious experience must assume a naturalistic explanation, but *assuming* a naturalistic explanation is incongruent with non-resistance.

Schellenberg does not consider the evidential force of testimony from religious practitioners remarkable because he thinks that first-person experiences have little epistemic standing. The argument begins by making clear the distinction between first-person and third person justification. 'Third-person justification are arguments to the effect that the occurrence of religious experience throughout the world is best explained by reference to a divine source' (Schellenberg (2011), 160). Of course, explaining the distribution of religious experience throughout different traditions is not the only way to infer that

God exists. One could accept on trust or testimony from a religious practitioner that God exists. Accepting testimony does not require arguments with an explanatory structure (Coady (1992)). In any case, first-person justification is the justification one has given one's own experiences. Even for first-person justification, however, '[r]eligious experience affords no immunity to religious skepticism' (Schellenberg (2011), 162). The reason is that it is 'always appropriate . . . to remember the possibility of misperception' (*ibid.*, 165). And it is the possibility of this misperception that serves as a challenge according to which: 'For the experience to be taken as undefeated evidence, that challenge [misperception] must be turned aside' (*ibid.*).

This initial attempt to file off the bite of an argument from religious experience lands Schellenberg in incoherence. Arguably, conscious apprehension of God is a token instance of a religious experience. But if our religious experiences are so epistemically fragile as he suggests they are, (i.e. one *must* turn aside the *possibility* of misperception to be justified), then why would a good and loving God desire conscious apprehension? To introduce a common motif in this sub-section, if non-belief is a function of there being no conscious apprehension of God and such an apprehension of God is epistemically fragile, then such non-belief fails to count as evidence against God's existence. God would not desire to bequeath such experiences as they are not, on Schellenberg's own argument, true epistemic goods, that is, they are not a source of justification.

Maybe there is a good reason that misperception is always a possibility, or that one must defeat all other non-theistic explanations for a religious experience before taking such experiences as veridical. I resist interpreting Schellenberg here as assuming that religious experiences are unveridical from the start of his enquiry. That would be incongruent with non-resistance, a feature of which requires that the seeker is open to belief in God, and in some places, is described as wanting to believe in God (quotations above). It is better to understand Schellenberg as having a hermeneutic of suspicion towards religious experiences, not that *they are* unveridical.

To justify this suspicion, Schellenberg focuses on (i) neurological/naturalistic explanations, (ii) religious diversity, and (iii) peer disagreement. Neurological explanations claim that certain brain states are associated with mystical type experiences. Schellenberg endorses Evan Fales' explanation according to which, mystical experiences 'are associated with micro-seizures of the temporal lobes of the brain . . . But mild seizures, which can be artificially induced during brain surgery can result in powerful mystical experiences' (quoted from Schellenberg (2011), 186). Schellenberg infers from this data that 'if [mystical experiences are associated with mild brain seizures] is correct, then it is clearly possible for mystical experiences to occur even when they are unveridical' (*ibid.*).

What is supposed to follow from such observations? It does not follow that such experiences are unveridical. First, even if it is *possible* that mystical experiences can be invoked by mild seizures in the brain, it does not follow that they all are. Even if they all are, it does not follow that a religious experience is unveridical. Given the current evidence in neuroscience, almost every experience is associated with a brain state defined in high enough resolution of neural activity. Suppose I am under an fMRI and I am asked to think about a priori truths; certain areas of my brain will become activated. Those truths are still truths, even if they are associated with brain states (Plantinga (2000), 145).

Furthermore, there is reason to suppose that God could choose, according to the mode of the knower, that a veridical experience of God is mediated by seizure *like* activity in the temporal lobe. If God made us, neurological architecture and all, God would be expected to disclose Himself by way of our embodied existence; God would reveal Himself by activating certain centres of the brain. In any case, there is no reason to suppose that religious experiences can be veridical only if they are experienced *apart from* any neurological activity.

If these seizures are distributed as widely as Fales indicates they are, that could just as well be an argument that God has distributed this feature in the temporal lobe to experience more easily mystical like experiences. This could count as data that God has distributed mechanisms by which to apprehend God widely throughout the population. If so, the evidence in favour of the hiddenness argument significantly truncates. The point is that a religious experience (or any experience) can remain veridical even when mediated by brain areas.

