

LOVE THAT TAKES TIME: PURSUING RELATIONSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF HIDDENNESS

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Abstract. This paper offers a fresh strategy for responding to J.L. Schellenberg’s argument from divine hiddenness, called the dianthropic strategy. First, it shows how Schellenberg’s understanding of openness is deficient by arguing that openness to relationship is consistent with initial concealment. Then, the paper develops the dianthropic strategy, which focuses on the role of other persons in making a relationship between God and the nonbeliever more likely. It distinguishes this strategy from the responsibility argument and anticipates objections.

I. INTRODUCTION¹

In its intellectual form, the problem of divine hiddenness “involves logical consistency between the existence of God and the occurrence of divine absence.”² One forceful formulation of this problem is found in J.L. Schellenberg, who argues that the existence of nonresistant nonbelief is inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly loving God. In particular, he argues God’s perfect love requires openness to relationship with every person at every time. For him, openness to relationship at a time requires one put another in a certain doxastic position at that time for the purpose of making relationship possible. If he is right, the existence of one nonresistant nonbeliever is enough to doubt the existence of a perfectly loving God.

The aim of this paper is to offer a fresh response to Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument. In short, I challenge his understanding of openness and argue that God has, in some or even many cases, reasons to conceal from nonresistant nonbelievers for a time because of his relational love rather than in spite of it. While this response does not entirely explain every instance of hiddenness, I do argue that, given what is generally true about personal relationships, it provides an explanation for why God often operates within hiddenness. With such an explanation, the religious inquirer need not see hiddenness (as Schellenberg understands it) for a time as a reason to doubt God’s existence. In the first section, I introduce two key concepts in Schellenberg’s argument: nonresistant nonbelief and openness to relationship. In the second section, I argue this understanding of openness is deficient. I demonstrate the deficiency by offering a human case which exposes a mistaken assumption in the Not Open Principle. In the third section, I develop my response, the “dianthropic strategy,” which attempts to demonstrate why God might remain concealed from nonresistant nonbelievers for a time.

1 A special thank you to two anonymous reviewers, who substantially improved this article by offering good critiques and other helpful thoughts. Thanks also to Joshua Cockayne, as my conversations with him greatly enlightened my thinking on this matter (as with many matters) and his comments tremendously helped the paper from an early stage.

2 Yujin Nagasawa identifies two problems of divine hiddenness: an intellectual and experiential problem. The intellectual problem can be divided into two versions. One is the problem of evil, which “asks how it is logically possible that an omnipotent and morally perfect God remains silent when devout believers suffer from horrendous evil.” The other version “is concerned with whether or not divine absence constitutes good *evidence* against the existence of God.” This paper addresses only the second version of the intellectual problem. For more, see: Yujin Nagasawa, “Silence, Evil, and Shusaku Endo”, in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Adam Green (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016), 232.

II. AN “OPEN” THEISM: NONRESISTANT NONBELIEF AND OPENNESS TO RELATIONSHIP

Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument is well-known and not rehearsed here,³ but it is fundamentally a claim about what love — in God’s case, perfect love — requires. In short, Schellenberg says love requires openness to relationship which is, for God, incompatible with the existence of nonresistant nonbelief. This section first introduces the concepts of nonresistant nonbelief and openness in Schellenberg, then shows how he applies them to God.

A nonbeliever is a person in a state of nonbelief with respect to something or someone. I am a nonbeliever with respect to the Loch Ness Monster in that, minimally, I fail to believe the Loch Ness Monster exists. A person A is in a state of *nonresistant* nonbelief with respect to B only if A’s “nonbelief in relation to the proposition that B exists” is not brought about by resistance.⁴ In the Schellenbergian sense, resistance is a “cognitive condition”⁵ but might result from certain desires. I might resist belief in the Loch Ness Monster, for instance, because I enjoy a morning swim in Loch Ness and the monster’s existence would curb that activity. If my desire to swim in Loch Ness negatively influences my evaluation of evidence for the existence of the monster, then I am a resistant nonbeliever. In fact, I do not take morning swims in Loch Ness and my evaluation of the evidence for the monster is not similarly tainted. With respect to the Loch Ness Monster I am a nonresistant nonbeliever.

For Schellenberg, love is aimed at union or relationship.⁶ Ideally, this includes more than mere relationship but “personal relationship,” which is “a conscious and reciprocal relationship that is positively meaningful, allowing for a deep sharing.”⁷ Whatever else love might require, it at least requires openness to relationship. Schellenberg offers the “Not Open Principle” to determine whether or not a person is open to relationship at a particular time:

Necessarily, if a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with a person B, is at some time in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that B exists, *where B at that time knows this and could ensure that A’s nonbelief is at that time changed to belief*, then it is not the case that B is open at the time in question to having a personal relationship with A then.⁸

Belief is relevant for openness to relationship because belief precedes relationship: “one clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without *believing that the other party exists*.”⁹ Openness to relationship is simply not being closed to a relationship such that one is “*not through one’s own actions or omissions making it impossible for the other*” to participate in the relationship.¹⁰ In the Principle, A’s nonbelief makes it impossible for A to participate in a relationship with B. Since B could change A’s nonbelief to belief — and A’s belief is required for personal relationship — but does not, B is not open to a relationship with A at that time.

