

**IS ATHEISM (THE FACT) GOOD EVIDENCE
FOR ATHEISM (THE THESIS)?
ON JOHN SCHELLENBERG'S ARGUMENT
FROM IGNORANCE**

CYRILLE MICHON

Université de Nantes

Abstract. The argument from ignorance mounted by John Schellenberg argues from the existence of non-faulty unbelief to the non-existence of God, from the fact of atheism or agnosticism to the truth of atheism. It relies on two putative conceptual relations: between the idea of love and that of personal relationship, and between personal relationship and existential belief on each side of the relation concerning the other relatum. I argue that each is debatable, and so the argument cannot proceed.

Atheism is the *thesis* that there is no God. But it is also the *fact* that some people believe that thesis, they believe that there is no God. Of course, the precise content of both the thesis and the fact depends on the notion of God that is at stake. We may at least conceive a distinction between a concept of God relying on a pure metaphysical property, like that of supreme or necessary being, or of first cause, involving some special attributes (the so-called omni-attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omniperfection) and a concept that relies on a moral dimension and adds to the idea of supremacy, perfection or creation, that such a being is personal, endowed with knowledge and volition, and is a loving person – a supremely or perfectly loving person. Since the metaphysical thesis that there is a first being (in perfection, causality, etc.) is only philosophical, or proper to some philosophers, we could call it ‘philosophical theism’ and its denial ‘philosophical atheism.’ The concept of a first being which is a person, and a loving person, can be understood by philosophers, and some may even argue that the first being is or has to be personal.

But it is certainly a concept that applies to what traditional religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam call God. I will then speak of a religious conception of God, and accordingly of 'religious theism' and 'religious atheism'. One can be a philosophical theist and a religious atheist, if one thinks that the first being is not a person, but say, the universe.

The distinction is important because many arguments for the existence of God are arguments for the existence of a supreme being, without consideration for any personal attribute. And arguments against the existence of God, like the argument from evil, are arguments against the existence of a moral God. The argument from evil, if it works, proves that there is no supreme being that is morally good, thus leaving open the possibility that there is a supreme being, that is not morally good (of course if 'supreme being' implies 'moral goodness', this position is not open). And one can be convinced by both kinds of arguments and so be a philosophical theist and a religious atheist. Philosophers might prefer to use different terms for different concepts and theses. In John Schellenberg's terminology, theism and atheism should be understood only according to their religious understanding, as the affirmation or the denial that there is a supreme being who is personal and loving. Philosophical theism should be called 'ultimism', the thesis that there is an ultimate reality. Note that ultimism is not exactly what I have called philosophical theism, because Schellenberg wants the ultimate reality to be ultimate not only ontologically but also axiologically.

Now, using Schellenberg's narrow concepts of theism and atheism, it is a fact that many people are theists, that many are atheists, and that many are agnostic (it might be that some agnostics and some atheists are ultimists). If we consider the motivation they have, the kind of reasons or justifications they could give for their stance, we can note an asymmetry. Many theists do not believe that there is a God on the basis of any argument, they rely on some religious tradition, that offers them a so-called revelation to which they give credit, or faith. They may have reasons to believe that the revelation is true, that the testimonies are reliable, but in the end, there seems to be an irreducible 'act of faith', a jump over rational argumentation that does not seem to be irrational, merely above rational arguments. Others simply feel and think that there is a personal God, maybe on the basis of a certain revelation, but maybe not, and they would justify their belief by the strength of an interior illumination or certitude, comparable to perceptual certainty. Atheism cannot be based on anything of the sort. The *fact* of atheism can be

causally *explained* by some sort of influence of an atheistic culture and tradition over the persons, but the *thesis* of atheism can only be *justified* on the basis of rational arguments, arguments for the non-existence of God.

I will begin with some general remarks on the argument from ignorance as an atheistic argument (I) and then propose a closer examination of Schellenberg's version of it: first of its general structure (II), and then of the two premises that rely on conceptual relations between the idea of love and that of personal relationship (III), and between personal relationship and existential belief concerning the *relata* of such a relation (IV). I will argue that each is debatable, and that, as a consequence, the argument is not built on solid grounds.