The argument so far is that we do not have a purely naturalistic explanation of a religious experience (or any experience) by simply noting that it is associated with a brain state. God's self-disclosure could be by means of brain states, and the association between an experience and a brain state is compatible with the experience being veridical. One would have to argue that such experiences were 'nothing but' or 'merely' neurological states. What would such an argument have to look like? Quite obviously it won't do to presuppose that the experiences are unveridical and infer from that assumption that the neurological state associated with the experience is *merely* neurologically induced.

Is this how Schellenberg's reasoning for (i) must go? Running on from the quotation from Fales, Schellenberg says the following: 'If this is correct, then it is clearly possible for mystical experiences to occur even when they are unveridical. Indeed, given the possibility of deliberate induction, we would have to say. . . that mystical experiences *do* occur even when they are unveridical' (Schellenberg (2011), 186). The reference to deliberate induction refers to the apparent fact that such mystical experiences can be induced during brain surgery. Notably, other experiences can be induced during brain surgery such as seeing a light in the top corner of one's visual field. That 'deliberate induction' does not render one's visual experiences of light outside the surgical suite unveridical. In any case, Schellenberg concludes as follows,

[B]arring some *independent* indication that the Ultimate is known in this way . . . could we avoid doubt as to whether this or that mystical experience was veridical? Thus if explanations of the sort in question are available, then with respect to the experiences and associated beliefs to which they apply we have a defeater: it is epistemically possible that the experiencers involved are deceived, and so doubt is in order instead of belief. (*ibid.*, 186–187)

Schellenberg wants to know what truly causes religious experiences. I have already noted that it is fallacious to infer from the claim that certain brain states are associated with mystical experiences, to the conclusion that such experiences are unveridical. I am more interested here with Schellenberg's inference that if such explanations are *possible*, the epistemic state of doubt is a reasonable response. More generally, under what conditions does an agent have a defeater to the putative veridicality of her experiences?

The chief problem with (i) in this context is that non-resistance is unlikely to be compatible with assuming a naturalistic explanation¹¹ for religious experience. The basic idea with this riposte is captured by C. S. Lewis, who, in autobiographical mode, relates that he has known only one person who claimed to have seen a ghost. It happened to be someone who did not believe in the immortality of the soul. Though the experience felt veridical, she interpreted it as an elaborate hallucination. Here is a person whose perception of a putative ghost appeared veridical, and yet it failed to invite belief. Lewis observes that whatever 'experiences we may have, we shall not regard them as miraculous if we already hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural . . . We can always say we have been the victims of an illusion' (Lewis (1970), 8). So too with naturalistic explanations of religious experience. If we assume naturalistic causes, those experiences have no epistemic standing. *Privileging* naturalistic explanations, however, is incongruent with non-resistance.

Lewis' reflections introduce a theme according to which it is rather easy to defeat the putative justification of a religious experience, that is, simply assume a naturalistic explanation. Whether this is congruent with non-resistance requires discerning when a belief suffers defeat. Broadly speaking, a defeater *D* for a belief *p* is any proposition that renders *p* unjustified. Of course, to function as a defeater, the agent must hold, believe, or consider *D*. If an agent thinks that *D* is implausible, or at least, less plausible than *p* itself, then *D* cannot function as a defeater to *p* – not for that agent anyway. Creationism (understood crudely) is a defeater to certain aspects of modern evolutionary theory, but the former position does not function as a defeater to evolutionary theory for most biologists. So, if a naturalistic explanation (hereafter *Ne*) for one's putative veridical experience is to function as a defeater to its veridicality, one must believe (*Ne*) to an equal or greater certainty that one has or had a veridical religious experience (hereafter *Ve*). *If Ne is merely possible, it cannot function as a defeater.*

Assessing a defeater as of 'equal or greater certainty' is a delicate matter. From some of what Schellenberg says, already quoted, it appears that merely having the attitude of *considering* a defeater to *Ve* renders *Ve* unjustified for that agent. But I might consider any number of sceptical hypotheses for my experiences and everyday beliefs ranging from global hypotheses such as Cartesian evil demon scenarios, to more specific beliefs, such as flat Earth hypotheses or Marxist hypotheses for my everyday moral beliefs, such as that pederasty is immoral. In each case, I do not abandon or think that my target beliefs lose any of their justification. I do not, for instance, think that my belief that pederasty is immoral is epistemically compromised by entertaining Marxist suspicions of traditional morality. Again, the mere presence of *possible* alternative explanations for my beliefs does not function as a defeater for those beliefs. Moreover, there is no reason that I should consider an experience with the depth and felt veridicality that typifies some religious experiences as unveridical until proven innocent. I do not treat my other perceptual beliefs with such a hermeneutic of suspicion. Singling out religious experiences for greater scrutiny is incongruent with non-resistance.¹²

So, we might distinguish between an agent considering a sceptical hypothesis in which the intellectual goal is understanding the contours of that hypothesis; and in which the goal is something like checking my beliefs against others to achieve wide reflective equilibrium (Rawls (1971), 20ff.) according to which belief revision is a distinct possibility. When the former goal is in mind, *Ne* does not function as a defeater to *Ve*; it *may* if the latter goal is in mind.

