

# Asian Journal of Philosophy

## A Critical Reflection on John Schellenberg's Argument from Divine Hiddenness --Manuscript Draft--

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| <b>Abstract:</b>                                     | <p>John Schellenberg has defended the Argument from Divine Hiddenness (ADH), which argues that if a perfectly loving God exists, then there should not be any nonresistant nonbelief. But nonresistant nonbelief has existed. So a perfectly loving God does not exist. I will first explore one line of reply which insists on divine transcendence &amp; then argues that Christian theism does not need to be interpreted as a form of personalistic theism. I think this reply is plausible but argue that we also need a reply for people who are sympathetic with personalistic theism.</p> <p>Then I argue against Schellenberg's No Delay Thesis as well as the Consciousness Constraint, which are presupposed by the ADH. I argue that the No Delay Thesis is implausible because the Delay Scenario is not axiologically inferior to the No Delay Scenario. Hence it is at least morally permissible for God to realize the former rather than the latter. Moreover, since God is the unique Person Who is also the Creator, the Truth, Goodness &amp; Beauty, etc., de re relationship with God is possible under many situations. Hence it is difficult to be certain that anyone who is seeking meaning, truth, goodness &amp; beauty &amp; so on does not have the opportunity to establish an implicit relationship with God, even if he lacks an explicit belief in God. Hence the ADH fails. I also evaluate Schellenberg's accommodation strategy and finds it wanting.</p> |
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PAPER SUBMITTED TO *Asian Journal of Philosophy*

Title: A Critical Reflection on John Schellenberg's Argument from Divine Hiddenness

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# A Critical Reflection on John Schellenberg's Argument from Divine Hiddenness

It is my honor to provide a response to Prof. John Schellenberg, whose original contributions to contemporary philosophy of religion are immensely significant.<sup>1</sup> He single-handedly constructs & ably defends the Argument from Divine Hiddenness (ADH), which provides a new challenge to theism, & stimulates a lot of new discussions in contemporary philosophy of religion. He proposes an original form of religious skepticism & skeptical religion, and a kind of progressive atheism (see Schellenberg 2007, 2009). He points out the unjustified dichotomy between naturalism & theism, & suggests ways to explore new options & renew contemporary philosophy of religion (see Draper & Schellenberg 2017). All these are admirable achievements worthy of extensive discussions. But this paper only concentrates on his famous ADH.

## 1. The Argument from Divine Hiddenness, ADH (or the Hiddenness Argument)

The following is one recent formulation of ADH.

Premise 1: "If [a perfectly loving God exists], then [there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person]" (Schellenberg 2015b,72).

Premise 2: "If [there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person], then [no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists]" (Schellenberg 2015b,72).

If [a perfectly loving God exists], then [no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists]. (Schellenberg 2015b,73) [from premises 1 & 2]

Premise 3: Nonresistant nonbelief has existed.

Conclusion: A perfectly loving God does not exist.

For Schellenberg, "the scope of "finite persons" ... is restricted to finite persons who have the capacities needed for such a relationship: ... a capacity to feel the presence of God, recognizing it as such; a capacity to exhibit attitudes of trust, gratitude, and obedience to God, and so on" (Schellenberg 2015b, 40). The idea of capacity for X here may not imply that one can currently do X, but it means that at least one could acquire the ability to do X. For example, "I am currently capable of speaking at least a few phrases of, say, Tagalog, a language with which I am presently entirely unacquainted;" although "learning to do so would require some study and training" (McKim 2001, 101). For Schellenberg, the "finite persons" do not include those who lack the mental capacity for God-relationship, but surely God also loves them. So their conscious God-relationship must be delayed & this delay, even to the afterlife, seems to be justified for Schellenberg: "if some human being, for whatever reason, environmental or genetic, seems at some time utterly incapable of personal relationship with God, we cannot rule out the possibility that God, if he exists and is perfectly

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<sup>1</sup> Schellenberg's work is now available in Chinese (see Schellenberg 2023).

loving, will at some future point in that individual's life, or in the hereafter, provide him with the capacities required for this and other forms of well-being" (Schellenberg 2006, 24–25).<sup>2</sup>

The ADH can be presented as an inductive argument but in recent years, Schellenberg prefers to present the ADH as a deductive argument. He regards the first two premises above as conceptual or necessary truths, discovered by reflection on the concept of a personal God. So he claims that the ADH has "as premises only necessary truths about persons and about love (or else evident empirical facts)" (Schellenberg 2015b, 23). For him, this is significant because "given the relatively early stage of human inquiry we are presently in, and the worries attending it about future discoveries that might negatively affect present results, a convincing clear cut *deductive* case may sometimes be needed for a conclusion to be drawn with any confidence, and should be sought. *I suggest that in the hiddenness argument we have found such a success story*" (Schellenberg 2015b, 113; italics mine). This sentence exhibits Schellenberg's strong confidence in his ADH,<sup>3</sup> but I will argue below that this confidence is misplaced.

## 2. My Major Disagreement with ADH

I tend to agree with Premise 3, the empirical premise, although sometimes I do feel that Schellenberg has exaggerated the pervasiveness of nonresistant nonbelief. I mainly disagree with both premises 1 & 2. Premise 1 asserts consistent or constant openness on God's side, & this entails the No Delay Thesis (see below), which is implausible to me. Premise 2 assumes that a God-relationship is possible *only if* we have an explicit or conscious belief in God- call this the *consciousness constraint*. I regard the consciousness constraint as unnecessary because we can have implicit experiences of God & an implicit relationship with God even without explicit belief, & this can be valuable in some stage of our life provided that we do achieve conscious relationship with God eventually. Let me first spell out the No Delay Thesis, which seems to be a necessary implication of the ADH.

No Delay Thesis: As soon as a person S is capable of & nonresistant to belief in God, God would bring S to belief in God, & seek to establish a relationship with S.

Such attempt would probably occur in that person's early childhood because any delay on God's part, according to Schellenberg, shows that God is less than perfectly loving! For example, a young kid can be induced to have an experience of "an intense apparent awareness of a reality at once ultimate and loving which (1) produces the belief that God is lovingly present ... Since the experience is had as soon as a capacity for personal relationship with God exists, we may suppose that it occurs quite early on in the life of

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<sup>2</sup> Two scholars, Weidler & Aijaz, argue that if the above Delay Scenario is deemed justifiable for Schellenberg, then Schellenberg's ADH will face a dilemma which undermines his argument eventually. They focus on people like the mentally handicapped. They query: if they might be compensated in the afterlife for their experiences of temporary divine hiddenness, why the same could not be done to the non-resistant nonbelievers? (Weidler & Aijaz 2013, 97) Perhaps Schellenberg allows for the possibility that mentally handicapped people can have implicit recognition of a God-relationship. But then "once we admit that implicit recognition suffices to put us in touch with the Divine to the extent that can reasonably be expected from an all-loving God, the remaining degree of hiddenness no longer undermines traditional theism" (Weidler & Aijaz 2013, 97). This raises interesting questions which cannot be discussed in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Schellenberg's confidence is really remarkable in view of the difficulties of assessing the comparative values involved in different scenarios of belief and disbelief. "We have no precise way to measure the force of the relevant goods and considerations... we also have no precise way to decide what to include on each side... we have no way to add up the value of the goods on each side, one with another, just as we lack a precise way to compare the goods on one side with those on the other... So while Schellenberg is right when he says that if God exists, God could do much more than God has done to make God's existence apparent to us, the case for atheism that he presents for our consideration is not compelling" (McKim 2001, 104). But I would not press this point here.

each individual, in particular, before any investigations as to the existence of God have been undertaken” (Schellenberg 2006, 49). To justify this claim, Schellenberg often relies on the parent-child analogy: “If God has created a world which prominently features finite persons, and if God is to be regarded as perfectly loving toward them, then the goods God seeks to realize in that world will be compatible with openness to loving relationship with them, *just as the goods that a loving mother seeks to realize in and through her life are ones she regards as compatible with such openness to her children*” (Schellenberg 2015b, 109; italics mine).