I. ATHEISTIC ARGUMENTS

Arguments for the non-existence of God cannot be of the empirical sort, the way I prove that there is no butter in the fridge by opening its door and showing that none of the stuff inside is butter. It has to be a rational proof that there is no God. When the proof has a deductive form, it is a proof that the existence of God is *impossible*. In the same way, deductive proofs of the existence of God argue that its existence is necessary. In both cases the modality may be absolute or only conditional. *A priori* arguments prove that God is absolutely impossible or absolutely necessary. They do so through an exploration of the concept of God, and argue that the very content of that concept implies that there cannot be any instance of it, or that there must be one. For example, if the concept of God implies that any God is omnipotent, and if omnipotence is an inconsistent concept (it leads to contradictions), then there can be no God. Alternatively, if the concept of God is that of a necessary or perfect being (or of that than which no greater can be conceived), and if this concept is such that there would result a contradiction if it were not exemplified, then there must be a God. *A posteriori* arguments introduce at least one empirical premise, and it is in virtue both of the concept of God and of that empirical fact, that God's existence is considered as impossible or necessary: the modality is then conditional upon the considered empirical fact. For example, the atheist argument from evil starts from the two premises (1) that God, conceived at least as omnipotent and morally good, is incompatible with evil (or a certain amount of evil), and (2) that there is such evil, to conclude that there is no God. The

first premise is conceptual, the second is empirical, and the conclusion is factual but it is *conditionally* necessary: given the fact of evil, there can be no God. In the same way, the cosmological argument concludes to the necessity of the existence of a first cause, given the existence of contingent beings. A priori arguments are all deductive, a posteriori ones can be constructed deductively or inductively: given a certain concept of God, the empirical fact is considered as implying the non-existence (vs the existence) of God, or only as raising its probability.

The atheistic argument from ignorance or unbelief (or argument from Divine Hiddenness),¹ that is from the fact of atheism (belief that there is no God) or agnosticism (no belief that there is one), is of the *a posteriori* kind, and, at least in Schellenberg's version, it receives a deductive form. In its most simple and condensed version (on the model of the argument from evil as presented above), it can be expressed thus:

- (1) If there is a loving God, there is no ignorance of God's existence without resistance
- (2) There is ignorance of God's existence without resistance
- (3) So, there is no God

This concise version helps to make the following quite general points.

First, it displays the distinction between the conceptual premise – the *incompatibility* between God and ignorance – and the factual one – the *fact* of nonresistant unbelief (atheism and agnosticism). Both can be discussed, but I will admit the truth of the second premise: there is some atheism (denial of God's existence) and agnosticism (doubt or ignorance about God's existence) that cannot be attributed to voluntary resistance on the part of the unbeliever. It might be contended, and has been, that atheism, and maybe agnosticism too, is always voluntary, or the result of voluntary action (aversion from God or from the search for God) or inaction (voluntary indifference). For example, following Paul's statement (Rom. 1:18) that the pagans are inexcusable not to have recognized the unique God, creator of heaven and earth, one might argue that reason

¹ I prefer the other two labels because of the misleading consequence of the third: only what exists can hide. Of course, the idea of divine hiddenness has a long tradition in religious thought, if only because of Isaiah 45: 15 ('Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Saviour of Israel'). It refers then to the fact that God does not manifest itself, the *Deus absconditus* of Augustine and Pascal. But the use that has been made of it to express only the absence of manifestation of God, and to infer from it that there is no God is misleading.

shows the existence and uniqueness of a creator, and that all unbelief concerning it is due to some voluntary resistance. I think we can discard this objection for the sole reason that, even if it were true, it would only make the point that philosophical theism, or ultimism, is a natural belief, one that can be abandoned only with some resistance. But what is at stake is religious theism, and unbelief in a personal and loving God. And even Paul did not say that such a God should have to be recognized.² So I will concentrate on the content and justification of the first premise.