Schellenberg’s Not Open Principle contends that openness requires putting the other in a certain doxastic position. Relationship remains the goal, but belief is the necessary barrier one must cross. This doxastic position is what Chris Tucker calls the “relating position,” by which he means a position where one can “participate in a meaningful and conscious relationship...just by trying to do so.”¹¹ The relat-

3 For more recent versions of the argument, see: J.L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017); J.L. Schellenberg, “Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy”, in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Adam Green (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016).

4 Schellenberg, “Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy,” 23.

5 *Ibid.*, 24

6 Schellenberg considers his own view of love to be “broadly in line” with the Thomistic understanding explicated by Eleonore Stump and Adam Green, eds., *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016) 17. For more, see: Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Clarendon Press, 2010), 91.

7 Schellenberg, “Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy,” 18.

8 *Ibid.*, 23.

9 *Ibid.*, 23.

10 Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 41.

11 Chris Tucker, “Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine-Creature Relationships”, *Religious Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008), 270.

ing position, although aimed at relationship, involves a doxastic position because it refers to the belief required to relate. Thus, one can be in the “relating position” without actually relating to the other. As a doxastic position, when a nonresistant nonbeliever is put into the relating position there is a necessary change of doxastic status. In the relating position, the nonresistant nonbeliever either believes, thereby becoming a believer, or refuses to believe despite evidence, thereby becoming resistant — there can be no nonresistant nonbeliever in the relating position.

Schellenberg’s divine hiddenness claim is that there is at least one nonresistant nonbeliever with respect to God. While some might deny this,¹² it has a good deal of intuitive support and I assume it for the sake of argument. Schellenberg sees nonresistant nonbelief as inconsistent, however, with the existence of a perfectly loving God. Schellenberg calls God’s love perfect, but it might also be called *maximal*¹³ love: God loves every person God is able to and loves those persons at every time God is able to. I also assume God is maximal in other ways such that God actually *is able* to love every person at every time. If love requires openness, then God is open to a relationship with every person at every time. If Schellenberg is right about what openness requires, then God puts every person in the relating position at every time. Yet, if every person is in the relating position, then there are no nonresistant nonbelievers. Given this, Schellenberg’s contention that there are nonresistant nonbelievers yields the conclusion that there is no perfectly loving God.

III. WHEN LOVES TAKES TIME: THE DEFICIENCY OF THE NOT OPEN PRINCIPLE

The aim of this section is to show how the Not Open Principle is deficient. To demonstrate the deficiency, I appeal to a human case which shows why one might remain concealed for a time despite desiring relationship with another. Human cases are important for Schellenberg’s understanding of love, as he argues that love — even divine love — is exemplified in “the paradigms of love known to us, such as loving parents or siblings or friends.”¹⁴ If he is right about this, I argue, then his Not Open Principle should be rejected. In the second part, I take a closer look at two worries that emerge from my argument, such as whether my human case is relevant for the case of God or whether resistance is required.

III.I A Paradigm of Human Love and Openness

My human example is of a father and his daughter. Suppose another man kidnaps the daughter at a young age, flees to another country, and raises her as his own. As she grows up, she is told that the kidnapper is her father, but also warned of strange folk about who lie to children about being their real parents. After years of searching, the actual father locates his daughter, but is informed how she has been lied to. Although no longer under the care of her kidnapper, the father, who desperately wants to be in relationship with her, fears introducing himself immediately as her father might adversely affect his goal of relating to her. He decides to remain initially concealed from her, but to work towards a relationship in other ways.

In order to determine whether or not the father is open to relationship with his child at this time, the characters can be plugged into the Not Open Principle:

Necessarily, if the child, without having brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with the father, is at some time in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that he exists, *where the father at that time know this and could ensure that her nonbelief is at that time changed to*

12 Pascal, for instance, said that “there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness of those of the opposite disposition” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Penguin, 1995), 81). Likewise, Nicholas Wolterstorff points out that a “characteristic of the reformed tradition” (in thinkers such as John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards) is viewing “cases of unbelief” as “resistance to the available evidence” rather than cases of insufficient evidence (as quoted in Kevin P. Kinghorn, *The Decision of Faith: Can Christian Beliefs be Freely Chosen?* (T & T Clark, 2005), 104).

13 This understanding of “maximal” is indebted to Nagasawa’s helpful characterization of God’s attributes as “maximal” by being a part of a “maximal consistent set” of attributes. See: Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 2–3.

14 Schellenberg, “Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy,” 18.

belief, then it is not the case that the father is open at the time in question to having a personal relationship with his child then.

Importantly, the child is “in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that [her father] exists” but has presumably not “brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with him.” In the Schellenbergian sense, she is a nonresistant nonbeliever.¹⁵

According to Schellenberg’s Principle, the father is *not open* to a relationship with the child, but this reveals a problem. The father’s actions, including his initial concealment, are aimed at entering a personal relationship with the child.¹⁶ The father both desires a relationship with the child and is actively pursuing it — pursuing, one could add, such that he wants the relationship to begin as soon as possible. He does not put the child in the relating position at first because, in this case, the relating position might harm the prospects of a lasting personal relationship. This example shows that, in some cases of human love, pursuing a relationship with another at a particular time might include initial concealment at that time — where concealment is understood as not putting another in the relating position. It would require odd intuitions about openness to insist that one could desire, and even actively pursue, personal relationship with another without being open to that relationship. The better conclusion is that the Not Open Principle is not a good principle for determining who is or is not open to a relationship with another.

