

1 Introduction

The hiddenness of God, as understood by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, enjoys a rich intellectual and spiritual tradition. Recently, some have argued that the apparent hiddenness of God constitutes evidence for the nonexistence of God. Some proponents of this so-called hiddenness argument suggest that it is as forceful as the argument from evil and shows that theism is unlikely to be true, or is even definitely false. This Element introduces the hiddenness argument as presented by John Schellenberg and its up-to-date discussion in a comprehensible way. In fact, I wish to introduce to you “one of the most dynamic areas in current philosophy of religion” (Green and Stump, 2015, frontmatter).

To begin, I offer a brief account of the hiddenness argument and its main characteristics. I contrast Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument, understood as an argument for atheism, with the traditional theistic view that God exists but is hidden. The main part of this Element consists of a clear exposition of the argument’s premises, followed by a discussion of the support and criticism other authors have provided for each premise, as well as my own response. Put simply, for each premise I outline Schellenberg’s claim as well as what might be said for or against it. This discussion is followed by a short section that considers open questions that may promote further investigation. I then compare the well-known argument from evil with the hiddenness argument. Some of the theodicies and defenses offered in response to the hiddenness argument are similar to responses to the argument from evil, while others are unique to the hiddenness argument, as I demonstrate. In what follows, I sketch some newer types of hiddenness arguments, which are inspired by but go beyond the original argument as developed by Schellenberg. I conclude with a brief assessment about where the debate stands, from my point of view, and whether divine hiddenness should reduce a reflective theist’s confidence in theism. Finally, I round off this Element with many references including a dynamic bibliography (in pdf format) by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green that I hope students, scholars as well as practitioners will find useful in further understanding and following the debate surrounding divine hiddenness.

2 The Hiddenness of God in the Hiddenness Argument

It is a well-known *theologumenon* that God is hidden. Many theists would not be surprised by the notion that God is hidden when it is first presented to them. In fact, divine hiddenness is such a common antonym or counterterm to the one of divine revelation that theists might not initially be worried about the idea that God is hidden. Of course, the intension and the extension, that is, the meaning and the reference of the term “divine hiddenness” as well as of the term “divine

revelation” are understood in various different ways by theists. But it is presumably uncontroversial not just that the meanings of the more general terms “hiddenness” and “revelation” are mutually interdependent (i.e. that the meaning of hiddenness is understood against the background of the meaning of revelation and vice versa) but also that they are reciprocally contrary (i.e. that the meaning of hiddenness is the negation of the meaning of revelation and vice versa). However, regarding the more specific terms divine revelation and divine hiddenness, theists commonly claim that, in the actual world, it is true that God is both hidden and that God is revealed. At an etymological level, the term revelation is derived from the Greek term ἀποκάλυψις or from the Latin term *revelatio*. Both terms signify uncovering something which had been covered or unveiling something which had been veiled (see Dierse et al., 2017).

It will be useful to provide a brief account of the traditional theistic understanding of divine hiddenness. The notion traditionally involved at least two ideas (for more detail on this, see Weidner, 2018: 16–25). The first idea is that God is hidden when a believer, who once experienced the presence of God, loses access to God’s presence, sometimes culminating in the painful experience of a dark night of the soul (see San Juan de la Cruz, 1993: 431–487; for commentary on him, see Cockayne, 2018: 73–90, and Coakley, 2015: 233–239). The second idea is that God’s hiddenness means that the nature of God is not completely comprehensible to human beings (see, e.g., Rahner, 1975: 285–305, especially 299, 305). At its most extreme, some maintain a view called apophaticism according to which, in its strongest version, God’s nature is utterly incomprehensible and ineffable for humans (for a recent account, see Scott and Citron, 2016: 23–49; see also Fakhri, 2020).

God’s revelation, in turn, traditionally implies, among other things, that God is available regarding His divine energies (i.e. the effects of God’s actions, which are recognizable by human beings). This is what is traditionally called special or supernatural revelation. General or natural revelation, on the other hand, is understood as the idea that all human beings, whether they are believers or not, are able to recognize that God exists by reflecting on certain features of the world or on the fact that there is a world at all (for more on this, see Weidner, 2018: 25–51).

