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Divine Hiddenness and Affective Forecasting

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that J. L. Schellenberg's Divine Hiddenness Argument is committed to a problematic implication that is weakened by research in cognitive psychology on affective forecasting. Schellenberg's notion of a nonresistant nonbeliever logically implies that for any such person, it is true that she would form the proper belief in God if provided with what he calls "probabilifying" evidence for God's existence. In light of Schellenberg's commitment to the importance of both affective and propositional belief components for entering into the proper relationship with God, this implication of his argument becomes an affective prediction or forecast. However, research in cognitive psychology has shown that in multiple and varied circumstances humans often make inaccurate predictions of their future affective states or reactions. Thus, this research provides strong empirical reasons to doubt that the implication is warranted.

Introduction

Why is God hidden? There has been much debate in the literature concerning J. L. Schellenberg's Divine Hiddenness Argument (DHA) since the publication of his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* in 1993.¹ Briefly stated, the argument says that the existence of nonresistant nonbelief is evidence against the existence of God, where nonbelief occurs whenever one "fails (for whatever reason and in whatever way) to believe that there is a God."² Fleshing this out, Schellenberg focuses on God as traditionally conceived: omnipotent, omniscient, possessing all creative responsibility, and most importantly, as perfectly loving. Schellenberg argues that if a perfectly loving God exists, then God's creatures are always in a position to enter into a conscious, positively meaningful personal relationship with God simply by trying. Only a person's

¹ Schellenberg, J. L. *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

own conscious choices could create an emotional or behavioral barrier to beginning such a relationship with God.

However, it is apparent that many people who are not “resisting” God in this way (i.e. whose actions or omissions they are not responsible or “culpable” for) nevertheless are unable to enter into a relationship with God simply by trying. Why is this? These people lack belief in God, which must occur logically prior to forming a relationship with God. Insofar as a perfectly loving God is incompatible with so-called “nonresistant nonbelievers,”³ the latter provide disconfirmation for traditional theism. Saying that God is “hidden” amounts to describing this state of affairs in which there is nonresistant nonbelief. Alternatively, as Schellenberg sometimes puts it, the absence of evidence for theism constitutes strong evidence for atheism.

An Implication of DHA

The DHA is committed to a problematic claim that is challenged by evidence I will cite from cognitive psychology. The key to seeing this lies in Schellenberg’s case that the sort of evidence God would provide humans with would be *probabilifying* evidence – that is, evidence not merely causally sufficient for belief formation, but also constituting adequate support by rendering God’s existence probable. Schellenberg thus denies that God would deceive someone into thinking her evidence is adequate when it really is not, for example.⁴ It simply follows from the definition of a nonresistant nonbeliever that if no resistance is taking place and the nonbeliever has conducted a rational search, then truly probabilifying evidence would cause her to form the proper belief in God.

We can state this conditional proposition (counterfactual) for any *S* such that *S* is a nonresistant nonbeliever as follows:

(P): If probabilifying evidence for God’s existence were made available to *S*, then *S* would form the proper belief in God.

Schellenberg appears to endorse this position when he writes, “it doesn’t take much imagination to see how nonresistant nonbelief in its various forms might be prevented through the provision of more subtle and interesting forms of evidence, such as religious experiences whose character and force are modulated according to our

³ For those familiar with the literature concerning his argument, it should be noted that Schellenberg has previously referred to this as “reasonable” or “inculpable” nonbelief, but now uses “nonresistant.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

intellectual and moral needs.”⁵ Our *imagination* or intuition, then, furnishes us with *prima facie* reason for thinking that these forms of evidence, if made available, would prevent nonresistant nonbelief. In the next section, I show how (P) constitutes an affective prediction through this distinction between propositional and affective belief.

Affective Religious Belief

What is meant above by the formation of the “proper” belief in God? Schellenberg devotes a considerable amount of space in *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* discussing the distinction between belief-*that* and belief-*in*, or propositional versus affective belief, respectively.⁶ According to Schellenberg, affective religious belief occurs when the following conditions are met:

1. *S* believes that a certain item *x* has value or is in some way a good thing.
2. At least a part of *S*'s reason for valuing *x* is that *S* values the existence of an ultimate and salvific reality or, more directly, the good obtainable in relation to such a reality, if it exists.
3. *S* is disposed, when *x* comes to mind, to experience a feeling state that, when conjoined with the facts represented by (1) and (2), produces a blended experience of approving, trusting and loyal emotions toward *x*.⁷

In the context of DHA, God represents item *x* and it is clear that the picture painted by a meaningful, conscious relationship requires that *S* experiences “approving, trusting and loyal” emotions toward God.

According to Schellenberg, responding positively to the conscious experience of God's presence requires general cognitive and affective faculties such as “the cognitive and affective equipment required, for example, to believe that God is lovingly present and make a response expressing gratitude or one that involves seeking a deepening of the experience of God.”⁸ Furthermore, he says that belief-*in* not only involves an evaluative

⁵ Schellenberg, J. L. *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 207.