What *may* follow is that a defeater *D* exerts its sceptical effects only if *D* is believed or considered (with the goal of achieving reflective equilibrium), to be equal to or more likely than the target belief. If *Ne* is held with equal plausibility, then evidential parity exists, and this is compatible with God supplying the necessary conditions for belief. As yet, there is no violation of what God would do on Schellenberg's terms. If *Ne* is held to greater plausibility than *Ve*, then either this greater plausibility is assumed, or it is based on independent evidence. If it is simply assumed, the seeker is likely to be resistant. Again, non-resistance is characterized as being open to belief in God and in which the agent would 'love' (Schellenberg (2011), 205) to believe and would put herself in a place 'to be convincingly . . . met by evidence of God' (Schellenberg (2015), 56). Such epistemic desires are incongruent with assuming *Ne* for any putative conscious apprehension of God.

What follows if the greater plausibility is a function of independent evidence? Let's assume for simplicity and concreteness that this independent evidence is the result of adjudicating the project of natural theology. If *Ne* enjoys greater epistemic probability because of this adjudication, the hiddenness argument is redundant – the existence of a Personal God is adjudicated on other grounds. Furthermore, if *Ne* enjoys greater

plausibility in the agent's noetic system than *Ve* – on the basis of evidence other than the hiddenness argument – then Lewis's reflections above apply; to wit, the experience could be veridical, namely, an actual conscious apprehension of God occurs, and yet the agent draws the wrong conclusions, or fails to interpret the experience correctly. What else could a good and loving God do? Hiddenness, on this disjunction, is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which any putative *Ve* can be reinterpreted with reference to some *Ne*. This argument does not entail that atheists are self-deceived. What follows on this disjunct is that the hiddenness argument does not function as an independent argument for them.

Either one of two conclusions follow. Plausibly, holding any *Ne* to a *greater* epistemic probability than *Ve* is resistant.¹³ So, the failure of a seemingly veridical religious experience to deliver the epistemic goods is not a case of non-resistant non-belief. However, quibbles about the borderlines of resistance can be intractable. So, another plausible conclusion of the argument is to assume that such non-belief counts as non-resistant. It is not, however, incongruent with what a good and loving God would allow (or could prevent). What else could God do if both the agent holds *Ne* to a greater plausibility than *Ve* and God aims to provide merely necessary conditions for belief? God does exactly what Schellenberg recommends, namely, God provides a religious experience, but if that agent thinks that a *possible* *Ne* defeats *Ve*, as Schellenberg recommends, the agent will never interpret or understand that experience as being of God. The agent is like Lewis's friend, 'there must be a naturalistic explanation'. Either option deflates the force of the hiddenness argument. Either the non-belief is not non-resistant, or it is non-resistant but not the sort that is incompatible with what God would allow or could prevent.

Does this mean that anyone who is suspicious of one's putative religious experience (either one's own or others) *must* be culpably resisting theistic belief? The answer is 'yes' if one is privileging *Ne* as an assumption. The answer is 'no' if one already thinks that *Ne* is more plausible on independent grounds. But for the latter option, no amount of a dazzling religious experience could offset *Ne*, per Lewis's reflections. Thus, God could not do otherwise, and such non-resistant non-belief is not incongruent with what God can be expected to do.

The above disjunctive arguments are, however, not the strongest point that can be made – even though I think they are valid and sound. Quibbles may occur over the inference, if an agent *S* assumes a naturalistic explanation for any *Ve*, then *S* evinces resistant non-belief. What is incontrovertible, and essential for my argument, is that if Schellenberg's argument against the evidential force of religious experience is correct, such experience is no longer the epistemic good that we should expect God to bequeath. If for any given conscious apprehension of God, it is defeated simply in virtue of considering possible naturalistic explanations, then it cannot function as the epistemic good Schellenberg supposes it to be in his hiddenness argument. So, if Schellenberg's argument against the evidential force of religious experience is correct, the hiddenness argument fails – a loving God would *not* be expected to bequeath conscious experiences. If his argument against religious experience is incorrect or weak, then the reports of religious practitioners and their epistemic practices should be recognized as bequeathing epistemic goods, which can be enjoyed by trusting their testimony or by engaging in such practices oneself.