But Schellenberg uses the language of the hiddenness of God or divine hiddenness in a different way. Specifically, he uses it nonliterally. On Schellenberg’s usage, these terms do not imply that there is a God about whom something is hidden. Instead, Schellenberg utilizes these terms to refer to the alleged empirical fact that there is or has been at least one human being who, due to no fault of her own, lacks belief that God exists. That is, in Schellenberg’s usage, God’s hiddenness refers to the observable state of affairs

which consists in at least one human being who, through no fault of her own, does not believe that God exists, be it in the presence or past. In Schellenberg's own words, this is what he calls the occurrence of "*nonresistant nonbelief*" (Schellenberg, 2007: 205; see also Schellenberg, 2015a: 17, 74, 75).

So, when Schellenberg claims that the hiddenness of God constitutes evidence of the nonexistence of God, he has in mind this nonliteral understanding of the hiddenness of God. He claims that, on his understanding, proper reflection on what it means to say that God is hidden will lead one to the conclusion that God does not exist. If Schellenberg is correct regarding the nonexistence of God, then, of course, it would be contradictory to uphold the *theologumenon* of the hiddenness of God as it is literally understood by theists (likewise, the revelation of God could no longer be taken literally). That the theistic understanding of the hiddenness of God is self-defeating seems to be Schellenberg's implicit suggestion to theists. Yet, of course, theists will not be genuinely concerned about whether they have been using the term divine hiddenness in the right way. They will worry about whether there is a God, given what Schellenberg has to say in his hiddenness argument.

There is an even more nuanced way of labelling Schellenberg's nonliteral understanding of divine hiddenness. In one of his works, Schellenberg uses the term "propositional hiddenness" (see Schellenberg, 2002: 37). He uses this term because the state of affairs to which he is referring is one in which, at some time, at least one person does not believe the proposition "God exists," due to no fault of her own. Put differently, the truth of this proposition is or was epistemically hidden for that person. This propositional hiddenness can be contrasted with "experiential hiddenness" (see Schellenberg, 2002: 38). The latter term expresses the idea that there is a state of affairs which obtains in the world that contains at least one person who lacks a religious experience of God (i.e. most roughly, an experience in which a person senses the presence of God). Schellenberg's hiddenness argument is *prima facie* not concerned with experiential hiddenness but seems to postulate only that propositional hiddenness is logically incompatible with the existence of the theistic God. However, upon a closer reading of Schellenberg's defense of the argument, propositional hiddenness is caused by experiential hiddenness. So, the hiddenness argument, in the end, also involves experiential hiddenness.

Let us take a closer look at the specific claims Schellenberg makes in the seven premises of his hiddenness argument. In section 3 (and its subsections) I present Schellenberg's argument and the support for each premise. Additionally, I discuss arguments for and against the truth of each premise. Finally, I highlight further open research questions, thereby aiming to encourage you to come up with even more considerations of your own.

3 The Premises of the Hiddenness Argument

Schellenberg's current hiddenness argument goes something like this:

- (1) Necessarily, if God exists, then God is a personal perfect being.
- (2) Necessarily, if God is a personal perfect being, then God always loves all human beings perfectly.
- (3) Necessarily, if God always loves all human beings perfectly, then God is always open to be in a personal relationship with all those human beings capable of such a relationship with God.
- (4) Necessarily, if God is always open to be in a personal relationship with all those human beings capable of such a relationship with God, then God does or omits nothing which would prevent all those human beings to relate to God personally who are capable of a personal relationship with God and also not resistant to a personal relationship with God.
- (5) Necessarily, a human being capable of a personal relationship with God who is not resistant to a personal relationship with God is only able to relate to God personally if she believes that God exists.
- (6) Necessarily, if God does or omits nothing which would prevent all those human beings to relate to God personally who are capable of a personal relationship with God and also not resistant to a personal relationship with God, then it is not the case that there is a human being capable of a personal relationship with God who is not resistant to a personal relationship with God and yet not able to relate to God personally because she does not believe that God exists.
- (7) There is at least one human being capable of a personal relationship with God who is not resistant to a personal relationship with God and yet not able to relate to God personally because she does not believe that God exists.
- (8) Therefore, God does not exist. (see Schellenberg, 2015b: 24–25)