Another remark is that the first premise relies on the divine attribute of love, and even of perfect love, as we will see, which is an important difference with the atheistic argument from evil, relying on divine omnipotence and moral goodness. Love is a less easy attribute to define and to work with, but it is of course all-important in the religious conception of God. Since it is God's love that the argument claims to be incompatible with the fact of unbelief, there is no way out by a modest change of the concept of God. One cannot easily escape just by making the point that God is not perfectly loving, after all, as one could avoid the argument from evil by limiting divine omnipotence (and leaving intact the attribute of divine goodness). In addition, the argument is different from the argument from evil in that there could be evil without ignorance of God, and there could be ignorance without evil.³ Of course, one might always say that ignorance is a kind of evil, but it is not the kind of evil usually considered, the one that seems to be incompatible with its permission by a morally good person. If it is incompatible with its permission by one who could avoid it, it must be on the basis of the love, and not of the goodness, even moral goodness, of that one.⁴

Finally, it is obvious that so presented, the argument has the deductive form of *modus tollens* (of course one could give it the form of a *modus ponens*). It could receive an inductive reformulation with the precision that one of the two premises is only probable, and since there is a good case for the second one, it should concern the first. If instead of a conceptual truth, the first premise were presented in such a way that there are good

² This is not to say that Paul's statement has not been interpreted that way. The idea that atheism is always faulty has a long history.

³ For this point, see Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch.8 'The Hiddenness of God', pp. 135-150.

⁴ Therein might lie the force of the argument from ignorance for people of faith: it challenges what might seem most proper to God, and to the value of faith – the perfect love of God for created persons.

reasons to think that a loving God would not allow ignorance, then the fact of ignorance would give good reason to think (it would raise the probability) that there is no God. Schellenberg has himself devised such an inductive version: using the analogy between God's love for finite creatures and human parental love (maternal mainly).⁵ This leads us to consider the content and justification of the premises. It will be better to consider them with the more developed version of the argument.

II. THE ATHEIST ARGUMENT FROM IGNORANCE

In this volume, John Schellenberg presents one of his own versions of the argument from ignorance (or Divine Hiddenness). For the ease of the reader, I recall it here:

- (1) If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with each finite person.
- (3) If there exists a God who is always open to personal relationship with each finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (4) 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 (from 2 & 3).
- (5) Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (6) No perfectly loving God exists (from 4 & 5).
- (7) God does not exist (from 1 & 6).

Since Schellenberg comments upon it, I recommend his comments to the reader. Just a few words: the first premise underlines that the conception of God at stake is that of religious theism, that of a loving, and even a perfectly loving God. And it authorizes the conclusion (7), once (6) is reached. The core argument is (2)-(6), and we see that (5) is the factual premise, stating the fact of unbelief (our 2. above), while

⁵ See for example his 'What Divine Hiddenness Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion', in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds.), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 33-61.

(4) is another formulation of the conceptual one (our 1. above). But (4) is itself an intermediary conclusion, from (2) and (3) which offer then a justification of the conceptual premise. The conceptual incompatibility between a perfectly loving God and nonresistant unbelief is based on two conceptual relations. One concerns the necessary openness of a perfectly loving God to personal relations with finite persons (2), and the other is the incompatibility between such an openness and nonresistant unbelief (3). This second conceptual premise makes two claims:

(3a) the sole openness of a perfectly loving God to personal relationship implies that such a relationship exists with nonresistant finite persons,

(3b) the existence of a personal relationship implies that both related persons believe that the other exists.⁶

(3b) seems to be merely definitional, but it is of course all-important for the argument. And Schellenberg is eager to maintain (3a) and (3b) together: abstracting from the divine person, he links *openness to a personal relationship* and reality of existential belief when he defines the complex predicate of a person being *not open to personal relationship*:

Not open to personal relationship: If a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of relationship with person B, is at some time in a state of *nonbelief* in relation to the proposition that B exists, where at that time B knows this and could change A's nonbelief to belief, then it is not the case that B is at that time open to meaningful, conscious relationship with A.⁷