The deficiency of the Not Open Principle is principally due to the time requirement. Call any time that fulfills the following conditions the *critical time*: (a) the lover knows the beloved exists and loves the beloved, (b) the beloved is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief with respect to the lover’s existence, and (c) the lover knows this and could put the beloved in the relating position. Schellenberg’s argument depends on identifying how a lover will, or must, behave at the critical time. I grant Schellenberg the point that belief in a person necessarily precedes personal relationship. However, his principle develops from this a mistaken assumption: if belief precedes relationship, then a lover must put the beloved in the relating position at the critical time. My human case shows the consequent does not necessarily follow the antecedent. In fact, there are cases where concealment at the critical time is the most loving action — that is, the action aimed at entering into a lasting, personal relationship with another.

II.II A Closer Look at Two Worries

There are at least two worries that emerge from what I have argued. The first is that the case of God is sufficiently different from my human case so as to render my response innocuous. First, it is important to recognize that my aim thus far has been to show how Schellenberg’s Not Open Principle fails *as a principle* for determining openness to relationship. Since the principle fails in my human case, it is not a good principle for determining openness. In other words, Schellenberg’s understanding of openness is a faulty one.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons for thinking that what is true of my human case — concealment is consistent with openness to relationship — is also true of God. Tucker in particular shows how the value of a relationship with God is, at least in part, dependent on that relationship being entered into.¹⁷ He says, if God “knows that He cannot get some good thing no matter what He does, the value of that thing provides God with no reason to attain it.”¹⁸ In Tucker’s view, if God knows, or at least has strong reasons to suspect, a nonbeliever will not enter into a relationship when put in the relating position at a particular time, then God may withhold the relating position at that time for the sake of some other good. Similarly, Paul Moser argues that, while God is interested in personal relationship, God is also interested in, among other things, moral formation.¹⁹ Because of this, God could pursue other goods

15 I return to other kinds of resistance later of which the child might be an example.

16 I use “actions” loosely, but I typically refer to concealment. Whether concealment (i.e. not introducing oneself to another) is an action or omission is irrelevant for my purposes.

17 Tucker, “Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine–Creature Relationships,” 273–74.

18 *Ibid.*, 274.

19 P. K. Moser, *The God Relationship: The Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017), 17–23.

at the expense of putting another in the relating position, particularly when God has reasons to think a relationship would fail to form.

In addition to other goods, one might also point to the quality of relationship as a reason God could conceal for a time. Peter van Inwagen observes that the proposition “God wants people to believe in his existence” does not entail “God wants people to believe in his existence — *and* he does not care why anyone who believes in him has this belief.”²⁰ Moser arrives at a similar conclusion and argues that God is not only after personal relationship, but relationship of a particular kind — namely, one characterized by trust, cooperation, and faithful, self-sacrificial obedience to God.²¹ Because of this, God’s interest in putting a nonbeliever in the relating position is directly connected not only to the likelihood that a relationship will be entered into (as Tucker says), but also the quality of that relationship (as van Inwagen and Moser say).

However, these sorts of replies are not satisfying to Schellenberg. He admits that “examples can be imagined” when a lover might conceal at the critical time for the sake of love.²² He gives an example of a father and daughter with similarities to my own example. He imagines a father Fred who finds his long-lost daughter Sally after years of searching only to find Sally in the middle of a task very important to her (e.g. the Olympics) that cannot be postponed.²³ Since completing this task would be a great good for Sally, and Fred’s putting her in the relating position might inhibit her performance in the task, he remains concealed because he loves her and sees her completion of this task as contributing to her flourishing.²⁴ Examples like this one make use of an accommodationist strategy, or an appeal to some other, greater good in order to explain hiddenness. Tucker says: “I am picturing God in such a way that He constantly evaluates, for every person, whether it is good or best to put her in the relating position, that is, a position to relate personally with Him just by choosing.”²⁵ That evaluation focuses mostly on other goods — he identifies avoiding persecution as an example — God can secure in not putting a nonbeliever in the relating position at a given time.²⁶

Schellenberg is dubious of such a strategy because he insists that all goods are “*relationship-compatible* goods” for God.²⁷ He doubts that any good would be otherwise unavailable if a person were in relationship with God. Yet, given Tucker’s response, this is somewhat beside the point. Even if it is true that all goods are relationship-compatible goods, a person’s being put in the relating position does not entail that they will be in a relationship with God. As Tucker argues, in cases where God has some reason for thinking a person will not enter into a relationship with him, a good being relationship-compatible does not give God sufficient reason to put a person in the relating position. Further, one might wonder, even if all goods are relationship-compatible goods, whether some goods are *more likely* to obtain outside of relationship or, more pertinently, outside of the relating position.