⁶ See Schellenberg, Ch. 2: “On Belief” and Ch. 3: “On Religious Belief and Religious Disbelief” in *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 39-94. I should note that Schellenberg seems to hold that propositional and affective belief are not identical to belief-*that* and belief-*in*, respectively, but follow from considerations thereof. For a related distinction between propositional and filial *knowledge*, see Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 92-101.

⁷ Schellenberg (2005), 85-6.

⁸ Schellenberg (2007), 201.

belief but also a feeling component “which, given the nature of the evaluation, results in a positive affective or emotional state. This latter state appears in all cases of belief-in to involve the emotion that typically *attends* approval or a positive evaluative belief.” He gives the example of a blind person whose affection for her guide dog causes her to be “*moved* in a certain characteristic, positive way”⁹ when she reflects on aspects such as the dog’s reliability and her reluctance to replace the dog.

We are now in a position to see how the implication (P) drawn out above constitutes an affective prediction. If the proper belief in God includes an affective belief component, then (P) is a forecast of *S*’s future affective state. Next I turn to what is called “affective forecasting” in order to see why this is a difficulty for the argument.

Affective Forecasting

Here I provide an overview of research in cognitive psychology relating to affective forecasting by focusing on both ‘affect’ and ‘forecasting’ in turn.

What Schellenberg has in mind regarding ‘affect’ clearly corresponds with what is meant in the psychological literature. In the latter, affect typically refers to an emotional or behavioral state, or an attitude toward some object. One simple definition states that affect “entails the feelings that people experience and may or may not concern a particular object or event.”¹⁰ Other terms sometimes employed as either concomitant or synonymous with affect include desire, emotion, feeling, motivation, or attitude. Bayne and Fernández write that affective states “represent the evaluative status of stimuli...[and] the relation that the agent bears to the object of judgment,” while they both “inform the subject about features of the environment *and* drive the subject to engage in certain responses to those environmental features.”¹¹ The common threads running through these and Schellenberg’s accounts include (i) a feeling state along with (ii) emotions toward an object and evaluation thereof, and (iii) compelling some response in the individual.

Affective *forecasting*, then, occurs when a subject predicts her own future affective state or attitude in light of some (typically) positive or negative event. Research in this area has shown that we are notoriously poor predictors of the future affective states of

⁹ Schellenberg (2005), 69.

¹⁰ Albarracín, Dolores, Mark P. Zanna, Blair T. Johnson, and G. Tarcan Kumkale. “Attitudes: Introduction and Scope.” In *The Handbook of Attitudes*, by Dolores Albarracín, Blair T. Johnson, and Mark P. Zanna, 3-19 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2005), 3.

¹¹ Bayne, Tim, and Jordi Fernández. “Delusion and Self-Deception: Mapping the Terrain.” In *Delusion and Self-deception: Affective and Motivational Influences on Belief Formation*, 1-21 (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), 9.

others and ourselves. For example, one oft-cited study demonstrated there is no significant difference between the future general happiness of lottery winners and paraplegics compared to control subjects, concluding that we tend to overestimate the effects a single positive or negative event will have.¹²

Four contributing factors to problems in cases of affective forecasting are outlined and described by Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson in “Miswanting: Some Problems in the Forecasting of Future Affective States.”¹³

First, we sometimes imagine the wrong event when we lack clarity concerning the details of the events’ development. This can happen due to failure to recognize the many diverse members making up a class, and thus disregarding that perhaps the particular event we will experience is unlike the one we are imagining. For example, Gilbert and Wilson provide an illustration of predicting future unhappiness during a party, while neglecting the various different types of possible parties. I may have fun at a costume party, but not at the company Christmas party.

Second, we sometimes use the wrong theory, particularly about ourselves. To the extent that we have incorrect or imperfect theories about who we are, we may produce poor predictions about future affective reactions to events even when we fully understand the numerous entailments of an event. The authors mention a study that asked participants to create a menu of different snacks they would eat on three consecutive Mondays. The tendency was for the subjects to prefer variety, making provision not just for their first favorite but also their second favorite snacks. Taking the phrase “variety is the spice of life” to heart, these patients did not consider that although having their favorite snack with each meal could quickly become boring, about once a week is the magic number. The subjects did not like their second favorite snack as much as they anticipated because they had applied an incorrect theory about their desire for snack diversity over time in crafting their menus.¹⁴

Third, we are liable to misconstrue those feelings experienced during the imagination phase as representative of how we would feel if that event occurred. Because the source

¹² Brickman, Philip, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman. "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 8 (1978): 917-27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.8.917>.