This definition really conveys two components: that a personal relationship implies existential belief, and that the sole openness to a relationship (and so to existential belief) is incompatible with unbelief, if the unbeliever is nonresistant and if the other person knows it and could change unbelief to belief – which is the case if the other person is a God. We will see that there is room for controversy over the two aspects, and so I prefer to consider that the conceptual premise of the argument from unbelief (4) relies on three premises: (2), (3a) and (3b).⁸

⁶ Of course only the belief in the existence of God by the finite person concerns us (the divine belief that the finite person exists is or should not be a problem)

⁷ Ref.: here p. XXX

⁸ So (2) and (3b) express conceptual propositions involving the concept of God, while (3a) does not, but relates the two concepts of personal relation and existential belief.

Before going to the details, and still taking (3) as a unique premise, we can see that Schellenberg expresses a maximalist and a minimalist requirement on God's perfect love. The maximalist one (2) concerns time: a perfectly loving God should *always* be open to personal relationship. The minimalist requirement (3) concerns the mode and content of the relationship: it has to be a *belief*, and its content is that of an existential statement (there is a God). Both express a necessary condition for perfect love, but the second one is just a threshold: it does not exclude that the mode and content of the relationship be much richer. It does not exclude that it be a direct perception (vision) of the divine essence, with full apprehension of all its aspects (attributes, persons, etc.), and not only of its existence. If Schellenberg does not formulate a maximalist requirement concerning mode and content, it is not only because the argument does not need it (the minimalist requirement joined to the maximalist one concerning time is sufficient to lead to a contradiction with nonresistant unbelief). Schellenberg also endorses the view that a perfectly loving God could allow for a progressive or developmental discovery of its nature by the nonresistant beloved. That is, Schellenberg makes room for the idea that there might be some good for the finite persons to only have a restricted access to God, if and when that is compatible with their own good. But such a restricted access cannot admit a stage of full ignorance of God: it presupposes existential belief at any time. The progressive discovery of God's nature must start with at least that condition for personal relationship. In the terms of Schellenberg's initial work:

No doubt there are, if there is a God, many other interesting and important religious truths not clearly entailed or rendered probable by the proposition 'God exists', but I do not see that awareness of these is essential to a personal relationship with God if such a relationship is construed ... in developmental terms. Belief in the existence of a perfectly loving God, on the other hand, is clearly necessary to get one started in such a relationship: without it ... explicit Divine-human reciprocity is ruled out.⁹

We could then say that Schellenberg adopts a principle of Maximal Access (concerning time), a principle of Minimal Access (concerning content), and a principle or Restricted Access that we could formulate thus:

⁹ See John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 41.

Restricted Access: A perfectly loving God does not necessarily give to all nonresistant finite persons more access to a personal relationship with Him than is required by their own good.

Note that traditional theistic conceptions admit also such a principle. In Christianity for example, there is a Maximal Access Principle concerning content, with the idea that nonresistant finite persons will receive the gift of beatific vision of the divine essence in glory; there is a principle of Minimal Access concerning time, since such a knowledge is not due before death, and can be preceded by an imperfect knowledge (natural or supernatural) implying belief in God's existence but needs not; and the principle of Restricted Access, as formulated above, is also endorsed and serves to justify the possibility of unbelief among nonresistant people: the good of 'soul-making' can be realized not only through a progressive discovery of God's essence and will, but also through a temporary (initial or not) ignorance of God. This should be argued at length, but we can just mention the idea that the development of an authentic moral life does not require faith nor any kind of belief in God's existence (some might even say that it is more authentic without such a belief), and that it might be for the good of the people (their personal moral development) that a loving God allow nonbelief. We can also stress that it is only with the fact of ignorance by some that the good of testimony (by words and life examples) can be realized by others.¹⁰

This remark is just made to underline the proximity between Schellenberg's requirements and the traditional theistic ones. But of course, it could not be argued against Schellenberg that he has unduly understood the principle of Restricted Access with a maximalist requirement on time, leaving room for restriction only concerning the content (while he could have reversed the two requirements). Schellenberg does not argue from Restricted Access to (2) and (3). He defends (2) and (3) and makes room for Restricted Access, so that he does not require that a loving God should give full vision from the beginning of human life. Whoever wants to reject Schellenberg's conclusion must reject one of the premises he endorses. And if the reality of nonresistant unbelief is admitted (premise 5), one then has to reject either (2) or (3) – and in that case either (3a) or (3b). To this I now turn.