Nonetheless, my response is not an accommodationist response. I have not argued that God avoids relationship with some persons for the sake of other goods, but rather that God remains initially concealed *for the sake of relationship*. This is illustrated well by the difference of my human case and the one offered by Schellenberg. In Schellenberg’s case, the father is actually *not open* to a relationship at the critical time because he believes a relationship would inhibit the realization of some *other good* for his daughter. Similarly, for Tucker, God’s initial concealment is acceptable when God thinks a relationship

20 Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 145.

21 This is arguably a summation of Moser’s larger project, but see especially: Moser, *The God Relationship*, 164–80.

22 Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 44.

23 Ibid.

24 Schellenberg offers another case of a child disposed to reject his parents. He asks whether the parents would pursue relationship within the context of intellectual closeness or not? The problem with this example is that it depends a great deal on the surrounding details. For surely it is easy to imagine the child’s being initially disposed to reject his parents *relative to his exposure to them*. In this case, the parents might indeed be justified in remaining initially concealed and pursuing relationship another way. See: Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 62.

25 Tucker, “Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine–Creature Relationships,” 284.

26 See the story about Fernando. Ibid., 281.

27 Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 47.

unlikely, but it is ultimately done for other ends — such as avoiding persecution or moral formation.²⁸ For the accommodationist, God is not interested in a relationship at the critical time in order to secure other goods. However, I argue that God is interested and open to a relationship at the critical time but conceals because God thinks this is *the best strategy for entering into a relationship with the nonbeliever*. A Schellenbergian could push back and insist that even the pursuit of relationship is “relationship-compatible,” or more modestly relating position-compatible. This is like saying that studying for a test is degree compatible or that drinking water is hydration compatible. In the example above, concealment is the means to the end of relationship, and so it is not “relationship-compatible” by definition.

Still, the Schellenbergian might wonder why God would ever allow a nonbeliever to be in a position where concealment is the best means for the end of relationship. Schellenberg protests “that God gets to set everything up in the first place”²⁹ and so would never allow intellectual closeness to be counter-productive to the aim of relationship. However, it is important to recognize that the circumstances leading to divine concealment might be the result of freely formed — i.e. formed as a result of free actions — desires, mental states, or dispositions. This objection would then be commensurate with wondering why God allowed genuine human freedom in the first place.³⁰ This requires speculation about whether freedom is worth the negative states that result from it. I am skeptical of our capacity, given our epistemic position in this matter, to make such a judgment, but even assuming we can helpfully speculate on the matter there are still good reasons in Schellenberg for thinking God would allow a high degree of human freedom. His idea of personal relationship includes consciousness, reciprocity, and deep sharing.³¹ The best interpretation of this is that two persons are involved with a high degree of autonomy. A programmed robot mimicking loving responses cannot meet the level of “deep sharing” between two persons in love. The very idea of a Schellenbergian personal relationship, then, includes a high degree of freedom which includes the possibility of negative circumstances or dispositions which lead to divine concealment for a time.³²

A second possible worry is that my response requires the nonbeliever to be resistant. In my human case, the reason the father does not initially put the child in the relating position is because he fears her rejection of him. In other words, he fears some kind of resistance from her. Yet, it is important to distinguish between different kinds of resistance. For Schellenberg, a nonbeliever is nonresistant only insofar as her state of nonbelief is not caused by resistance. This is *doxastic nonresistance* because it is indexed to nonbelief, namely nonbelief that is nonresistant. The child in my example is not resisting the father doxastically. If the father walked up and introduced himself, the child would believe he exists. For doxastic nonresistant, it does not matter whether the child forms certain beliefs about the man (i.e. that he is her father or that he loves her), but only that she would believe that he exists. Therefore, that example is still sufficient to show the deficiency of the Not Open Principle.

However, suppose the Not Open Principle were amended to include other forms of resistance. Consider two other possible forms of resistance:

Interaction Resistance: A person is resistant to interacting with another person.

Relationship Resistance: A person is resistant to being in a lasting personal relationship with another person.

28 Tucker, “Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine–Creature Relationships,” 281.

29 Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 45.

30 Indeed, Schellenberg appears sympathetic to this sort of reasoning. He wonders why God would create “morally weak and impressionable persons” like us. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 65–68.

31 Schellenberg, “Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy,” 18.

32 Note that my argument is different than the “free-will defense” sometimes employed in response to the hiddenness argument. A free-will response posits that God must remain hidden in order to retain an element of free-will for persons (see especially Michael Murray, “Deus Absconditus”, in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and P. K. Moser (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002)). Here I make a case for “free-will” only to argue that certain negative dispositions might be a corollary of it. I am skeptical, as Schellenberg is, about whether “free-will” solves the hiddenness dilemma on its own. Nonresistant nonbelief is not, it seems to me, required for persons to be free. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 65–67.

Let “interacting” in this definition be any kind of personal interaction or communication between two persons.³³ If I am in a state of interaction resistance with respect to Sebastian, then I find him annoying or difficult to deal with and would prefer not to interact with him at all. This is different than doxastic resistance because I am not resisting a belief that Sebastian exists. A state of interaction resistance also assumes a state of relational resistance because personal relationship requires interaction,³⁴ but one can be in a state of relationship resistance but not interaction resistance. Perhaps I find Julia pleasant enough to interact with — and am comfortable with a kind of mere relationship with her — but I am resistant to forming a lasting personal relationship with her.