Although the parent-child analogy does make the No Delay Thesis plausible to us who live in the contemporary era, I believe there is a logical gap between the No Delay Thesis & the concept of perfect personal love. I agree with Robert McKim who pointed this out quite some time ago: “it does not follow from the combined facts that our having a personal relationship with God is a great good, and a good that brings with it numerous benefits for the human participants in the relationship, and a good whose achievement is central to the purpose of our existence, *and that* we are capable of such a relationship, that it is right that we should achieve it *now*” (McKim 2001, 101).

### 3. Modern Culture Chauvinism?

I do think anyone who is open to a God-relationship will EVENTUALLY obtain that. God would not send this kind of person to hell, because as C. S. Lewis says, “The door of the hell is locked from the inside.” I tend to agree with this comment of a critic of Schellenberg: “what’s the hurry? There’s an eternity of love ahead of them” (Howard-Snyder 2015, 135). I feel that Schellenberg’s interpretation of “perfect love” is a bit mechanical, & seems to reflect a fashionable idea of contemporary culture which is not necessarily embraced by all cultures or in all ages [but I am not saying that this interpretation is necessarily wrong]. As Helen de Cruz says, “The secure attachment with a responsive, sensitive mother is put forward as the golden standard.” However, “this ideal of parenthood described in terms of duties toward one’s child is a relatively recent, Western concept” (de Cruz 2015, 63). “The Western ideal of the responsive and sensitive parent, on which Schellenberg relies, predicts that God would *always* want a two-way responsive relationship with creatures who are capable of such a relationship. However, ... there is no reason to expect God to conform to a recent Western model of attachment, and God might desire a different kind of relationship with some of his creatures” (de Cruz 2015, 64-65; italics mine). For example, in the traditional Chinese culture, fathers are not often emotionally involved with their children, & they are not keen to establish a very personal relationship with their children. Although I personally do not recommend this kind of parent-child relationship, if this kind of father is truly loving, I would not judge this kind of relationship to be *necessarily* defective.

So: Is Schellenberg’s assumption culturally relative, just reflecting the bias of a typical modern intellectual in the West? Can we simply dismiss his claim that the No Delay Thesis is a necessary truth? But beware of the genetic fallacy: the fact that Schellenberg is drawing on some culturally fashionable ideas does not show that his interpretation of perfect love is wrong. So this point of cultural variability in itself may not destroy ADH. Schellenberg does not shy away from admitting that his ideas reflect modern cultural development, but he can claim that this is a moral progress. Schellenberg refers to the “movement toward gender equality and away from certain images that once dominated our social consciousness and reinforced the idea, inherited from religious tradition, of a hidden masculine God: images of the strong, solitary male and of the distant father. Not so very long ago, no one thought anything of it if a father was absent from the lives of his children for considerable stretches of time, or if he had some trouble relating with them amiably” (Schellenberg 2015b, 32).

However, due to the process of moral evolution, we “have come to value more a certain relational love ... , or at least to value less the ‘benevolence from a distance’ alternative” (Schellenberg 2015b, 33). Schellenberg is careful to say, “Evolution doesn’t necessarily signal improvement and although many will agree with me that in most of the cases I’ve mentioned it does amount to improvement, others will disagree” (Schellenberg 2015b, 34). However, Schellenberg does hold strongly that this moral evolution is

also real moral progress. While he is always polite towards those “others” who disagree, he seems to regard these people as somewhat “backward.” He warns his critics: “So be sure that new objections don’t just fly in the face of some of these things we’ve *learned*. Objections deriving from religious traditions formed prior to such positive cultural evolution are especially liable to do so” (Schellenberg 2015b, 108; italics mine).

However, I am not so sure. While I agree with most of those “progressive” ideas mentioned by Schellenberg, I also think that old religious traditions may well have got some important things right where the modern culture has gone wrong. For example, Michael Rea argues that Schellenberg’s interpretation is not true to some Christian traditions which emphasize divine transcendence (Rea 2015, 2018). Although the Christian tradition does appeal to the parent analogy, he thinks that the idea of divine transcendence of God may have precedence over the parent analogy. So Schellenberg may be begging question against some Christian views of God. Those who uphold these older Christian traditions may simply deny that the No Delay Thesis necessarily follows from their concept of perfect personal love, & hence the ADH is only a form of modern culture chauvinism. Especially in view of the long future ahead (a point which Schellenberg emphasizes), this kind of modern culture chauvinism may be thrown into doubt in the future, because some of the things we “learned” in past decades may well be deemed backward in 10,000 years’ time. Who knows?<sup>4</sup>

Anyway, some critics will insist that the idea of perfect personal love, when applied to God, needs to be interpreted with respect to divine transcendence. Hence, the ADH is only applicable to *some* forms of theism, & cannot be regarded as the refutation of theism *per se*. As Rea says, the “*problem of divine hiddenness* ... depends for its traction on contestable theological assumptions. Accordingly, one might just as easily take the problem not as a referendum on the existence of God, but rather on the viability of certain ways of understanding the nature of God and God’s attributes” (Rea 2018, 6). So more theological explorations are called for: “it does not seem right or reasonable to think that the matter could be decided by the hiddenness argument in the absence of detailed, historically and theologically informed exploration and defense of the assumptions about God that are embedded in it” (Rea 2018, 7-8).

This comes in stark contrast with Schellenberg’s approach which aspires to be purely philosophical- this assumes that divine attributes can be understood basically in literal or univocal ways. Here Rea would disagree. He may appeal to the biblical passages such as Isaiah 55:8–9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (See also 1 Corinthians 1:25–7.) For Rea, “if God is transcendent, then God is not *wholly* characterizable in literal, univocal terms” (Rea 2018, 52). So when we call God loving & the like, these predicates must be understood analogically in the context of divine revelation: “whatever exactly divine love, goodness, and mercy amount to, they cannot be very well understood (much less analyzed, or literally characterized) by human reason alone, without aid from divine revelation... divine love and goodness are, at best, only analogically related to ordinary human love and goodness” (Rea 2018, 51). In other words, Rea is “denying ... that we can arrive at a fully transparent concept of divine love *without deriving it somehow from divine revelation*, simply by analyzing love in general, or by reflecting on creaturely paradigms of love.” We need to “allow ourselves and our ways of thinking about things to be taken up into and transformed by the divine revelation that is the life and work of Jesus Christ and his church” (Rea 2018, 54). Rea quotes Karl Barth in support: “God is subordinate to no idea in which He can be conceived as rooted or by which He can be properly measured. There are not first of