¹⁰ See Michael Murray 'Deus Absconditus', in Howard-Snyder and Moser, *Divine Hiddenness*, pp. 62-81.

III. LOVE AND CONSTANT OPENNESS TO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The first premise (2) relies on a putative conceptual relationship between the concept of love and that of openness to personal relationship. Before considering the constancy of the openness in the case of God, Schellenberg seems to assume something like

A. If X loves Y, X affords to Y the possibility of (= is open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

This proposition is not precise enough, since it does not say for how long this openness or offer should last. Concerning love between finite persons, proposition A might seem to be plausible, but only understood with a minimalist reference to time

A1. If X loves Y, X affords *sometimes* to Y the possibility of a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

The reason why this restriction should be added is that love might not be constant between finite persons, and that even when they love each other, their love might not be strong enough to overcome reasons for breaking, at least for a while, a personal relationship: the lover might prefer to allow, if only by game, the beloved to think that she no more exists (is dead). Of course, both reasons (intermittence and weakness of love) should be discarded when the lover is God. And this has to do mainly with the perfection of God's love. So we can propose

A2. If X *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

But A2 is debatable concerning finite persons who love each other. It might be that the lover has reasons to hide, and reasons that are not only compatible with her love, but dependent on her love. A perfectly loving mother could be in a situation in which her love for her child drives her to hide up to the point of the child ignoring whether her mother is (still) alive. For example, the mother could be under the threat of a malevolent agent who would kill the child or make him suffer, if she did not hide. So

A3. If X *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X, *unless X has reasons to hide from Y*

Those reasons could be reasons to hide *always*, or reasons to hide *sometimes*. The first sort of reason is imaginable in the scenario suggested above. But it is clear that a God would not have such reasons to hide: there is no threat that cannot be overcome by an omnipotent being. At least no threat of that kind, coming from another agent. And this is understandable even without a precise definition of omnipotence. So I think we could accept this modification of A3

A3*. If X is *omnipotent* and *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X, *unless X has reasons to hide sometimes*

And A3* certainly implies this slight modification of A1:

A1*. If X is *omnipotent* and *perfectly* loves Y, X *sometimes* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *sometimes* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

But of course, what is at stake is the proposition needed for the argument from ignorance to proceed, the proposition which says that a God would *never* have any reason to hide from the beloved, or that a God would *always* offer the possibility of a personal relationship, that is A2 applied to God, or more precisely

A2*. If X is *omnipotent* and *perfectly* loves Y, X *always* affords to Y the possibility of (= is *always* open to) a personal relationship, conscious and meaningful, with X

The generalization over Y to any finite person is not a problem, and (2) follows from A2*. So we have to evaluate A2*.

There is no problem with the idea that love favours the existence of personal relationship (usually love asks for love in return). There is no problem with the idea that an omnipotent lover would suppress the obstacles to a personal relationship if he or she wanted to. And there is no problem with the idea that there is no kind of external threat that would give an omnipotent and perfect lover a reason to hide: it would be an obstacle that an omnipotent lover could easily suppress. But is it true that an omnipotent and perfect lover could not have any reason to hide for a while, because of a greater good (that is greater than the knowledge of the lover) which would justify the lover's hiddenness?