Unlike doxastic resistance, interaction and relationship resistance are not indexed to nonbelief. A person could be in a state of doxastic *nonresistance* and interaction *resistance* with respect to the same person. For the sake of maximizing possible forms of resistance, I assume some resistance to a person is compatible with nonbelief in that person, such that interaction resistance could refer to either:

Active Interaction Resistance: A person is resisting interaction with another person.

Potential Interaction Resistance: A person would resist interaction with another person if the two persons met.

An example of the latter: Rex does not know Anthony exists but if Rex’s nonbelief is changed to belief then Rex *would be* interactively resistant with respect to Anthony. The same active/potential distinction could be extended to relationship resistance as well.³⁵

In my human case, the child is not doxastically nonresistant, but she is plausibly resistant in one of these other ways — potential interaction (or relationship) resistant. Moser’s work especially explores the role of resistance. He says God would expect humans “to *make themselves available* to receive evidence of God,”³⁶ which suggests that insofar as persons do not have sufficient evidence it is because they have not made themselves available. God’s hiddenness can also be interpreted as helping cure persons of their pride.³⁷ For Moser, God’s hiddenness is aimed at correcting the way humans pursue knowledge of God such that, insofar as God is hidden, it is best understood as humanity’s failure to look in the right places.³⁸ This is paired with his insistence that propositional knowledge of God is not required for a relationship with God.³⁹

Despite some similarity, my account differs from Moser’s in at least three ways.⁴⁰ First, Moser’s larger project is to recast the conversation entirely (a project I am sympathetic with generally), but here I use Schellenberg’s own language and argue that his argument fails on its own terms. Second, largely on the shoulders of the first, I grant that propositional knowledge precedes relationship and Moser does not. Third, my account grants the existence of nonresistant nonbelief. *Pace* Moser, my account aims to show that nonresistance of any kind is compatible with God’s initial concealment. The point of my human case is to show that initial concealment can be directed at a lasting personal relationship. It is true that the resistance of the child is a factor in the father’s initial concealment, but it need not have been. All the father needs to conceal at the

33 This is vague, but my goal is not to offer good accounts of resistance but rather to test whether other possible options would be a problem for my argument. This definition, then, might be consistent with all sorts of understandings of interaction.

34 Recall that Schellenberg’s understanding of personal relationship includes interaction of some kind.

35 I assume this for the sake of argument, but I am not arguing it is in fact possible to resist something you do not believe in. Again, I am attempting to maximize the forms of resistance one could have towards God — which only makes my case more difficult to make. These forms of resistance, and God’s interaction with them, likely depend on counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, but I do not discuss that topic here. For a good discussion on this, see: Tucker, “Divine Hiddenness and the Value of Divine–Creature Relationships.”

36 Moser, *The God Relationship*, 17.

37 *Ibid.* 37.

38 *Ibid.*, 1–47.

39 *Ibid.*, 10–13.

40 The similarity would be Moser identifying some issues with Schellenberg’s preoccupation with propositional knowledge. He fears that Schellenberg’s argument reduces knowing God to a “spectator sport” (P. K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 52). For more of Moser’s work, see especially: Moser, *The Elusive God*; Moser, *The God Relationship*.

critical time is a reason for thinking that putting his child in the relating position at that time would make a relationship less likely than if he did this at a later time.

If resistance is not the reason why the lover conceals, then what is the reason? It very well could be factors outside of either person. To slightly alter the details of my human example, let's imagine the child is not resistant in any way. Indeed, she knows she has been kidnapped and desires to be reunited with her true father. Still, even when the father locates her there may be reasons for initial concealment. Perhaps the daughter is still under the watchful eye of the kidnapper or factors at the daughter's school or work which would be initially disruptive to the possibility of lasting personal relationship. The father only needs some reason (or reasons) for thinking that initial concealment makes a lasting personal relationship more likely at a later time. The same is true of God. The nonbeliever may not be resistant in any way to God, but perhaps he is so invested in his career — or other projects — that his relationship with God would be at best weak or tenuous and unable to flourish. Presumably, God is more interested in a *lasting* personal relationship rather than mere personal relationship. Schellenberg might protest that God would not allow any nonbeliever to get to the point where he is so invested in his career that a relationship with God could not flourish, but once again this could be the result of freely chosen states by both the nonbeliever or others around him. I have already argued that the very idea of personal relationship, however, requires a high level of freedom.

In this section, I have demonstrated a deficiency with the Not Open Principle. That deficiency is best illustrated by any human case in which a lover conceals at the critical time for the purpose of entering into a relationship at a later time. A lover in such cases is clearly open to relationship — indeed, one might add that she could desire, pursue, and do whatever is within her power to bring that relationship about — but remains concealed at the critical time. However, even if I am right about this, one might wonder what reasons God could have for concealing at the critical time. In other words, *how* could God's initial concealment make a relationship with a nonbeliever more likely at a later time? In the remainder of this paper, I attempt to provide an answer to this.