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<sup>4</sup> McCreary (2010) argues that Schellenberg’s evolutionary scepticism about religion would undermine his own ADH. Schellenberg calls for “radical modesty and even pessimism... about our present capacity ... to establish or disestablish claims concerning the existence or nature of an ultimate and salvific reality” (McCreary 2010, 211-212). But in the debate about ADH, “Schellenberg does not exhibit ‘radical modesty’ ... concerning his own ability to establish the nature of theistic reality, if such reality exists” (McCreary 2010, 212). This seems to be inconsistent. I find the above criticism plausible but this is more a criticism of Schellenberg’s system of philosophy than ADH. To deflect McCreary’s criticism, Schellenberg might tone down his religious skepticism to avoid internal inconsistency & the ADH would remain unscathed. Since I personally do not support Schellenberg’s religious skepticism, I would not press McCreary’s criticism in this paper.

all power, goodness, knowledge, will, etc. in general, and then in particular God also as one of the subjects to whom all these things accrue as a predicate” (quoted in Rea 2018, 55).

So one possible reply to ADH is as follows: “If God is transcendent, then the Schellenberg problem is unsuccessful as an argument against the existence of God, as is any other version of the hiddenness problem that trades on the violation of expectations arising *simply* out of philosophical or commonsense conceptions of attributes like “love” and “goodness” (Rea 2018, 57). Schellenberg may simply reject this kind of theological approach but if we have no prior rational arguments which can decisively refute the possibility of knowledge or rational belief based on divine revelation, then we also cannot be sure that this Divine Transcendence Reply (DTR) to ADH is incorrect.

I do think that divine transcendence needs to be taken seriously, & hence I regard this DTR as a possible reply. But as a matter of fact, many people are indeed puzzled about the phenomena of divine hiddenness, but DTR alone cannot provide any explanations of these puzzling phenomena. It is also understandable that non-Christians would not be particularly impressed by the appeal to revelation. Perhaps even some Christians may think that a more modern understanding of perfect personal love like Schellenberg’s may also be justifiable on the grounds of revelation. These people still need more elaborate replies to ADH. One way to strengthen DTR is to give reasons for positively expecting differences between perfect personal love in God’s case & perfect personal love in human scenarios: “even if the best love between humans involves reciprocity and mutuality, this may be a poor model for love between God and us. Love between humans is love between equals, or at least beings in the same general category, whereas love between God and us is love between the worship-worthy creator of everything and a small part of his creation” (McKim 2001, 102-103). Secondly, even if we rely on human models, parent-child relationship is not the ONLY choice; other human analogies are available too: “in so far as genuine intimacy with God is contingent upon our aligning our will and purposes with God’s, divine love may be rather unlike a parent’s love for a child... it may be more akin to the sort of care which a visionary philanthropist has for those to whom he has entrusted the day-to-day operations of his foundation” (Cuneo 2013, 160). In this model, human beings are more like stewards.

I would like to provide a reply to ADH which works even if we more or less grant Schellenberg’s understanding of perfect personal love, which can be called personalism or personalist theism. Even Rea recognizes the fact that Schellenberg’s view is quite consonant with some forms of contemporary evangelicalism (Rea 2015, 225). I confess my own personal sympathy with personalist theism, & agree with Schellenberg that traditional forms of theism tend not to emphasize *enough* the importance of conscious personal God-relationship. So I would not press too hard Rea’s line of reply in the following discussions. My first line of reply is to query whether Schellenberg’s understanding of perfect personal love is personalistic enough.

#### 4. Implicit *Ceteris Paribus* Clause Needed for a Personalistic Understanding of Love

Premise 1 of ADH says: “If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.” Schellenberg claims that premise 1 is a “necessary truth about persons and about love,” & this means that “always open to a personal relationship with any finite person” is a divine attitude which holds universally in all sort of situations at all times without exceptions- no deviation even to a very slight degree is allowed! But it is doubtful that a concept about personal relationship can be easily expressed as an exception-less formula. For example, it is plausible to claim that if A has perfect love for B, then A will never tell lies to B. But what about a surprise birthday party? When a wife takes his husband to task for his forgetting of her birthday, the husband may reply, “Oh, honey, I have forgotten your birthday! Sorry!” while he is preparing a great birthday party for her in fact. You may say this kind of white lie with good intentions is not a real lie but the difficulties of drawing the boundary between a real lie & a merely apparent lie cannot be underestimated. But other difficult cases are well known. We may really need to hide the truth of the death of a son from his mother who is suffering from serious mental

problems by telling elaborate lies, which cannot be easily defined away. So a better way to capture perfect love here is:

If A has perfect love for B, then A will not tell lies to B unless there are strong moral reasons for doing so.  
OR:

If A has perfect love for B, then all other things equal (or *ceteris paribus*) A will not tell lies to B.

I tend to think that in general a truly personal relationship cannot be expressed as an exception-less formula. In short, a *ceteris paribus* clause is often needed. We can throw similar doubts on Schellenberg's Premise 1, which should be modified like this:

(1') "If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person *unless there are strong moral reasons for doing so*."

Schellenberg himself emphasizes that our extremely long evolutionary future should make us skeptical of our ideas about the religious ultimate (Schellenberg 2013). Why not also skeptical of our philosophical intuitions like Premise 1? They are equally immature from the evolutionary perspective. My (1') would be less immune from this kind of skepticism. It is harder to imagine or conceive a scenario in which a perfectly loving God is NOT open to a personal relationship with any finite person when *there are NO strong moral reasons for doing so*.

In fact, even natural laws cannot easily be expressed as exception-less formula about bodily behavior. For example, Newton's 1<sup>st</sup> law of motion does not say that bodies in uniform motion will always continue in uniform motion. It only says that bodies in uniform motion will always continue in uniform motion if not acted upon by external forces (or *ceteris paribus*). But it cannot provide a complete list of what kinds of external forces which may exist. That is why a famous philosopher of science, Carl Hempel, indeed thinks that statements of natural law need an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause, although he admits that this poses a difficulty for his *deductive-nomological* model of scientific explanation (Hempel 1988). Similarly, I do think that God's perfect love means continuous openness to a relationship with nonresistant nonbelievers *ceteris paribus* – namely, *if no other goods morally justify the temporary withholding of the God-relationship*. [Perhaps perfect love does mean openness to an *eventual* God-relationship for nonresistant nonbelievers with no exception.] These goods need not be *higher* goods (equal goods would do) because there is no need to insist that temporary withholding of the God-relationship is morally *required*. As long as this is morally permissible, there is a possible reply to ADH.

If this modification of premise 1 is reasonable, then it would pose a difficulty for a *deductive* version of ADH. Because in this case ADH would be invalid unless an extra premise like "there are no other goods which morally justify the temporary withholding of the God-relationship" is added. This extra premise is difficult to prove because we cannot disprove the possibility that there are unknown greater or equal goods which morally allow temporary divine hiddenness. As Robert McKim suggests, "the possibility that there are unknown goods among the benefits of nonbelief being rational calls into question Schellenberg's main argument" (McKim 2001, 103). It also means that Schellenberg cannot dismiss the skeptical theism reply to ADH (which is parallel to the skeptical theism reply to the problem of evil) so easily.