This is quite a massive block of text and may seem daunting at first glance. In the following, I will divide it into smaller portions and address each premise in turn. Before that, let's start by noting that the hiddenness argument is a deductive argument (see e.g. Schellenberg, 2015a: 3). The first thing to determine when analyzing an argument in general, and a deductive argument in particular, is whether it is valid or not. That is, does the conclusion necessarily follow from the premises? If yes, then you have a valid deductive argument. If you have a valid deductive argument then, if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true. But, far more interestingly, we still need to determine whether the premises are in fact true. If, for each premise, the answer is yes, then you can deduce that the conclusion is also true. In that case you have learned that you have a sound

deductive argument, which is nothing else than a proof. Schellenberg claims that his hiddenness argument is a sound deductive argument against the existence of God, and thus a proof of God's nonexistence (see, e.g., Schellenberg, 2015b: 31). Schellenberg now defends the view that all premises except premise (7) are also necessarily true (Schellenberg, 2015b: 25). However, altering the modal truth status of almost all the premises in this way does not have any effect on the alleged soundness of the argument. This is because, as mentioned, it would suffice that the premises are merely true for the argument to be sound. Neither does the change in the truth status of almost all the premises validly imply that Schellenberg's conclusion must be necessarily true. This would require all the argument's premises to be necessarily true. In what follows, I turn to my discussion of individual premises.

3.1 Premise (1)

(1) Necessarily, if God exists, then God is a personal perfect being.

3.1.1 Background Claims

According to Schellenberg, the hiddenness argument concerns itself with the God of monotheism (or just "theism," on his usage) as found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (see Schellenberg, 1993: 10), and "is an argument against the existence of *God* (or against the truth of theism)" (Schellenberg, 2015a: 21). In other words, Schellenberg holds that his argument shows that the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam does not exist. But if the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam apparently does not exist, it follows that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are false.

Yet, what sort of being is it that Schellenberg claims is nonexistent? In what follows, I cite from his earliest book and from one of his latest books. First:

God, if he exists, is *unsurpassably great*. As such, God is to be described (minimally) as ultimate (i.e., the source or ground of all existence other than his own, to whom nothing stands as a ground of existence), personal (that is to say, one of whom agential, intellectual, and affective qualities may appropriately be predicated), and ... all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good. (Schellenberg, 1993: 10)

And:

According to theism, God is a personal creator who intentionally produces or permits everything else that exists ... ; who has all power, all knowledge, and all goodness ... ; and whose love ... makes for our deepest well-being. (Schellenberg, 2019a: 80)

As Schellenberg sees it, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam endorse a concept of God according to which God is unsurpassably great or perfect as well as personal in the sense of being a person. Hence, the theistic God is a perfect personal being (see Schellenberg, 2015a: 90). In other words, the theistic concept of God, as Schellenberg states it, amounts to one which is endorsed by personal perfect being theology. How is it possible to grasp what it means to say that God is a person, according to Schellenberg? All one needs to do is to reflect on what it means to say that a human being is a person and extrapolate this sense of personhood to God (see, e.g., Schellenberg, 2019a: 82).

God ... [is] a particular being and center of consciousness with power, knowledge, goodness, and love that can be understood by extrapolation from our own similar attributes plus ultimization. (Schellenberg, 2015a: 21)

That is, according to Schellenberg, our understanding of a property ascribed to human beings is a reliable source for our understanding of that property when ascribed to God. The property when ascribed to God must be at least similar to the property when it is ascribed to humans. However, certain properties can be actualized in human beings to varying qualitative degrees. Only the most perfect realization of a human property “could serve as an analogy” of that property as realized in God (Schellenberg, 1993: 18). Schellenberg claims that this practice of extrapolating human properties to understand divine properties is common in theology and philosophy of religion (see Schellenberg, 2002: 45).

Regarding what it means to say that some human is a person, Schellenberg says that it entails that she “can be self-aware and aware of other things, has moral properties, and can act intentionally” (Schellenberg, 2017a: 2; see also Schellenberg, 2019a: 82). Moreover, a person exhibits agential, intellectual, and affective qualities (Schellenberg, 1993: 10). As Schellenberg nonchalantly notes, “I’m assuming we have got our present understanding of a person in view ...; otherwise all bets are off” (Schellenberg, 2015b: 17, fn. 7). And so, according to Schellenberg, when defining God as a person, we should ascribe to God the most perfect realization of the qualities a human person possesses qua “person.”