IV. THE DIANTHROPIC STRATEGY: A NEW WAY FORWARD

The aim of this section is to develop a fresh strategy for responding to Schellenberg's hiddenness argument called the dianthropic strategy and to anticipate an objection to it. I do not argue this strategy entirely explains every instance of divine hiddenness, but I do argue it provides an explanation, appealing to what is generally true about personal relationships, for God's operation within concealment in many cases.⁴¹ The goal of this response is to show how the existence of nonresistant nonbelief is compatible with the existence of a perfectly loving God. If it achieves this goal, then Schellenberg's argument does not give the religious inquirer reason to reject God's existence.

Schellenberg's characterization of the hiddenness problem focuses on the relationship dynamics between two actors: God and the nonbeliever. As he sees it, the burden of relationship formation must be placed on one or the other. Either the nonbeliever is resisting belief in God or God has yet to do enough to change the nonbeliever's nonbelief to belief. Any instance of the latter case, Schellenberg thinks, is reason to doubt there could be a perfectly loving God. I have already shown that concealment for a time can be an instance of love motivated by relationship, but another problem with Schellenberg's framing is that relationships between persons are almost never understood or formed in a vacuum — that is, isolated between the two individuals. Instead, a third actor often plays a role, sometimes a significant one, in when and how a relationship forms between two other persons. Because of this, a reevaluation of relationship formation is needed and, in particular, why the role of the third actor is so important. The dianthropic strategy seeks to provide this reevaluation.

⁴¹ While this might appear to be a weakness, I am skeptical whether such an account is possible. The defender of theism cannot provide a complete explanation for every individual case of doxastic hiddenness (for surely each individual case is different) any more than she can provide a complete explanation for every instance of evil — or any more than the nontheist can provide a complete explanation for every individual case of religious experience.

The dianthropic strategy is so-called because it contends that God mediates relationship with non-believers *through* another person(s).⁴² Unlike in Schellenberg, the dianthropic strategy focuses on the role of a third actor: the mediator. A mediator is a third actor who introduces two other persons to one another. In my human case, the father is in a difficult position because, he believes, introducing himself to his daughter at the critical time would be detrimental to forming a lasting personal relationship with her. What is he to do? One option is dianthropic introduction. If he could befriend a close friend of his daughter's, for instance, then he might be able to mediate his love for her through this mutual friend. Similarly, God might in some cases opt for a dianthropic introduction for similar reasons. At the critical time, the dianthropic strategy might make a lasting personal relationship more likely than putting the person in the relating position at the critical time.

This strategy works on what can be called the “dianthropic assumption” or intuition: *all else being equal, a person is more likely to respond positively to something or someone if introduced by a trustworthy friend*. I cannot think of counter examples to this, but for modesty's sake I assume this is only generally true or tends to be true. Although Schellenberg is correct that belief is required for personal relationship, he underestimates the importance of *how* that belief forms. Many factors — including but not limited to mood, environment, and other persons involved — are relevant for how humans respond to things, but a major factor is who or what is making an introduction. Imagine the following cases, all else being equal, of meeting a stranger at a party:

Case #1: A man bumps into a stranger, Charles, by the punch bowl and they introduce themselves to each other.

Case #2: A man's close and trusted friend, Cordelia, insists that he must meet her friend Charles. She introduces him to Charles over a glass of punch and tells him how wonderful Charles is and how well the pair would get along.

If the dianthropic assumption is correct, then Case #2 is more likely to yield a lasting personal relationship between the man and Charles. Importantly, Cordelia's role is not just to get them to meet — they might bump into each other anyway — but to heighten their interest in one another. In some or even many cases, that heightened interest could be decisive in forming a lasting personal relationship.

It is true that a relationship with God is different in important ways from human relationships, but there are good reasons for thinking the same reasoning applies.⁴³ For many people, meeting God is analogous to meeting a stranger at a party. Even if one came to believe that God exists, they might be uninterested in a relationship with God for whatever reason. That reason may be due to some kind of non-doxastic resistance to God, and likely often is, but it could also be due to reasons independent of God or the nonbeliever. In fact, the nonbeliever might be interested in a relationship with God at the critical time, but God believes a better relationship is available when mediated at a later time. In cases like these, perhaps God shares some “mutual friends” with the nonbeliever that God can use for a kind of introduction. While the dianthropic assumption is generally true of persons, it is worth adding that the case of God might give us more reason, not less, for thinking mediation is important. A relationship with God — a transcendent, all-powerful, creator of the universe — is not always easy to imagine simply

42 From the Greek preposition *dia* (through) and noun *anthropos* (human). This word is adapted from N. T. Wright's use of the word in an unpublished lecture, in reference to God as revealed in the Christian scriptures.