#### 4.1 Begging question?

Regarding this suggestion, Schellenberg writes: "Opponents of the hiddenness argument sometimes also develop the objection that there might very well be goods *unknown* to us that require hiddenness ... but if one has been led to accept the hiddenness argument's premises, then this move fails. that 's because from what some of those premises allow us to conclude, namely, that a loving God *would not* permit nonresistant nonbelief, it deductively follows that there are no goods, known or unknown, such that for their sake God *might* do so. So the present objection is shown to beg the question" (Schellenberg 2015a, 30, n.23). Elsewhere Schellenberg calls this response "a logical foul" (Schellenberg 2015b, 111).

I do not find this reply convincing. Daniel Howard-Snyder responds, “I find these words perplexing. For ... any open-minded inquirer with a modicum of intellectual humility will refuse to accept that a loving God would not permit nonresistant nonbelief until she had first satisfied her natural curiosity about whether there are any goods, known or unknown, such that for their sake a loving God would permit nonresistant nonbelief... it requires that she consider whether she is in a position to tell whether there are any goods unknown to her that might figure in a loving God’s purposes in permitting nonresistant nonbelief.” Suppose she does not accept Schellenberg’s premises. “Would she thereby deserve ... the charge of ‘begging the question’? I don’t see why. Perhaps she is simply attentive to ... her intellectual limitations” (Howard-Snyder 2015, 137-138).

Of course, if Schellenberg had really *proved* the original premise 1 to the satisfaction of all critics, then he might conclude that there are no unknown goods. But he had only provided some plausible arguments for the original premise 1, which hardly amount to a *proof*. So we cannot really be sure of premise 1, although it has plausibility to some extent. Of course, neither the critics can claim to have proven the existence of those *unknown* goods; but the possibility of unknown goods cannot be discounted absolutely. So here the arguments of both sides seem to come to a stalemate. But I think there are good reasons for denying the No Delay Thesis to be a necessary truth.

## 5. Critical Assessment of the No Delay Thesis:

### 5.1 There is No Rush!

#### 5.1.1 No Delay Thesis & My Own Experience

My mother was a nominal Christian who occasionally took me to a Christmas or Easter service when I was young, & I also attended a Christian primary school. But I did not have a belief in God or religious experience until around 13 years old. After I was 13, I started to have a series of experiences of God, & hence began to have a God-relationship around that time. However, I probably was capable of & nonresistant to a God-relationship at least since 8 or 9. According to Schellenberg’s interpretation, my period of nonresistant nonbelief from 9-13 reflects God’s lack of perfect love for me, & hence I should complain or resent about that. However, I did not have the slightest tendency to feel that this period was something I should complain about. Instead, I continue to feel grateful about this period because it makes my life story more dramatic & interesting. This in itself is a value I cherish.

Moreover, some events in my period of nonresistant nonbelief helped me to appreciate my faith journey (like providing a contrast, etc.), & they can be integrated into an overall meaningful story about my whole life. Since I expect an unending God-relationship in the future, I also feel that a few years of nonresistant nonbelief was nothing at all. There is no need to rush after all!

#### 5.1.2 A Story of Late Conversion

In Hong Kong, there had been a District Councilor called Mr. Ng, who was very enthusiastic about social justice & service for the poor & marginalized people. He should have opportunities of knowing some basic Christian ideas but he had never shown any interest in religion for many years. This was probably a period of nonresistant nonbelief. However, when he was older, he got a serious disease. Then someone told Ng about the Christian gospel, & he readily accepted it. He soon died after that. However, he did not regret or resent about the long period of nonresistant nonbelief in his life. He felt that his final conversion, although belated, was a consummation of his lifelong search for Ultimate Love & Justice, deep down in his heart. Perhaps in his lifelong quest for Ultimate Love & Justice, he was *in fact* seeking God, who IS Ultimate Love & Justice, without realizing it. We may even talk about his *de re* relationship with a God incognito. This idea will be explored later. We have provided two anecdotes above which seem to contradict the No Delay Thesis. Let us now proceed to more systematic evaluation of the No Delay Thesis.

## 5.2 Moral Permissibility of Delayed Realization of God-relationship

Suppose a finite person S is capable of, & not resistant to a God-relationship from time t onwards, but not before t. There are two possible scenarios:

1) No Delay Scenario: God reveals to S at time t, & S's conscious relationship with God is realized at time t & kept ever after.

2) Delay Scenario: S comes to believe in God at time t+d (d for delay) due to his friend P's sharing with S, & S's conscious relationship with God is realized at time t+d & kept ever after.

Which of these scenarios is a better one from the axiological perspective?

### 5.2.1 Goods in the Delay Scenario

- A conscious God-relationship from t+d to eternity (an infinite good)
- P's exercise of moral responsibility in helping S come to faith
- Human solidarity between P & S by mutual sharing in some momentous experiences in S's life
- Divine-human synergy (cooperation) in helping a person come to faith (P was urged by the Holy Spirit to talk to S)
- S has a greater sense of drama about his own life
- P has a greater sense of participation in the cosmic drama of salvation

### 5.2.2 Goods in the No Delay Scenario

- A conscious God-relationship from t to eternity (an infinite good)
- No human exercise of moral responsibility in helping S come to faith
- No solidarity between humans
- No divine-human synergy in helping a person come to faith
- S has a less sense of drama about his own life (although other dramas in life can still occur after the beginning of his God-relationship)
- Less human opportunities to participate in the cosmic drama of salvation (although other opportunities may be available)

### 5.2.3 Comparative Assessment

From the above analysis, we can see that some kinds of goods are involved in the Delay Scenario but not in the No Delay Scenario. Moreover, some kinds of goods are manifested in a greater degree in the Delay Scenario compared to the No Delay Scenario. Both involve an eternal God-relationship, but quantitatively speaking, the God-relationship in the No Delay Scenario is longer than that in the Delay Scenario. But this difference is effectively nothing compared to the infinite length of both relationships. So on the whole, the Delay Scenario is axiologically better than the No Delay Scenario. At least it is not clear that the latter is preferable to the former.

One possible criticism of my analysis is: No good can justify God's decision to "sacrifice such relationship" between humans & God (Schellenberg 2007, 210). But this is misleading: the Delay Scenario does not mean a sacrifice of God-relationship, but only a delay of its realization for a finite period of time.

### 5.3 Assessment of Schellenberg's Accommodation Strategy

Schellenberg has a general line of reply to criticisms like mine above, & this has been called the accommodation strategy. This strategy begins with the claim that all goods can be & must be realizable *within* a God-relationship: "if God is unsurpassably great then in an important sense all good is in God, and there could hardly be a *better* world than one that permitted the good that is in God to be ever more fully shared with finite creatures" (Schellenberg 2015b, 109; italics mine).<sup>5</sup> It follows that "objections to the

<sup>5</sup> Here Schellenberg seems to require his critic to show that a world with divine hiddenness is better. Later I will argue that this requirement is too high.

hiddenness argument proposing goods that allegedly require someone somewhere not to believe in God are *often* of a type that can be accommodated within relationship with God precisely because of how much the latter would have to encompass. You want room for inquiry? There will always be more to know about God. You want opportunities for free choices as to the nature of your character? There will be endless opportunities to choose to be more like God” (Schellenberg 2015b, 110; *italics mine*). Often? Yes, but not always. Let me use some examples to illustrate this point.