Let the analogy with parental love come in, and let us suppose that it is constant love with no insurmountable obstacle. What reason could a loving mother have, whose love for her young child is close to perfect

love (at least insofar as it is constant), to hide from her child if there were no obstacle (including threats) she could easily suppress? Remember that hiding does not mean simply disappearing from sight as in a game of hide-and-seek (this allows for personal relationship in the seeking, and certainly does not suppress in the child the belief that her mother exists).¹¹ It would mean to allow full ignorance (unbelief) of the mother's existence. The addition of the length of the hiding (sometimes for all life long) and of the troubles (evils) the child may encounter during that time makes the question more pressing, but even without those, according to Schellenberg, the mother would not have any reason to hide, and so she would not hide.

In response to this strong statement, many have opposed that there are reasons to hide that have nothing to do with obstacles or threats. A perfect lover might choose to hide, in the strict sense, in order to allow for the *soul making* of the beloved. Among aspects of *soul making*, *freedom* would be greater if the belief in the lover's existence might limit the choices of the beloved. This can be understood in different ways: one is that full recognition of an omnipotent and perfect lover would prompt maximal love in return, without real possibility of refusal. Another way is to consider that, if the lover were also a remunerator of good and bad deeds, and if the beloved did also believe it, then moral choices would be greatly influenced, if not determined, by this awareness, the desire of happiness and the fear of condemnation. *Authenticity* of moral choices would be compromised by such considerations, since moral choices would always be performed with selfish reasons available. In the same way *moral development* can be thought to be greater without such belief in the existence of a perfect and omnipotent lover who is also a remunerator. And finally, it might be true that, from the point of view of the lover, it would be better to be known and loved than to be ignored, but only if knowledge and love were realized *in a certain way*, while it might be better to be ignored than to be known and loved *in another way*.¹²

¹¹ Not to be open to a personal relationship implies that the beloved does not believe that the lover exists, either without having ever believed it, or after doing so. If the lover were hiding in the sense that there would be no communication with the beloved, but the beloved still did believe in the lover's existence, that would be enough for some kind of conscious and meaningful relationship, such as waiting for X, hoping to see X again, praying to X, and of course loving X. It is only if Y did not believe (anymore) that X existed, that such relations would be undermined.

¹² Peter van Inwagen makes this point in *The Problem of Evil*.

Consider a young boy whose mother is absent. He doesn't lose his belief in her existence, but he knows that she does not look at him, and that she won't know when she comes back what he has been doing, and so will not punish him if, for example, he spends some time doing things that have been forbidden ('Don't watch TV when I am away'). If he chooses to obey her mother's command, this choice might be considered as more free, and morally superior to an act of obedience with the belief that the mother is present and/or will know and punish disobedient behaviour. Knowing this and wanting her child to improve morally, the mother would have a reason to hide, in the usual sense. The same might be argued for an improvement in different skills: the child would improve if he were left alone, having to solve problems by his own and not always with the aid of his mother. Why not suppose that a loving mother could have a reason to hide in the strict sense, at least for a while, if she were convinced that this situation would allow for different improvements, moral and others, in her child? And if this were true of a loving mother, why would it not be true of God?

One reaction can be that a mother might have good reasons to hide in the usual sense, for the good of her child, but she would never voluntarily hide in the strict sense and have her child ignore her existence. The first, usual, way of hiding is a plausible strategy for parents in moral education, or as a test of their children's love for them. But they would never (and in fact never do) allow for a full ignorance of their existence in their children. And neither would God, the argument goes on. I am not convinced, and it might be a point where the analogy between divine and finite parental love breaks down. If the parents really believed it would be better for their child to ignore their existence for a while, they certainly *should* hide. If they never *do* hide, that might be because they never have such a belief, or because, even if they had, their own instinct and feelings are such that they cannot hide in that sense. But this is a limitation on parental love that we should not transfer to God. And concerning the belief they never have, they might be wrong. Since an omniscient God believes only what is true, the real point is then: could it be the case that ignorance of God (unbelief) is sometimes better for a finite nonresistant person?