43 Judaism and Christianity in particular have reasons to affirm this given God's behavior in the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament). Rarely does God act by fiat, but rather uses people to accomplish his goals. Perhaps the greatest example of divine “interference” is the Exodus story, but the divine acts, especially divine words, in the story are often mediated somehow by Moses. Additionally, the New Testament provides Christians further reason to affirm it. Jesus charges his disciples to “be his witnesses” (Acts 1:8). The Apostle Paul says, “we are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20). These verses (and others) suggest a dianthropic expectation when it comes to the revelation of God.

because of who God is.⁴⁴ Although God is personal, God is not just a person like we are persons.⁴⁵ This is a barrier for many nonbelievers, and plausibly an immense one. The role of the mediator can help overcome that barrier. The mutual friend might tell the nonbeliever about her own experience with God and point the nonbeliever to good qualities which God exhibits and the benefits of belief. Ideally, this would increase the likelihood of a lasting personal relationship between God and the nonbeliever.⁴⁶

While the dianthropic assumption is generally true, for the dianthropic strategy to work it only needs to be true in some cases. In Dustin Crummett's response to Schellenberg, he clarifies that he only aims for a "partial" rather than a "complete response."⁴⁷ By this he means that he intends to explain some, but not all, cases of divine hiddenness. However, Michael C. Rea raises an important point about nonresistant nonbelief (and other nonbelief theses) that is relevant here: the existence of nonresistant nonbelief, or how much of it exists, is simply not something for which we can have very good evidence.⁴⁸ He grants the existence of nonresistant nonbelief for the sake of argument (as do I) but points out the complexities involved in speculating about the cognitive states of others — or even ourselves.⁴⁹ That could easily be extended to speculating about the motivations of God. Like Crummett, I suspect that the dianthropic strategy is only a part of a more complex picture of divine hiddenness, but I worry about identifying any strategy with specific, individual cases of hiddenness. However, we can still say the dianthropic is generally true and that it extends to God — or is at least plausibly true of God given what we know about human love.

The dianthropic strategy is not the first strategy to focus on a third actor in responding to Schellenberg. For instance, Richard Swinburne offers a "Responsibility Argument."⁵⁰ For him, nonbelief, while itself a negative, allows for the good of responsibility so that humans can cooperate with each other in teaching others about God.⁵¹ This good is only available in a world where God is relatively hidden. Additionally, Travis Dumsday formulates a different version of the same response. As he sees it, responsibility and cooperation are simply germane to relating to God. He says, "to be a friend of God involves engaging in cooperative work aimed at the achievement of common goals. Therefore to be in a positive relationship with God involves such cooperative work."⁵² God's hiddenness allows for this important formation in other persons. Dumsday also suggests that the end of such responsibility can be relationship for the nonbeliever.⁵³ However, the dianthropic strategy is different precisely in the good it seeks to preserve. The responsibility argument aims to preserve the good of moral formation *in the third actor*; the dianthropic strategy aims to preserve the good of personal relationship with God *for the nonbeliever*. Unlike the responsibility argument, the dianthropic strategy is silent on whether any formation, moral or otherwise, happens in the mediator — and, if it does, it is a bonus good. How this affects the third actor is irrelevant

44 By transcendent, I refer simply to God's "otherness." He is not like human persons. Schellenberg often repeats the objection that God gets to set everything up in the first place and so would not allow certain states of nonbelief, but some of those states of nonbelief could be partially (even mostly) due to our fundamental difference from God.

45 The work of Michael C. Rea is especially helpful on this point. See: Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 29–41.

46 Terence Cuneo argues that "there could be ample, intimate, and lovely ways of being in relationship with God" even at times when a conscious relationship is not available. I have assumed for the sake of argument that belief precedes any kind of relating, but Cuneo's view compliments the dianthropic strategy well. The dianthropic strategy, too, might itself be one of those "intimate, and lovely ways" that nonbelievers relate to God. Nonbelievers might relate to God through individual believers, for instance, or through the church. See: Terence Cuneo, "Another Look at Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013).

47 Dustin Crummett, "'We Are Here to Help Each Other': Religious Community, Divine Hiddenness, and the Responsibility Argument," *Faith and Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2015), 48.

48 Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, 17.

49 It is an open question among philosophers about whether robust self-deception is even possible. Although I do not argue for self-deception, it seems at least plausible. A few good interactions with this question are found in: John Cottingham, "Descartes and the Voluntariness of Belief," *Monist* 85, no. 3 (2002); William D. Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

50 This is the label applied by Schellenberg in: J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2006), 130.

51 Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 211.

52 Travis Dumsday, "Divine Hiddenness and the Responsibility Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 12, no. 2 (2010), 364.

53 *Ibid.*, 364–65.

to the success of the dianthropic strategy. Instead, this strategy argues for mediation as the best way, in some cases, for a nonbeliever to receive knowledge about God *for the sake of the nonbeliever's relationship with God*.

Another version of the responsibility argument is worth mentioning. For Crummett, the responsibility afforded by God,

is good because it gives us an opportunity to serve God and one another in a very important task and because it gives us the ability to form relationships with God and one another that are based partly on our positively and freely influencing one another's spiritual development and knowledge of God.⁵⁴