### 5.3.1 The Experience of Amazing Grace- the Good of Conversion

The lyrics of the hymn *Amazing Grace* are familiar to many of us: “Once I was blind; now I can see... Once I was lost; now I am found.” I think this experience of amazing grace (conversion) is a great good, but this good presupposes a period of nonbelief, which cannot be accommodated *within* an explicit God-relationship alone. In general, the dramatic experience of the *transition* from nonbelief to a conscious God-relationship with its multifarious values has to go beyond an explicit relationship with God on its own by logical necessity.<sup>6</sup> But Schellenberg argues, “If God would be an unsurpassably great Person, then God would be endlessly rich and beautiful and interesting and the process of knowing God would indeed have to be a process, with endless stages of development as you grasp ever more of the beauty and wonder of God” (Schellenberg 2015b, 109-110). His point is that any interesting & valuable spiritual development can occur within a God-relationship: moving from believing stage 1 to a more advanced believing stage 2 within a God-relationship, etc. So the good of conversion can also be accommodated within a God-relationship. But in fact any such development (from believing stage 1 to believing stage 2) would be significantly different from the development from a stage of explicit unbelief (which is compatible with a stage of seeking God or even implicit God-relationship) to a stage of explicit God-relationship. So the accommodation strategy cannot really show that the value of a prior period of divine hiddenness is unnecessary!

It is true that for many (but not all as I argue) goods which go with divine hiddenness, somewhat *similar* kinds of good can also be obtained within a God-relationship. But the former & the latter are still different in some (significant) aspects, & we cannot just assume that they are completely interchangeable, as Schellenberg seems to assume. For example, the inquiry about a deeper understanding of God is quite different from the inquiry about whether there is a God or what is the best worldview among different theories about the Ultimate (which include atheistic worldviews). The opportunities for free choices within belief in God would be different from the opportunities to choose to lay down our lives even if one does not believe in God or afterlife, or the choice to overcome self-deception to open our hearts to God’s invitation to start a God-relationship, etc.

### 5.3.2 The Diversity of Goods Is Itself a Good

Let us consider two goods:

G1= the good of exercising a free choice to overcome self-deception to open one’s heart to God’s invitation to *start* a God-relationship

G2= the good of exercising a free choice to overcome self-deception by facing one’s spiritual blindness to one’s sins within a God-relationship, which is then transformed by God into a *more mature & intimate* God-relationship

Schellenberg’s accommodation strategy seems to argue this way: G1 & G2 belong to the same type of good; the value of G1 is not higher than the value of G2. So the good of G1 can be accommodated into the No Delay Scenario which contains G2. It follows that the Delay Scenario is not necessary. But this conclusion is not sufficient for rebutting the above criticism of ADH. My criticism of the No Delay Thesis only needs to

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, experience of conversion is possible for resistant non-believers who for some reason just decide to believe. But here the focus of discussions is on those non-resistant non-believers.

assume the Delay Scenario is morally permissible; there is no need to show it to be morally required. The idea of accommodation is also far from clear. Any two things can be said to belong to some type, as long as this type is defined in a very abstract way. Similarly, any two goods may be grouped under the same broader type of good, but as argued above, this does not mean that one good is completely replaceable by the other. So G1 is not obviously replaceable by G2. Moreover, the critic need not argue for the superiority of G1 over G2; at most we need to argue that they are comparable or equivalent in value.

In fact, I think we do not even need to argue for this. Let us suppose the value of G1 is less than that of G2 for the sake of argument. Supporters of the Delay Scenario can suggest a reverse accommodation strategy: the Delay Scenario allows for the existence of BOTH G1 (before the God-relationship) & G2 (within the God-relationship). Even if G1 has less value than G2, the existence of both G1 & G2 in different stages of life is still better than the existence of G2 only. Why? Because it is better to realize more diverse kinds of good. So it is better to allow for *both* a stage of divine hiddenness & a stage of explicit God-relationships in this world (Delay Scenario). My conclusion is that it is doubtful that the accommodation strategy can defeat my criticisms above. In fact the above reply can be generalized into a reverse accommodation strategy: all the goods which exist in the No Delay Scenario can be accommodated into the Delay Scenario, & there are some distinctive goods in the Delay Scenario. Even if these distinctive goods are similar to some goods in the No Delay Scenario, why not both & realizing a richer world with more diverse goods?

### 5.3.3 Moral Permissibility is Enough for a Reply to ADH

I want to emphasize again that we do not need to say that God *must* realize the Delay Scenario- at long as this is morally permissible for God to realize, this suffices for the refutation of the No Delay Thesis. But Schellenberg sometimes seems to think otherwise. For example, he argues that “a secondary kind of hiddenness” like the experience of a dark night of the soul “would in a variety of cases accomplish all that the primary sort of hiddenness with its greater relationship related costs was said to realize.” Then he claims that hence “there was no *need* for the latter in those cases” (Schellenberg 2015b, 111; italics mine). Suppose I grant that divine hiddenness is not absolutely needed. But that there is no need to do X does not entail the conclusion that it is not morally permissible to do X. As long as temporary divine hiddenness is morally permissible, the ADH is defeated. There is no need for the critics to argue that divine hiddenness is morally required.

Schellenberg also says, “if the same goods or goods of the same type as the critic appeals to are in this way available within personal relationship with God, then given that openness to such relationship would have to be compromised for them to be made available otherwise, the hiddenness arguer has a powerful reason to deny that God would choose the latter course” (Schellenberg 2015a, 29). Typically, the goods suggested by critics of ADH & the counterpart good within a God-relationship suggested by the ADH defender are not the same goods; they are rather *non-identical* goods of the same type such as G1 & G2 in my example above. I cannot see that God’s decision to realize both, say, G1 & G2, means that divine openness to such relationship has been compromised. Not only it does no harm to the person involved, it may also make his life richer. It may also make the entire world richer. Why must God choose one such as G2 at the expense of the other such as G1? Why not choosing both while divine openness remains unchanged all the time? Schellenberg’s reply here is not very clear; it seems insufficient. The critic does not need to argue that a similar kind of good within a God-relationship would not be possible otherwise- just that the option chosen by God is good enough. Many examples like G1 can be provided- see below.

### 5.4 Multifarious Goods Made Possible by the Temporary Absence of God

McKim puts an emphasis on the good of moral autonomy: since a personal relationship with God “would be very invasive” a stage of divine hiddenness may enhance our “moral autonomy” (McKim 2001, 102). Bozzo

provides such a list of distinctive goods in the Delay Scenario: “the opportunity and responsibility to cooperatively bring non-resistant non-believers to belief in God ... the opportunity and responsibility to sustain theistic belief it’s possible to lose ... the chance to express commitment to and faith in God in the face of non-resistant non-belief ... the ability to form virtuous characters in the face of non-resistant non-belief ..., the humility and appreciation realized upon attaining belief in God’s existence ..., and the opportunity to develop proper attitudes attending the search for meaning in the face of death and non-resistant non-belief.” These “are all very great goods ... Since such goods entail the absence of personal relationship with God ..., God can’t actualize this whole collection of goods unless he also permits that some persons lack relationship with him for some time” (Bozzo 2020, 606).