If it were a greater good for a child to ignore the existence of her mother for a while, the duration and conditions of this ignorance might be quite important. Ignorance might be good for a short time, and in circumstances in which it does not add evil to evils. Yes, but all that is

at stake is whether it is better *overall* for the child to ignore her mother, however long this ignorance might be, and whatever the circumstances. What we can admit is that she has no reasons (apart from obstacles or threats we decided not to consider since they could be overcome by an omnipotent lover) to hide *always*. Let us even admit that hiddenness should never be for more than a short period, relative to the whole of human life. Now, ignorance of God may last all life long, and if this earthly human life were the whole of human life, then unbelief would certainly be incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly loving God. But what if earthly life were only a short period compared with the whole of human life? I agree that this is adding a new premise, but it is a so common one in the different versions of religious theism, that it should not be considered as begging the question. In any case, if you admit that God can hide, in the strict sense, but only for a while, this can give a good reason to deny that there is a God if earthly life is the whole of human life. It cannot, as such, give a good reason to deny theism understood as the conjunction of the existence of a perfectly loving God and of eternal life.

Maybe the analogy with a loving mother is not appropriate under all aspects. Maybe God is more like an anonymous benevolent person who wants the moral good of some people: she hides from those she is helping, because she wants them to behave without awareness of the help they receive, without acting from gratitude, and also without any hope concerning other future helps. She wants them to act and behave for the purest reasons they could have. Maybe God's way and mode of being is that of a silent person who does not express her love through signs and words, but whose love is real and has consequences that remain unseen from the beloved, for a while.¹³

IV. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP AND EXISTENTIAL BELIEF

Consider now premise (3). We have seen that it should be split in two parts

(3a) the sole openness of a perfectly loving God to personal relationships implies that such a relationship exists with non resistant finite persons,

¹³ See Michael Rea, 'Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence', in Louis Pojman & Michael Rea (eds), *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 6th edition (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth/Cengage, 2011) pp. 266-75.

(3b) the existence of a personal relationship implies that both related persons believe that the other exists.

Let us first consider that (3a) is unproblematic and concentrate on (3b). Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty have argued that the concept of belief (resp. unbelief) might be ambiguous in different ways.¹⁴ One ambiguity is between *de re* and *de dicto* belief. The sergeant Garcia believes that Zorro is a brigand but does not believe that don Diego is one: he even believes that don Diego is not a brigand. We might say only that he believes *of* don Diego that he is a brigand. That is a *de re* belief while the other two are *de dicto* beliefs (one true, one false). Is saying that X believes that Y exists attributing to X a *de dicto* belief or a *de re* belief concerning Y? Does the existence of a personal relationship imply the belief, on the beloved's part, that the lover exists under a certain concept (in that case, the concept of 'God') or does it imply only that there is a concept under which the beloved believes that the lover exists? It certainly is possible to have a personal relationship with someone, believing that the person exists, but ignoring his or her real identity. So one could believe that one is having a relation with someone whom one does not recognize.

Who else could we take God to be? Here I see two answers that have some credits. One is that people may have some relations to abstract values, like truth, justice or beauty, as well as with the supreme good or happiness: they may cherish, value, or seek them. They might believe that such things exist, but not believe that they are in fact identical with (or constituted by) God. But if God is truth, justice, beauty and/or (the source of) happiness, then a relation with one of these is a (*de re*) relation with God. And belief that one of these exists is a *de re* belief that God exists. This answer has a long tradition for it, but it might be contested that a relation with Truth or Justice is not a personal relation. And so, even though it were would be a relation with God, it would not be a personal relation. Well maybe, but maybe not. In any case, this leads me to the second answer, which also has a certain tradition for it, and even an evangelical root. It suggests that any human person might be,

¹⁴ Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, 'Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief', *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007), 183-98. They consider two other features of belief that could allow for ambiguity: the distinction between partial and full belief (degrees of belief) and that between diachronic and synchronic belief. The last one corresponds to our concern with time in part III.

in a way, a re-presentation of God. One could explain that each finite person is a child of God, or is inhabited by God, or is an incarnation of the divinity. The important point is not so much the metaphysical explanation than the practical consequence that follows: 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (Mt. 25:40). If it is true that having a personal relation (of love, despising or hatred) with another finite person is to have it with God, then, one can have a personal relation with God without realizing it. Should we say that, in such a case, one could believe *de re* that God exists, without believing it *de dicto* (one would have an existential belief concerning God, of God, but not under the concept of God)? Or rather that one can have a personal relation with someone without believing that this person exists?