Further, "by encouraging one another in individual spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, and participating in communal ones, such as collective worship, we can help bring about the spiritual benefits that these are supposed to provide."⁵⁵ As Crummett sees it, the pros of responsibility outweigh the cons. God's hiddenness, then, can be explained by responsibility in both a negative aspect, or a failure to tell others about God, and a positive aspect, or posing a hinderance in one's actions or words, to this failure.⁵⁶ Crummett's emphasis is different from Swinburne's and Dumsday's in that he avoids portraying God as intentionally hiding for the sake of responsibility.⁵⁷ Instead, he emphasizes the failure of persons to communicate God to others instead of God's remaining concealed for the sake of responsibility. Although Crummett's emphases are closer to mine than Swinburne's or Dumsday's, there remains the same important difference between his version of the responsibility argument and the dianthropic strategy. The focus remains on other goods in the third actor provided by God's hiddenness. It is true that goods are available in his response for the nonbeliever, but those goods maintain a focus on *responsibility*. In the dianthropic strategy, God's hiddenness is not due to a failure on the part of other persons (as in Crummett) or God's intentional hiding for the good of responsibility (as in Swinburne and Dumsday), but rather on God's intentional concealment in order to mediate relationship through those persons.⁵⁸

A possible objection to the dianthropic strategy is that God is more appealing than any mutual friend could be. This objection can take two forms: one focuses on the perfection of God and one on the imperfections of the mediator. The perfection of God objection is basically this: if God is as beautiful and good as described by most theists, God is necessarily more attractive than any mediator. The problem is that two incorrect assumptions lurk in this objection, and it requires at least one of them to work. The first is that a beloved's rejection of a lover is always located in deficiencies in the lover. This need not be the case. In my human example, the likelihood that the child will respond negatively to the father has nothing to do with the father. Similarly, a nonbeliever's negative — or even apathetic — response to God might have nothing to do with God, but other factors in the nonbeliever's own life or environment. The second incorrect assumption is that human persons always respond to the beautiful or the good. However obvious a poor decision is to those around them, humans often make decisions based on other desires besides being united with what is true, good, and beautiful. If this is correct, God's perfection is not necessarily more compelling to certain individuals than the a less beautiful or good mediation.

The imperfection of the mediator objection is basically this: God would avoid dianthropic mediation because of glaring imperfections in human mediators. As Crummett points out, this could take the form of either a believer's failure to communicate with nonbelievers or a positive hinderance in the words or actions of believers such that nonbelievers are put off by the idea of a relationship with God.⁵⁹ The former could refer to neglect on the part of mediator, but it also could refer to "temporally and spatially isolated

54 Crummett, "We Are Here to Help Each Other," 48.

55 Ibid., 50.

56 Ibid., 50–51. An example of the positive aspect might be racism in the church.

57 Ibid., 53.

58 Joshua Blanchard argues that God's hiddenness in individuals is due to God's desire to be known in communities. Communities thus contribute, positively and negatively, to whether others believe. However, this too is different than the dianthropic strategy because the aim of my account is still God's relationship with individual persons. For more, see: Joshua Blanchard, "Heschel, Hiddenness, and the God of Israel", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8, no. 4 (2016).

59 Crummett, "We Are Here to Help Each Other," 50–52.

non-theists.”⁶⁰ In either case, it is true that mediation will often fail. Still, the failure of mediation keeps God at the critical time with the nonbeliever. As before, God may in some cases still think mediation is the best option, even if mediation is not immediately available. The failure of one mediator, or even multiple mediators, does not entail that mediation is not the best option *at some point*. Further, Tucker’s point about God’s not putting a nonbeliever in the relating position if God knows a relationship is unlikely is relevant: presumably, God will continue to seek the introduction which makes a lasting personal relationship most likely. Further still, my response to the previous objection remains relevant: imperfection can, in some cases, be more compelling than perfection. This is especially true when the point above about God’s otherness is pressed further. In some cases, regardless of how imperfect the mediator might be, mediation might still be the best option available to God.⁶¹

However, the case of spatially and temporally isolated nonbelievers raises a particularly important question: will God remain eternally concealed from a nonbeliever because of a failure of mediation? The dianthropic strategy itself is silent on this, but I think not. I argued above that the time requirement causes the Not Open Principle to fail, but the remainder of the Principle remains plausible to me. God’s concealment can only ever be for a time. If there is a time in which mediation is not or no longer an option and God remains concealed, then perhaps God is not open to relationship at that time. However, I am skeptical that we can identify any individual case where mediation is not or no longer an option, and it seems probable to me that some of these cases will extend beyond death.

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to offer a fresh response to Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument. It did so in two ways. First, it showed (in the second section) how Schellenberg’s understanding of openness is deficient. Appealing to an example of human love, I argued initial concealment is consistent with openness to relationship and even pursuit of relationship. Second, this paper offered a new strategy (in the third section) for responding to the hiddenness argument called the dianthropic strategy. Like responsibility arguments, it focuses on a third actor. Unlike responsibility arguments, it focuses on the third actor’s mediating contribution to the formation of a lasting personal relationship between God and a nonbeliever. The goal of the dianthropic strategy is to give one possible explanation, given what we think plausible with respect to some paradigm cases of human love, for why a perfectly loving God might remain concealed for a time from nonresistant nonbelievers. If this strategy is plausible, it provides a response to Schellenberg’s claim that the existence of nonresistant nonbelief is incompatible with the existence of God. Thus, the religious inquirer need not see nonresistant nonbelief as a reason to deny God’s existence.

60 Ibid., 58.

61 Indeed, the Bible is replete with examples of imperfect persons serving as excellent mediators — *Deo gratias*.

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