These are Teeninga’s suggestions: “If the value of some moral choice is to any degree greater when chosen by a nonresistant nonbeliever than it is when chosen by a believer, then this contributes value to [a world] ... If Jones does the right thing, God’s hiddenness will have allowed him to exercise a greater strength of will than Smith has” (Teeninga 2017, 599). “A second benefit of allowing for nonresistant nonbelief is that it makes it possible for some humans to have the responsibility of telling other humans about God’s existence ... Since there may be many significant truths about God, God could give some believers the responsibility of teaching other believers these truths... the responsibility of telling another person that God exists is the greatest responsibility (and privilege) a person could have... He wants His creatures to respond appropriately to learning of His existence: by pursuing a relationship with Him, rather than rejecting Him, and by pursuing that relationship for the right reasons.” There is also the “possibility of genuine self-sacrifice ... without considering the hope ... that she will continue to exist in the afterlife... there can be a greater variety of personal testimony about entering into a relationship with God” (Teeninga 2017, 600).

Teeninga even thinks that these goods may be sufficient for justifying an entire life of nonresistant nonbelief: “even a lifetime of hiddenness seems very short relative to an eternity of enjoying a personal relationship with God. And if there are goods which only come about because of one’s lifetime of nonresistant nonbelief and which enhance one’s eternal relationship with God, it seems that God would be justified in allowing for that lifetime of nonresistant nonbelief” (Teeninga 2017, 596, n. 20).

## 6. Critical Assessment of the Consciousness Constraint

### 6.1 Schellenberg on the Consciousness Constraint

Let me first point out the Consciousness Constraint assumed by the ADH: “a personal relationship is a conscious, reciprocal relationship, and a conscious relationship is a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in. Given these facts, one clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without *believing that the other party exists*” (Schellenberg 2015b, 23).

Schellenberg explores the idea that “*hope* or even a certain kind of beliefless *faith* could take the place of belief, at least at the start of a meaningful conscious relationship” (Schellenberg 2015b, 23). He asks, “if at some later stage belief arose, and at the end of her life the person in question were to be asked when she thinks her personal relationship with God began, would she be *mistaken* if she were to pick the time when her religious hope or faith began, rather than the time when she came to believe?” But Schellenberg emphasizes that that “change of her perceived relation to God will be a change not just in degree but in *kind* ... the relationship made possible by belief is a different relationship than any left to subsist on hope or nonbelieving faith” (Schellenberg 2015b, 24).

#### 6.1.1 Is Explicit Belief Overrated?

Yes, hope for God & belief in God are different things but these two stages are continuous in some sense, & they can be integrated into a coherent & interesting narrative. We need to consider our life experiences holistically. Consider a person which had expected the Messiah for all his life, & then met the Messiah before his death. He then died with satisfaction & happiness. The former & longer stage of hoping without

believing can be woven into the later short stage of believing, making the entire story meaningful & beautiful.

## 6.2 Implicit Experiences of God & De Re Relationships with God

Let me start to throw doubt on the Consciousness Constraint by reflecting on a story.

### 6.2.1 A Real Father-son Relationship without the Father's Recognizing It

I had watched a Chinese TV Drama (《情滿九道彎》) about the love story between a Mr. Yang (楊樹茂) & a Miss Ye (葉菲). It was shown near the end of April 2024. They were in love, but they were forced to separate by Yang's parents. However, Miss Ye had given birth to their son Ye Yang (葉楊) without Yang knowing about his existence. Ye Yang was also ignorant of the identity of his real father. Later Yang & Ye got back together, & Yang lived with both Ye & their son, without knowing that Ye Yang was really his son. Yang thought that Ye Yang was the son of Ye with another man.

Meanwhile, Yang's parents & sisters recognized that Ye Yang was probably Yang's son because he looked exactly like Yang when he was young. But, interestingly, Yang never suspected that due to some reasons (sheer stupidity, preconception, etc.) Finally Yang knew about Ye Yang's identity & he came to confront Ye furiously, asking her why she didn't tell him about the real identity of Ye Yang. Ye told Yang that she hoped that Yang would come to discover this 'secret' himself. After all, Yang's family members could recognize that! In the end, the three of them lived together happily.

The intriguing question is when did the father-son relationship between Yang & Ye Yang begin? Only after Yang consciously realized that Ye Yang was his son? I think not. They had a real father-son relationship even before Yang consciously realized that Ye Yang was his son, & this was an interesting & dramatic phase of the history of their relationship. Was Ye morally wrong in not telling Yang & Ye Yang their real relationship earlier? I suppose the relationship between Yang & Ye Yang would be greatly better if they knew earlier about the secret. Ye loves both of them dearly, but isn't her doing something wrong to them by holding the secret back? I don't think so, & I guess many would agree with me.

### 6.2.2 De Re or Implicit God-relationship without Explicit Belief in God

In general, we can have a relationship with someone we do not explicitly believe in- this is called a *de re* awareness or relationship. So it seems mistaken to claim that "one clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without *believing that the other party exists*."

We can draw a parallel in perception: the difference between *seeing that* & *seeing thing*. Jackson points out that "what constitutes perception of some material thing can occur without any appropriate interpretation occurring. I can see the headmaster without knowing that I am; I can see him even without realising that I am seeing a person- I may mistake him for a realistic dummy ... I may see a red patch on the wall but take it that I am seeing a red after-image- even as radical a mistake in interpretation as this does not rule out *my in fact seeing the red patch*" (Jackson 1977, 23). We need to distinguish between what we *intentionally* see and what we *actually* see. We can actually see something without intentionally seeing it. ( *Seeing incognito*.) For Jackson: if I see D and D=D', then I (actually) see D' no matter whether I think I am seeing D' or not.

Wainwright thinks that even without a belief in God, humans can also establish a relationship with God under other descriptions, e.g., the Good. So "if everyone has a glimpse of the Good, no one is precluded from the possibility of establishing an appropriate God-relationship," which may "blossom into explicit belief in God" later (Wainwright 2002, 114). If God exists, then God IS indeed the Good, whether one realizes this or not. So when one experiences the Good, one is having an *implicit* experience of God without explicit recognition of this. Human conscience cannot be identified with the voice of God, but if God exists,

God can sometimes speak through conscience. Even nonbelievers sometimes feel that our conscience is the voice of God. So when people listen to their conscience, they may be implicitly listening to the voice of God.

### 6.2.3 Max Baker-Hytch's Analysis of De Re Relationship with God

One of the best analyses is provided by Baker-Hytch (2016). "A person who feels emotions of awe and wonder towards the creator of the universe will thereby be feeling those attitudes de re towards God. The same is true of the person who feels gratitude towards the ground of my being... if someone strives to obey the moral lawgiver, then her striving will be directed de re towards God" (Baker-Hytch 2016, 386). These are de re relationships with God under alternative but true descriptions. Moreover, another kind of de re relationships with God may even contain some false beliefs. In the pub, John is referring to a person holding a cup of martini, but in fact he is holding a cup of water; yet the reference can still be successful. "In a case in which the subject has direct cognitive contact with God in some such manner, the subject might use a description that is false of God and yet because the description is simply a means of 'pointing to' the object of her experience, she nonetheless succeeds in referring to God" (Baker-Hytch 2016, 387).