If we understand that one might entertain a personal relationship with somebody else one does not recognize, and that existential belief might be *de re*, propositions (3a) and (3b), and so (3), might be true, but they won't lead to the conclusion that there is no God. The reason is that in proposition (4), the fact of ignorance, the fact that some people believe that God does not exist, or do not believe that there is a God, all those are probably true only with a *de dicto* reading. And it would be fallacious to change the meaning of 'belief' (resp. 'ignorance') in both premises. If one wants to stick to the *de dicto* understanding of 'belief' in (3), then it might be argued that (3) is not true. Either because (3b) would not be true: personal relationship with someone does not imply that one recognizes that person and so has a *de dicto* belief that she exists (thus if one maintains that relationship with another finite person is *de re* a relation with God). Or, if you consider that a personal relationship with someone implies a *de dicto* existential belief concerning that person (3b), (3) could be denied because of (3a): 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. Now, (3a) might be denied and (2) held true only if 'personal relationship' in (2) were understood as not involving *de dicto* existential belief, and so there would be some equivocation between (2) and (3) this time. But if 'personal relationship' is understood similarly in (2) and in (3a) as involving *de dicto* existential belief, in case (3a) would be denied, (2) also would have to be denied. Is it a problem? Well, all that has been said until now leads to the assumption that there is no obvious contradiction in the idea that a perfectly loving God needs not be *always* open to a personal

relationship with any finite person (2), if God's power were such that any allowed personal relationship would be brought about (3a) and if 'personal relationship' implied the having of a *de dicto* existential belief concerning the lover (3b). This might be maintained for the reasons mentioned above (III), while constant openness to *de re* personal relationships, so to say, might be ascribed to God nonetheless. God could hide (sometimes) *de dicto* without (ever) hiding *de re*.

CONCLUSION

Schellenberg has given form to a very powerful argument against the existence of God, often felt without being thought with rigor by believers. The very fact of unbelief is evidence against the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly loving God. And the reason is that love seeks personal relationships and personal relationship implies existential belief concerning the related persons. But the validity of the argument requires a Principle of Maximal Access in time (always) to God on the part of finite persons: they would at least believe that there is a God if they did not resist to such a relationship. This must hold, according to Schellenberg, even if the great good of soul making allows for a certain Restricted Access Principle: nonresistant finite persons might grow in the quality and quantity of their knowledge of God, but they could not start from a period of complete (existential) ignorance. In that sense, a perfectly loving God would never hide. The fact that some people do not believe that there is a perfectly loving God is then in full contradiction with the existence of such a God.

We have considered two objections that might defeat the soundness of the argument. One is that it is not obvious that even perfect love by an omnipotent lover implies that the lover would *never* hide from the beloved. It might imply that the lover would *not always* hide, and not hide for a long time. But with the assumption that earthly life might be only a small part of the existence of finite persons, earthly ignorance of God would not be proof that there is no God. The other objection was made with the assumption that a perfectly loving God would always allow for personal relationship. It questioned the presupposition that such a relationship necessarily involved *de dicto* existential belief (belief that God, conceived as God, exists). True, one might not have a personal relationship with another without believing in the existence of that other, but one might be ignorant of who exactly that other is. In the case of God,

one might have a relation to Truth or Justice, while not realizing that those absolute values are God. One might have personal relationships with other finite persons without realizing that such relations involve a relation with God.

If one of these objections has some force, and we can ignore the question of which one, the argument from ignorance is not conclusive. This does not mean that it has no force. It might still have an inductive value. And it certainly constrains in some ways the representation of God, and of God's love in particular. The hidden God, if it exists, cannot be fully analogous to a perfectly loving mother.