3.1.2 Discussion

Is it true that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all endorse personal perfect being theology? In other words, is it true that their basic theistic claim consists in affirming that God is a personal perfect being, as Schellenberg sees it? According to Schellenberg, the definition of God as a personal perfect being

“would ... be accepted by the majority of contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion” (Schellenberg, 1993: 10). In his second book on hiddenness, he affirms this claim again and makes an even broader assertion about who would accept his definition of God, namely, not only the majority of those scholars. Rather, it is a concept of God which is the most popular worldwide among those religious people who affirm that there is any transcendent divinity: “Properly conceived, within a philosophical context, the hiddenness argument will be viewed as a way of testing whether the most common elaboration of ultimism in the world today, the idea of a person-like God ..., can rationally survive” (Schellenberg, 2015a: 21). His claim is that theists in general embrace personal perfect being theology: “[W]hen theists talk about God as a person, they mean that God is the *greatest possible* person. When they say that God exists, they should be taken to mean that the greatest possible person exists” (Schellenberg, 2015a: 95).

However, Schellenberg apparently retracts this view to some degree in a later paper, stating that he has been misunderstood as building his argument against the truth of theism on a commonly accepted concept of God. Here, he clarifies that his concept of God is not necessarily embraced by any theology and that he is aware that there might be other theological concepts of God.

A philosopher can be thinking about, and hold to be uninstantiated, the idea of a personal God without supposing that what she has in mind has been endorsed by any theology and also without seeing herself as mounting her case against it because it has been thus endorsed. Theologians and their supporters too easily assume – and incorrectly assume, where my argument in particular is concerned – that a philosopher’s main aim is to attack theology. ... I fully recognize that the deity I have discussed is not always theology’s deity; and so recognizing that what I have had to say about God does not always correspond to what theology has said is merely a small step toward understanding my view rather than the basis for a legitimate criticism of it. (Schellenberg, 2017b: 7–8)

Of course, it would be sensible to reason about God in this way. But if one’s argument that God does not exist relies on an uncommon conception of God, then that conclusion will be less significant than if one’s argument used a common conception of God. In that case, even if the hiddenness argument is sound, all one would be entitled to conclude is the conditional claim that if theism entails that God is a personal perfect being, then the theistic God does not exist and thus theism is false. But it seems that Schellenberg does not defend a merely conditional conclusion such as this. Rather, he claims that theism entails that God is a personal perfect being, and that, as a conclusion of his hiddenness

reasoning, the theistic God does not exist and thus theism is false. In his words, “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” (Schellenberg, 2015b: 31).

So Schellenberg remains consistent with his previous publications when he repeats the view that the theistic idea of God who is also overall perfect amounts to

a personal or person-like being who is all-powerful ... and all-knowing, as well as perfectly morally good. ... When this idea of God is the conclusion of an argument, philosophers call the argument an argument for *theism*. Naturally, other philosophers have developed arguments for the denial of theism, the claim that there is no God. When this latter idea is the conclusion of an argument, philosophers call the argument an argument for *atheism*. (Schellenberg, 2019a: 4–5; see also 7–9.13)

Thus, the hiddenness argument is an argument against the truth of theism and thus that a personal God does not exist. That is, in Schellenberg’s view the result of testing whether the idea of a personal God and thus theism overall can rationally survive is clear: it cannot. Since the hiddenness argument apparently shows that there is no personal God, atheism is the only way to go. Yet, this has not prompted Schellenberg to leave religion as a topic aside but, instead, to dedicate his subsequent work to carving out other forms of being religious beyond what he considers to be genuinely theistic thoughts (see Schellenberg, 2009, 2013, 2019a, and, especially, 2019b).

So far we’ve been largely concerned with how to get here – with properly identifying the road *to* atheism. But having safely arrived, we may wonder, now what? So there’s no omni-God. Where can we go from here? The road from atheism I am recommending will take us into further and deeper religious investigation aimed at informing our future cultural life. (Schellenberg, 2019a: 156–157)

Some agree with Schellenberg that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam fundamentally entail personal perfect being theology and that this is a common view. Consider, for example, another Cambridge Element in this series by Natalja Deng in which she states that “‘theism’ refers to the view that there is a personal God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, who created the world, and who is still actively involved in the world. This is intended to capture a core view at the heart of all three Western religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity)” (Deng, 2019: 3). Likewise, Trent Dougherty asserts that Judeo-Christian and Islamic theism involves at least a concept of God which might be called “*omniGod*” (Dougherty, 2016: 78), that is, a concept of God ascribing

omni-attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence to God. Hence, according to him, “any argument against an omniGod *prima facie* counts as arguments against the Abrahamic God” (Dougherty, 2016: 68). This view is also endorsed by Alvin Plantinga (see, e.g., Plantinga, 1974: 165). Richard Swinburne, Schellenberg’s former dissertation supervisor at the University of Oxford, describes the God of theism as “a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who necessarily is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things” (Swinburne, 2004: 7).