Consider the following example. Gracie is grateful to the person who brings her Christmas gifts & she thinks this is Santa Claus; but in fact the person who brings the Christmas presents is Bill, her father. However, were Gracie to be apprised of the true identity of the person who brings the Christmas presents, she would direct her gratitude towards Bill. Bill can 'count' Gracie's gratitude as though it were rightly directed towards him. Gracie will also come to see those episodes in which she had thought she was interacting with Santa as something to be deeply cherished for what they show of her father's love for her (Baker-Hytch 2016, 388). Then "those episodes retrospectively take on an importance within her relationship with her father once she becomes apprised of what was really going on" (Baker-Hytch 2016, 388-389).

Similarly, even an atheist can have an implicit experience of God. Suppose "Anders is an atheist" who "feels a deep sense of gratitude towards the source of his blessings"- which he thinks to be something impersonal. "If God exists, then God is in fact the source of Anders's blessings ... if Anders were to come to believe that God rather than a set of impersonal forces is the source of his blessings, then Anders would direct his attitude of thankfulness towards God. God, knowing this counterfactual truth about Anders, could count Anders's feelings of gratitude as though they were directed towards God." These experiences "take on a deep retrospective significance within his relationship with God once he is able to say 'It was you all along!'" (Baker-Hytch 2016, 389).

An atheist scholar Barbara Ehrenreich had written a book, *Living with a Wild God* (2014), which talks about her lifelong buried history of religious experience. For her, it was a furious encounter with a living substance that was coming at her through all things at once. It was like the encounter with an irresistible cosmic fire. It seems to be not a moral force. She thinks it could not be the God of Christianity because it does not match her understanding of monotheism. But in fact the Bible talks of God as consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), & sometimes God manifests as an "amoral" force (earthquake to Elijah). So even atheists could have de re experiences of God.

God may be "hidden" in our ordinary experiences. But "there is no a priori reason to suppose that the realm of ordinary experience and that of ecstatic experience are as widely separated as all that. It becomes an open question whether it might be that experiential absence is often a matter of failing to pick up on something that is in fact present within the pattern of one's experience or of failing to be aware of what exactly one has picked up on" (Green 2015, 145-146). In fact, "belief in God is not necessary to start down the path of shared attention. An infant does not have to believe that other people exist in order to begin to experience other people. Moreover, an infant can be aware of another person without being aware of what they are aware of. Not being aware of what it is that one has a *de re* awareness of is not a death sentence for the relationship" (Green 2015, 152). In short, a failure of recognition does not entail the absence of relationship.

Adopting a phrase from Hilary Putnam, Cuneo says, the “vitally important components of the divine–human relationship just ain’t in the head” (Cuneo 2013, 154). (Putnam’s original phrase “meaning ain’t in the head” is referring to the externalism of meaning.) Cuneo points out that while the consciousness constraint is plausible for human-human relationships, it may not be applicable to human-divine relationships because God’s relationship to the world is different from humans’ relationship to the world: “God bears a relationship to the world of such a kind that not only are the world’s beauty and goodness manifestations of the divine life, but also certain actions we perform towards each other count as actions performed towards God. If this is so, then God’s relationship to the world is utterly different from ours ... there would be ways of being aware of God and God’s activities that, in general, are and could not be ways of being aware of each other and each other’s activities” (Cuneo 2013, 161). This is also a reason why we shouldn’t rely too much on human analogies for our understanding of divine love.

### 6.3 The Multidimensionality or Ubiquity of God-relationships

The upshot of the above framework is that there are a lot more implicit experiences of God than we ordinarily recognize. Green even says, “God can be available to be experienced *ubiquitously* ... Intimate relationship cannot be created by fiat. It must be grown into. The obstacles to such growth are various, but the seed from which relationship grows need not be either belief or a powerful experience. It can simply be a *patient presence* waiting to be received” (Green 2015, 154; italics mine). God may well be this kind of patient presence in the lives of many people before their explicit God-relationships. After all, there is no need to rush for God. I provide a brief survey of various kinds of experiences which may well contain implicit God-relationships below.

#### 6.3.1 God & Fidelity

Brendan Sweetman has published a book to defend Gabriel Marcel. He appeals to Marcel’s analysis of the experience of fidelity as unconditional commitment, and then argues that existence of God is “the best explanation for these commitments.” Moreover, “the ‘absolute Thou’ is what a person who is involved in an unconditional commitment experiences as part of that commitment” (Sweetman 2008, 84). So we may have an implicit experience of God in or mediated by our experience of fidelity.

#### 6.3.2 Roger Scruton: Interpersonal Experiences and Transcendence

Scruton defends the distinctiveness of human persons; only humans have a kind of spiritual existence, and is blessed by the capacity for the rainbow of experiences (see Kwan 2011). He then focuses on the ‘strangeness’ of our interpersonal experience (IPE): “it is as though the world of objects were perforated by apertures, from each of which a subject peers, and through each of which we glimpse the ‘transcendental’ province of another’s will. The eyes of a person may accuse, condone or exonerate... [In a] lover’s glances... a lover shines his eyes into the depths of his beloved, calling the other subject to the surface” (Scruton 1996, 82). Our IPEs have an implicit reference to transcendence. The experience of fidelity (see above) is one example of these.

The above analyses of IPE and moral experience show that they are fully intelligible only on the *imago dei* thesis:

“For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity a human face.

And Love the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress...

an air of sacred prohibition surrounds humanity, since the ‘human form divine’ is our only image of the subject” (Scruton 1996, 119).

#### 6.3.3 Experiences of Freedom & Courage

Scruton also appeals to our experience of freedom and moral responsibility. To treat others as objects, “studying the laws of motion that govern them, and adjusting their behaviour through the application of

medical and biological science, ... strikes us as sinister, uncanny, even devilish" (Scruton 1996, 102). Unfortunately, while humans possess a free will, they at the same time have a tendency to 'escape from freedom': "Each man loves certain illusions, has favorite evasions, projects a beloved self-image, which even his friends soon learn to be sensitive to, not to crush, occasionally to flatter, often to lament. ... men are not noteworthy for courage sufficient to be entirely honest" (Novak 1971, 14). Yet, sometimes when we experience the courage to face our freedom, it seems that "the courage which moves us does not come from ourselves... in some way, our true identity ... lies up ahead, calling to us, drawing us " (Novak 1971, 14-15). This may well be an implicit divine calling.

#### 6.3.4 Quest for Meaning and Wholeness

Sometimes experience of God is fused with or implicit in our experience of the quest for personal fulfillment. By devoting ourselves to this object of supreme worth, we are liberated from self-centredness and challenged to actualize our potentialities. We also find that the "creativity which precedes and calls forth our endeavours responds to our commitment with powerful support. ... grace is not a figment of the pious imagination, but an empirical reality" (Schilling 1974, 115). By experiencing the grace in our lives, we are also enabled to share this grace with others, and in the process find the fulfillment of our selfhood, and meaning in life. This *whole process* may well be an experience of God.