As for (ii), religious diversity is an odd objection to the truth of religious claims. We do not discount the occurrence of certain events in history even if historians disagree about the specifics of those events, for example the one gunman versus multiple gunman theories concerning the Kennedy assassination. No one infers that Kennedy was not assassinated. If one person reports that the blue car hit the red car first, and another person reports that the yellow car hit the red car first, we do not conclude that an accident

did not occur. On such matters as religious diversity, one should recall the Thomistic dictum according to which knowledge is in the knower according to the mode by which the knower knows. Armed with this epistemic wisdom, it is expected that religious believers in different sociocultural contexts, in widely variant epochs, with distinct mores, customs, meaningful symbols, and dominant virtues, and with radically different intellectual heritages, will experience one and the same God quite differently. But even so, there are incredible similarities in religious experience (see Otto (1958)), and there is a good argument to the effect that the diversity of religious experience is willed by God to achieve a transcendental unity starting from terrestrial plurality (see Schuon (1984)).

Turning finally to (iii), namely peer disagreement, Schellenberg supposes that one must ‘turn aside’ defeaters partly because there are those who disagree. Schellenberg seems to think that the hypothesis of misperception is strong enough to require attention because there are those whose intellectual abilities are similar to a religious practitioner’s but they do not have such experiences. Again, peer disagreement exerts an epistemic effect that supposedly undercuts the justification a religious practitioner has in her religious experiences. Here is Plantinga responding to a similar point.

But the more I thought about God, the more it seemed to me that there really was such a person. In church I sometimes felt very close to God, as also in prayer, in reading the Bible, and in some other circumstances, for example in the mountains. I was inclined to doubt that the same was true of my colleagues; they didn’t go to church, and, as far as I knew, they didn’t pray or read the Bible. So I doubted that they had the same kind of religious experience as I had. This led me to doubt that they were my epistemic peers with respect to belief in God. As far as I can see, I wasn’t going contrary to any epistemic duties in so thinking. (Plantinga (2015), 253)

An epistemic peer is partly defined as one who is engaged in *the same belief-forming practices* as you, and those practices comport with the kind of enquiry in question. As pointed out by Plantinga, if someone else is not praying, participating in liturgical practices, informing oneself of religious insights, then there is no reason why their absence of religious conviction exerts any sceptical effects on one who is engaged in such practices.

One may retort by observing that religious experiences are astonishing, or unusual. The idea might be that when I tell someone that I saw an accident on a busy street, no one is suspicious; when I relate that I saw phosphorescent wheels slightly below the surface of the sea while sailing (Coady (1992), 190ff.), many would be suspicious. Religious experience, Schellenberg may say, is closer to the latter than the former. But notice, to assess religious experience as astonishing, one must already think that the objects of the experience probably do not exist. Such an assessment cannot itself be justified by divine hiddenness considerations without vicious circularity. It does not help to assert that the default position for interpreting religious experience is a naturalistic one. Again, to *assume* naturalistic interpretations is to *resist*, even on Schellenberg’s understanding of non-resistance, which requires openness to believing. To think that they should be privileged because religious experience is not veridical is logically circular.

There is a tension here within our own intuitions. On the one hand, the more dazzling the experience may be, the more I will think that it is unusual and I would be more inclined to treat it sceptically. Knowing this, God is justified in not disclosing Himself in such dazzling ways – and Schellenberg rightly recognizes this point. On the other hand, the more humble, mundane, or terrestrial the experiences are, the less I will think they are religious. Consider an everyday example such as entertaining an objective moral truth. C. Stephen Evans points out,

If one supposes that there is a God, and that God wants humans to know him and relate to him, one would expect God to make his reality known to humans in very obvious ways . . . If an awareness of moral obligations is in fact an awareness of God's commands or divine laws, then the ordinary person who is aware of moral obligations does have a kind of awareness of God. (Evans (2018), §3)

Of course, one might not see a moral truth as an expression of God's will for our lives. Judging from the ripostes to the moral argument for God's existence, there is no reason why one *should* not since they all exploit some version of the claim that the epistemic authority of moral truths *can* be explained naturalistically. But refusing to see moral truths as an expression of God's will for my flourishing fails non-resistance if one doubts because of a *possible* naturalistic explanation.