Yet, some criticize the inherent anthropomorphic inclinations of personal perfect being theology which depict God as “super-duper superman” (see Trakakis, 2015: 194, and the worthwhile literature references he provides by Brian Davies and Fergus Kerr, Paul Helm, and David Burrell who all refuse to see such anthropomorphism as being genuinely theistic, be it in the Catholic Christian tradition, the Protestant Christian tradition, or in any Abrahamic religion). As Michael Rea points out, “[w]ithin a large segment of contemporary Christendom, God has been increasingly portrayed as, in effect, a doting suburban helicopter parent whose entire day is structured around the interests and needs of his or her child” (Rea, 2018: 29).

As Jon McGinnis, a scholar of the *Falsafa*-tradition, sees it, the concept of God presupposed as theistic in Schellenberg’s argument is, in fact, one endorsed only by some contemporary Christian theists. It is not likely to be accepted by medieval Muslim and Jewish philosophers of religion such as Al-Ghazali, Avicenna, or Maimonides.

[T]he notion of a personal relation presupposes two things: first, an account of person, and, second, the possibility of a relation’s holding between two persons. Certain medieval philosophers (and some Jewish ones too) would have found both elements doubtful if not damnable when applied to the purported relation between God and creatures. ... Ironically, then, the atheist who appeals to the argument from divine hiddenness might best be thought of as a “Christian atheist” in as much as he or she apparently agrees more with modern Christians about God than with theists historically and more generally. (McGinnis, 2015: 173–174)

3.1.3 *Open Questions*

What difference would it make to the significance of the hiddenness argument if the concept of God it assumes is not the only or primary concept of God affirmed by most theists? Is there reason to claim that Christian philosophers of religion and theology too hastily speak on behalf of other theistic traditions without proficiency in these traditions? If so, does this put them in danger of

patronization and colonialism in thought, and what might be done to avoid this imbalance or misalignment? What reasons are there for and against a univocal usage of the term “person,” whether referring to human beings or God, and are there any sensible alternatives? Would it be possible to personally relate to a God who is not conceived of as a person? Is there reason to think that the analytic approach is characterized by its straightforwardness and striving for clear-cut definitions, and if so, that this may promote a simplified anthropomorphic concept of God who is seen as a mere object of human thought (but not, for example, as that encompassing transcendent and yet immanent reality which is beyond the categories of subject and object but which is the synthesis of subject and object)? Is it plausible to assume that belief in God would not decline as quickly in our Western secular societies if philosophy of religion and theology proposed alternative theistic concepts of God which do not depict God as a perfect human person?

3.2 Premise (2)

(2) Necessarily, if God is a personal perfect being, then God always loves all human beings perfectly.

3.2.1 Background Claims

In the quote cited in section 3.1.1 (Schellenberg, 1993: 10), I have omitted this last qualification of God by Schellenberg.

As such, God is to be described (minimally) as ... perfectly loving. ... It might be thought that this is a claim that only Christians have any reason to accept. But I would deny this. ... [I]t would seem (and I will assume) that *all* who espouse a form of theism are rationally committed to the truth of the claim that God, if he exists, is perfectly loving. (Schellenberg, 1993: 10–11)

According to Schellenberg, perfect love is not just one property of a personal perfect God among many, but it is one which such a God exhibits necessarily (see, e.g., Schellenberg, 2002: 41) and always (see Schellenberg, 2015b: 20). That is, perfect love is not only some “great-making property” of God (Schellenberg, 2015b: 18), but one of the most central great-making properties of God.

Without offering anything like a complete explication of “Divine love,” I think we can say that what usually goes by that name – at a minimum, self-giving, unconditionally accepting, relationship-seeking love – is such that any being who lacked it would be a being whose greatness *could* be surpassed, and therefore not God. Love of the sort in question is clearly one of the highest manifestations of personal being; so if God is conceived as