Consider the experience of David Raup of the University of Chicago. He says, "By most standards my life would have been considered a success story. I had a wonderful wife and family, a new home and a successful career. I thoroughly enjoyed science and felt fortunate to have a career in that field. Yet I felt an emptiness, a lack of purpose and meaning... Was this all there was to life? The beauty, order and design evident in the world I observed as a scientist only whetted my desire for spiritual understanding" (Anderson 1998, 20). Later he had experiences of Jesus Christ, and the earlier experience of emptiness is now understood as an implicit experience of "separation from God." All the above examples show that implicit experiences of God without explicit belief in God are possible. The consciousness constraint is not necessary for a God-relationship.

#### 6.3.5 Helping Christ Incognito

In the famous parable of the sheep & the goat in Matthew 25, the King (Jesus Christ) says this to the just: "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." This is referring to the just's actions like feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoners, etc. On the basis of the above parable, Cuneo claims that "by doing such things as feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, Jesus claims, we thereby bless and honour him. Conversely, by doing such things as ignoring or harming the least of these, we thereby wrong and dishonour him" (Cuneo 2013, 152). It means that "a person's having fed the hungry counts as her having blessed God, while her failing to do so counts as her having wronged God... , these actions and omissions are such that they bring her into a meaningful relationship with God ... we can be entirely ignorant of the fact that we stand in these relationships in virtue of our actions and omissions" (Cuneo 2013, 153).

#### 6.3.6 Experiences of Truth, Justice & Beauty

The "beauty of the symphony ... ordinarily could not be a way in which you disclose your goodness and beauty to me. ... by contrast, ... the beauty of a performance of Mahler's Third is in fact a manifestation of God's goodness and beauty" because God is Beauty Itself for Christianity (Cuneo 2013, 161). Similarly, Scruton argues that our aesthetic experience, and even culture finds fulfillment in religion. Scruton (1996, chapter 11) argues that music is also a pointer to the eternal realm.

Michon generalizes this point: "people may have some relations to abstract values, like truth, justice or beauty, as well as with the supreme good ...: they may ... value, or seek them. They might ... not believe that they are in fact identical with (or constituted by) God. But if God is truth, justice, beauty ... , then a

relation with one of these is a (de re) relation with God ... it might be that an omnipotent perfectly loving God would not always bring about personal relationships involving de dicto existential belief with every finite person” (Michon 2015, 49-50). Michon notes that it might be contested that “a relation with Truth or Justice is not a personal relation,” but for more intense experiences of quest for Truth & Justice, they do manifest some quasi-personal characteristics like intense longing & loyalty.

### 6.3.7 Interim Summary: Multidimensional Experiences of God

So there are “untold ways in which God could manifest Godself to us and for us to be aware of God. These manifestations, moreover, could be expressions of divine love, as they could be the means by which God forges and builds bonds of union and intimacy with us, even when we do not recognize them as such. ... there could be ample, intimate, and lovely ways of being in relationship with God” (Cuneo 2013, 161) To sum up, “the divine–human relationship enjoys a multidimensionality and resilience that, in general, is not present in relationships between human persons” (Cuneo 2013, 161-162).

This emphasis on the *multidimensionality* & diversity of God-relationships seems richer than Schellenberg’s confinement of God-relationships to explicit relationships. Interestingly, Schellenberg also says that a God-relationship “would be multi-dimensional” (Schellenberg 2015a, 29). But as noted before, all those multidimensional experiences of God in the No Delay Scenario can also be obtained in the Delay Scenario, which should be regarded as even more multi-dimensional.

## 7. Prof. Schellenberg’s Interesting Life and Faith Journey

Schellenberg says, I “grew up in a deeply religious household on the prairie of Manitoba ,, feeling a loyalty to them and to their God, stirred by what I took to be God’s presence in the whirling wind and sky and my inmost thoughts.” He even served for “one year as associate pastor of a Mennonite Church in Alberta” (Schellenberg 2015b, 35). He later embraced disbelief, but he says, “even after that I converted to theism for a short while (or backslid—take your pick), only to be returned to atheism by a double jolt of reasoning” (Schellenberg 2015b, 118). He also admits, “At various times early in my life I had powerful theistic religious experiences. But since leaving theistic religion—indeed, after becoming an atheist—I have also at various times had powerful and unmistakably religious experiences that had no distinctively theistic content at all. These latter experiences did not form in me any sort of religious belief, in part because of my awareness of the problem of religious experiential diversity, but they did make me more open to the possibility of a religious dimension to life” (Schellenberg 2015b, 115-116).

Schellenberg says, “although I had lost a passel of beliefs, I was still committed to the truth in my newfound vocation as a philosopher. Indeed, an unrelenting and scrupulous pursuit of truth and understanding—a fierce and unwavering desire to know the truth, whatever it might be—was something I now set before myself as worthy of cultivation much more consciously and earnestly than I had ever done before” (Schellenberg 2015b, 36). This strikes me as something akin to religious devotion. So from my perspective, if God exists, perhaps Prof. Schellenberg may well be having implicit experiences of God, but his current conceptual scheme forbids this kind of explicit recognition.

Of course, I do not have the capacity to probe the depths of human hearts. I am not foolish enough to proclaim anything about the destiny of my fellow human beings. I myself had experienced a period of intense doubt & was very close to abandoning the faith. I was significantly helped by the works of Richard Swinburne, our common PHD thesis supervisor, during my way back to faith. So although I am not in the end convinced by the ADH, I agree with Schellenberg that “opening myself to life and wonder ... is the only way to go” (Schellenberg 2015b, 119).

## 8. Conclusion

I recognize one plausible line of reply to the ADH is to insist on divine transcendence & then argue that Christian theism does not need to be interpreted as a form of personalistic theism. For critics who are sympathetic with personalistic theism, they can challenge Schellenberg's No Delay Thesis as well as the Consciousness Constraint, which are presupposed by the ADH. I argue that the No Delay Thesis is implausible because the Delay Scenario is not axiologically inferior to the No Delay Scenario. Hence it is at least morally permissible for God to realize the former rather than the latter.

The main reason why the human analogy & the consciousness constraint fail is that God is the unique Person Who is also the Creator, the Truth, Goodness & Beauty, etc. De re relationship with God is possible under so many situations that it is difficult to be certain that anyone who is seeking meaning, truth, goodness & beauty & so on does not have the opportunity to establish an implicit relationship with God, even if he lacks an explicit belief in God. The "key benefits that Schellenberg claims are granted in conscious relationships can be experienced by subjects that are not aware of their participation in such a relationship" (Cawdron 2021, 366). For example, Joy can be experienced before belief in God as in C. S. Lewis' case (see his *Surprised by Joy*). Later, Lewis came to realize that in experiencing Joy, he was in fact experiencing God as well. This point can be generalized into an reverse accommodation strategy: many goods realized in a conscious God-relationship may also have counterparts in a person's implicit experiences of God when he still lacks a conscious God-relationship. The integration of all these goods in different stages of the faith journey, which include temporary divine hiddenness, may well achieve a greater good, & that shows again that the Delay Scenario is at least morally permissible for God to realize. Hence the ADH fails.

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