¹³ Gilbert, Daniel T., and Timothy D. Wilson, "Miswanting: Some Problems in the Forecasting of Future Affective States" in *Feeling and Thinking: The Role of Affect in Social Cognition*, by Joseph P. Forgas, 178-97. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁴ The study referred to comes from Read, Daniel, and George Loewenstein. "Diversification Bias: Explaining the Discrepancy in Variety Seeking between Combined and Separated Choices." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 1, no. 1 (1995): 34-49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037//1076-898X.1.1.34>.

of our feelings is often unknown to us, it is possible that these stem from factors other than our imagining the future event. These feelings or “gut reactions” are then interpreted as how we are likely to react to that hypothetical event. The idea of going to the ballet next weekend might strike us as thrilling, but this feeling is actually motivated by having just heard good news about a job promotion. In this case, we did not imagine the wrong event (say, the opera) and were not influenced by an incorrect theory about ourselves (thinking we actually liked watching dancers in tights when we do not). Rather, we misattributed our feelings about our new job offer to the possibility of attending the ballet.

If all of this was not enough, there is another factor, what I will call the “persistence problem” of affective forecasting, that alone is sufficiently problematic for Schellenberg: we are liable to overestimate the *persistence* of the emotional impact of events. In other words, we typically overestimate the *duration* of the emotional effects of some important event. This happens primarily due to what is sometimes called focalism, which arises when we focus only on the event, neglecting everything else that might occur afterwards. We rarely take into account other factors that would affect our emotional states, especially well into the future, beyond the initial event. Gilbert and Wilson write, “[f]ocalism is an especially vexing problem because avoiding it seems to require that we do the *impossible*, namely, consider the impact of every event before estimating the impact of any event.”¹⁵ Both the impossibility of (i) being cognizant of all that may obtain following a given event and (ii) evaluating which events are most likely to contribute to modification of the original affective state, seem to pose an insurmountable obstacle when it comes to making reliable *long-term* affective predictions.

The Problem for DHA

So far I have argued that DHA contains the implication (P), which states that if probabilifying evidence were made available to any nonresistant nonbeliever, then he would form the proper belief in God. I have also agreed with Schellenberg that “proper” belief in God must account for both propositional and affective belief components. The claim (P) is thereby construed to be an affective prediction about the future emotional state of the nonresistant nonbeliever. In light of the persistence problem, I here want to add that (P) also includes the *persistence* of this belief and the accompanying affective state.

It seems that the proper affective state must persist until the person dies for the religious significance to hold any weight. What good would it do a person if God provided them probabilifying evidence, only for them to become atheists shortly before death?

¹⁵ Gilbert and Wilson (2000), 187.

Additionally, there may be independent theological reasons to think that God, perhaps in light of perfect justice, may hold someone with more probabilifying evidence even more morally accountable for his or her sins or disbelief.¹⁶ Apart from this, Schellenberg himself appears to endorse this when he writes that probabilifying evidence for God's existence "is meant to apply to both the initial acquisition of belief and (should it be retained) to its persistence."¹⁷

The persistence problem of affective forecasting is thus wholly relevant here and becomes even more problematic insofar as Schellenberg invokes testimony of "former believers" as evidence for the existence of a particular type of nonresistant nonbeliever. Speaking of former believers, he writes "there may be times when they think they have detected traces of God in some public event or argument or experience. But it is only for a moment: the event's theological significance is soon undermined by convincing reinterpretation or the argument is proven unsound or the experience is rendered doubtful by reflection on their psychological state or on *conflicting* experiences—whether their own or others'."¹⁸ Schellenberg seems to agree here that an event strong enough to form belief in God can be overturned in the cases of this class of nonresistant nonbelievers known as former believers. Predicting all of the situations or events that might arise to counter an affective belief state after its initial formation seems to require an omniscience human beings clearly do not possess.

Conclusion

The divine hiddenness argument, in proposing the existence of nonresistant nonbelievers, is committed to the implication (P) that for any such person, he would form the proper belief in God if provided with probabilifying evidence. As we have seen, the affective religious belief condition in this case means that (P) is an affective prediction. The problem is that the lack of confidence in our general ability to make accurate affective forecasts, as shown by studies in cognitive psychology, provides strong empirical support for doubting (P), and by extension, the premise of DHA from which it follows. By this token, the evidential connection provided by Schellenberg for thinking that there exist people who satisfy the conditions required by the notion of "nonresistant nonbelief" is weakened.

¹⁶ For an argument along these lines, see Dumsday, Travis. "Divine Hiddenness as Divine Mercy." *Religious Studies* 48, no. 2, 183-98. doi:10.2307/23260016. Dumsday argues that "God mercifully remains 'hidden' in order to limit our moral culpability" for immoral actions whose character is seen as even more immoral in a world where God's existence is not subject to doubt.

¹⁷ Schellenberg (1993), 33.

¹⁸ Schellenberg (2007), 229.

Now, I do not expect this to change the minds of those convinced by the divine hiddenness argument, but I would like to suggest that this is because the argument is intuitive. That is, we intuitively agree with Schellenberg that nonresistant nonbelievers exist. What I have attempted to show is that this intuition, although providing some initial receptiveness to the argument, is probably mistaken, and that it is this selfsame human intuition that leads us astray in cases of affective forecasting.

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