To summarize, here is how to think about what is fundamentally problematic with Schellenberg's riposte to the argument from religious experience. If we pair Schellenberg's articulation of the hiddenness argument, i.e. its focus on the absence of conscious awareness, and his rejoinder to the epistemic standing of religious experience we get the following pastiche of claims. Schellenberg argues that conscious awareness of God is something to be expected in a universe in which a good and loving God exists, but he also thinks that such an experience holds little epistemic weight. This poses a dilemma. Either conscious awareness of God is epistemically important enough for a good and loving God to make available to all non-resistant seekers or it is not. If Schellenberg thinks that religious experience has no epistemic standing, then there is no argument for thinking that a good and loving God should make that experience available to non-resistant seekers. Conversely, if religious experience of either the dazzling or humble sort has epistemic standing, then there is no reason for not trusting the testimony of religious practitioners for they are readily at hand (Davis (1989)). One would not be non-resistant by disbelieving their reports. One might think that such experiences should be distributed equally. But for such a riposte to function as an argument against God's existence it must endorse something like the following inference 'if I have not experienced God, God does not exist'. My understanding of Schellenberg's work, in particular his reflections on scepticism (Schellenberg (2011), 15–49), suggest that he would not endorse this inference on grounds that it is epistemically narcissistic.¹⁴

Conclusion

Though popular and attractive at first, the divine hiddenness argument suffers from a false premise, precisely the premise that even many theistic commentators recommend accepting. The conclusion of my argument should not be surprising. *Constructing* arguments, *entertaining* hypotheses, *drawing* inferences, etc. are all intellectual *actions*. Actions are informed by motivations and the latter are identified by their end. When those actions have as their end the defence of atheism, the motivation informing those actions is the defence of atheism. So, it is not surprising that constructing and defending the argument from divine hiddenness must involve a motivation to defend atheism. It follows that the divine hiddenness proponent – understanding 'proponent' to mean one who is engaged in the act of defending – cannot satisfy the criterion of non-resistant non-belief. Non-resistant non-belief assumes an open will, or intellectual motivations that are open to theism – one would 'love' to believe. Of course, there are atheists who are so on grounds other than hiddenness. The argument just given does not apply to them and hence, is not pejorative. Their atheism is consistent if, for example, it is based on the argument from evil, or they find naturalistic explanations concerning the origin of life, the contingent universe's existence, the presence of objective moral truths, etc. as the best

explanations. Resting one's atheism on the argument from divine hiddenness, however, is either redundant, since it would require assuming naturalistic explanations on independent grounds, or incoherent since it would involve both endorsing conscious apprehension as a great thing that God should distribute (the absence of which is evidence that God does not exist) and viewing those very experiences as holding little epistemic weight.

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Notes

1. For important exceptions see Henry (2001 and 2008) and Lehe (2004), the influences of which are apparent in this article. The difference between this contribution and Henry and Lehe's is that I focus on two different aspects that call into question the existence of non-resistant non-belief. The first is our labile intuitions on what a loving God would do – intuitions that I show Schellenberg shares; and I focus on internal tensions within Schellenberg's argument. As I hope to make clear, these two foci form a coherent unit, namely, the tensions are a function of our variegated intuitions.
2. Anselm is a possible exception. Anselm explicitly crafts his so-called ontological argument as a meditation upon God that occurs during prayer. It is not so much an argument *for* God as a meditation *on* God qua perfect being.
3. This point is contested very well by Garcia (2002), but my critique of the hiddenness argument does not depend on her argument.
4. This is contestable because one might think that all arguments for God's existence are flawed in some respect or other (as Plantinga (1990) does), but the person reports having personal communion with God. Schellenberg's insight could then focus on why such personal communion is not distributed equally to all seekers. Besides, the project of natural theology does not deliver or bequeath the direct subject to Subject relationship that Schellenberg thinks a good and loving God would make available. So, even if natural theology is a 'success', such success is not what God is truly interested in achieving.
5. What follows is a summary of Schellenberg's argument spanning Schellenberg (2011, 205–206) and (2015). I have stripped the argument of its modal operators and its specification to subjects and times since that level of precision is not necessary to understand my criticisms below.
6. Though my argument below does not require it, one can infer from this quotation that insofar as a non-resister is truly open to belief in God, she would view naturalistic interpretations of her putative religious experiences with suspicion. To be more precise, my argument in the sub-section 'Religious experience and circularity' notes that a non-resister would certainly not think that a *possible* naturalistic explanation defeats her putatively veridical experience. And that is enough to respond to Schellenberg who, given the quotations below, suggests that the mere possibility of misperception or natural causes is enough to defeat justification from a religious experience.
7. This inference is relevant for assessing Schellenberg's argument against using religious belief-forming practices (see section 'Testimony and the selection of belief-forming practices' below).
8. I would have liked Schellenberg to state instead that there are those who do not *experience* conscious apprehension of God, rather than focus on not *believing* in God's existence. The problem here is that one can be consciously aware of, for example, another person's love for me, but not understand it as the person's love for me. Imagine a dysfunctional couple in which one person shows his love principally through acts of service, and the other shows her love principally through quality time or conversation. They each might think that the other doesn't love the other, even though they do. Likewise, one might be aware of God's love, or an aspect of God's being, such as the existence of objective moral truths (see the Evans quotation below). But this conscious awareness of God's love for me is not perceived as God's love for me. Suppose that by divine providence I marry someone who is exceedingly loving towards me and whose love heals my many wounds from childhood. Suppose also that I am an atheist. It could be the case that God is loving me through my wife, but I don't see it as God's love for me. Consequently, we need to make a distinction between being *aware of* God's love for me and understanding it as God's love for me. If this is correct, then absence of a conscious awareness of God is ambiguous between either God simply not disclosing His being to the non-resistant seeker or the non-resistant seeker not understanding God's love for her as God's love. What counts against God's existence is the former, viz., there is no disclosure whatsoever. As I see it, one can be a non-resistant seeker and due to a simple glitch in one's gestalt perception of the world, not see someone's love for me as extending back to God's providential care. Such non-resistance is not incompatible with God's existence.

9. The evidential parity I speak of here is a parity vis-à-vis third-person evidence; but Schellenberg also mentions experiential evidence as constituting parity. Insofar as Schellenberg argues against using religious epistemic practices (discussed below), I do not see how he can claim experiential parity when he recommends not engaging in the epistemic practices ordered to bequeath experiential knowledge of a divine Person. So, at this point in the dialectic, evidential parity refers to third-person evidence. First-person evidence and the complications it invites are discussed below.

10. Again, the retort may be that such practices fail universality. But the universality requirement is suspect because belief-forming processes that are clearly reliable for one domain of discourse (e.g. mathematical intuition) may not be reliable or should be used in other domains (e.g. aesthetic judgement). On one understanding, the requirement does not consider how certain belief-forming practices are, and should be, indexed to specific domains of enquiry.

11. I thank a referee who points out that one need not assume philosophical naturalism to defeat the epistemic worth of a religious experience. That may be true for Schellenberg, but not for other proponents of the hiddenness argument, such as Drange (1998). Schellenberg's own metaphysical commitments tolerate there being an impersonal transcendent being. And many religious practitioners have interpreted some of their own putative religious experiences as not caused by God but as being demonic or naturalistic in origin. So, the focus here is on a naturalistic explanation being assumed, not naturalism. What matters is how that naturalistic explanation functions to rebut belief in a Personal God.

12. Recall Schellenberg's characterization of resisters as engaged in 'careless investigation' (Schellenberg (2015), 55).

13. This is especially true given that Ve is based on experiential evidence, and arguably, Ne is propositional. Two points are important to observe in this regard. First, as noted above, these are different orders of evidence. Natural theology could be a resounding success and the hiddenness argument remains poignant. So, it is questionable on Schellenberg's own commitments how Ne could affect Ve. Aside from his own commitments, there is a good reason to think that Ne could not affect Ve except in stringently defined cases. Consider the following example from Bergmann (2002). Suppose I am accused of a crime I know I did not commit. But the propositional evidence keeps mounting against me. I remember, however, very clearly and distinctly being in Puerto Rico on the beach, enjoying myself, when the crime took place in New York City. No matter how much propositional evidence there is, it would be irrational of me to abandon my belief that I was in Puerto Rico at the time of the crime. To privilege Ne over Ve, one must already think that Ve is not just on an epistemic par with Ne but is viewed as not possibly being veridical – much like how Lewis's friend interpreted seeing a putative Ghost, viz. 'there must be a naturalistic interpretation'.

14. One might argue instead, on the basis of the pastiche of reflections Schellenberg offers, that he has hermetically sealed naturalistic explanations from critique or change, and that is incongruent with non-resistance as well. On the one hand, Schellenberg requires God's manifest self-disclosure, and on the other he argues that if God were to do so, the experience can be recast or reinterpreted naturalistically. Stacking the deck against theistic belief in this fashion appears resistant.

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