The Hiddenness Argument and The Limits of Doxastic Positioning

by

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ABSTRACT

If God exists, how clear or obvious should we expect his existence to be? Particularly if such a God is interested in having a personal relationship with us? The Hiddenness Argument contends that it should be much clearer than it in fact is. If God exists and really wants us to know as much, we should expect to inhabit a very different epistemic situation than we in fact do – one that rules out the possibility of *rational nonbelief*. The evidence available for God's existence should be so definitive that it would be impossible for us to fail to believe on good epistemic terms.

My dissertation sets out to delegitimize this expectation. While available objections to it challenge its propriety – God may have overriding reasons for disclosing his existence in a way that allows for rational nonbelief – my account challenges its *feasibility* – whether it is in principle possible to meet. Expecting divine self-disclosure to rule out rational nonbelief assumes that it *can* rule out rational nonbelief – but can it? By homing in on the nature, mechanics, and limitations of disclosure itself, I show it cannot.

Divine self-disclosure is an instance of what I call *doxastic positioning*: the process of positioning someone to rationally form some belief – in this case, theistic belief. To rule out rational nonbelief, God's disclosure would need to make theistic belief a universal rational requirement. Given the success conditions of doxastic positioning, this would involve the *provision* of sufficient evidence as well as the universal *possession* and *appreciability* of said evidence. But no matter what evidence God provides, God cannot guarantee on pain of irrationality that humans will possess or be in a position to appreciate the available evidence, leaving rational nonbelief an ever live possibility. —Which is just to say that divine self-disclosure *cannot* rule out rational nonbelief. The expectation that it would do so is, then, illegitimate and the hiddenness argument depending on it fails.

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Undertaking a meaningful philosophical project is tricky business and not for the faint of heart. While there are few challenges as rewarding, and perhaps even transformative, the psychological demands it makes on you are nontrivial — few things force you to face yourself and own up to your own ignorance, confusion, and cognitive limitations as ruthlessly as it does. Completing this dissertation was no exception, and I cannot begin to adequately express my gratitude for those who were with me at the start, those who supported me along the way, and those who helped me bring it all to completion. —Even so, I must try!

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These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

— T.S. Eliot

Chapter 1: The Hiddenness Argument

The phenomenon of divine hiddenness has been a longstanding problem for theists. The experience of God as *hidden* – i.e., distant, absent, or silent – has been a recurrent theme within the major theistic religious traditions and scriptures, and, with that, a significant source of spiritual suffering, dread, and lamentation. But in contemporary philosophy of religion, the "hiddenness of God" has become a problem for theists in a new way: no longer simply an in-house problem *within* theism, the various phenomena associated with divine hiddenness have been employed by atheists to argue *against* theism.

Simply put: if God exists, he would disclose his existence in a clear and obvious manner because he would want to give us the opportunity to be in a personal, loving relationship with Him. And yet it appears that many fail to believe God exists through no fault of their own. This would not be the case if God has in fact clearly disclosed himself to us. So, we have reason to conclude that such a God does not exist.

This argument from hiddenness has been considered among the more formidable, live challenges to theism, ranking alongside the problem of evil[1]. My aim in this introductory chapter is to draw out the basic shape of the problem and investigate just how formidable of a challenge it is — and, with that, to set the

[1] —If not simply being an instance of it. There has been taxonomical disagreement regarding the relationship between the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness. For engagement with this disagreement, see Keller (1995), Kvanvig (2002), Maitzen (2006), and Rea (2018). One reason for resisting categorizing the problem of divine hiddenness as an instance of the problem of evil is that arguments from evil typically argue from a universally acknowledged evil to the nonexistence of God. Nonbelief, however, is not a universally acknowledged evil. From a theistic outlook, it is an evil, but from a non-theistic outlook, it is only a hypothetical one.

stage for providing a solution to it in the next two chapters. I will begin by providing a basic overview of the literature, setting out the main version of the hiddenness argument in §1-3 and reviewing the primary responses to it in §4. Having judged the available responses unsatisfactory as-is, I will wrap up in §5 by identifying the most promising point of pushback and forecasting my own alternative response to the argument.

At the end of the day, the hiddenness argument has a fatal flaw: it depends on an assumption about what results God can guarantee in positioning humans to believe he exists — and this assumption is false. More precisely, it assumes that there are *viable* conditions on which God can guarantee the formation and maintenance of theistic belief. There are no such conditions. Establishing how and why this is the case will be the primary objective of my account and, with that, my proposed solution to the problem. But first, the problem.

§1 THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS

In its most basic and distilled form, the problem of divine hiddenness is a problem of violated expectations for *divine self-disclosure*: if God exists, why doesn't he make his existence more clear or obvious to us? Why is it possible for us to doubt his presence and involvement in the world, to doubt his very existence? Wouldn't God rule out such possibilities? As hinted by this cluster of questions, the problem admits of theistic and atheistic variants: while theists are left to question God's presence or involvement in their lives or the world, atheists take the signs of God's purported absence to be evidence that God does not exist at all.

Historically, the theistic variant of the problem has been most prominent. Though the atheistic variant has not gone entirely unnoticed, it is *within* the domain of theism that the problem of divine hiddenness has been most directly wrestled with, developed, and engaged. That said, in the theistic context, divine hiddenness has primarily been registered as something that brings one's personal relationship and standing with God into question, or as something that brings one's understanding of God's nature, character, or purposes into question. It has not been registered as something that brings God's *existence* itself into question.[2]

In contemporary philosophy of religion, however, the atheistic potential of divine hiddenness has become quite salient, and that largely due to the work of J.L. Schellenberg.[3] The various phenomena theists have interpreted as signaling God's absence or silence, Schellenberg has translated into an argument against God's existence, namely, *the hiddenness argument*.[4] Though he has not been

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[2] The literature categorizes these as existential, theological, and epistemic problems of divine hiddenness, respectively.

[3] Schellenberg is not the first to develop the thought, but he is responsible for its current prominence in contemporary philosophy of religion. Precursors to the atheistic variant of the argument begin to appear in the 17th and 18th century, in the work of Blaise Pascal and Joseph Butler, respectively. In the 19th century, we find a more direct germ of the thought in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Robert Anderson. In the 20th century, the thought is expressed more directly by Bertand Russell, N.R. Hanson, Ronald Hepburn, John Hick, Terence Penelhum, Samuel Terrien, Samuel Balentine, Thomas V. Morris, and G. Tom Milazzo. See Schellenberg (2015: 24-28) and Rea (2018: 5-6) for their treatment of precursors to the hiddenness argument.

[4] As Schellenberg notes, there is awkwardness with the language framing the hiddenness argument: the language implies God's existence. That is, on its most straightforward reading, "God is hidden" implies "God exists." But the whole point of the hiddenness argument is to show God does not exist. Schellenberg shares how he interprets the framing language here:

> Hiddenness reasoning in support of atheism arises when someone looks at facts in the world interpreted by the religious in terms of God's hiddenness…and says: "I don't think these facts would be facts if there were a God." Given the context as set by theology, it is natural for the arguer to say: God would not be hidden in this way. By the same token it is natural to speak of the relevant sort of divine hiddenness as a problem and of any atheistic argument exploiting this problem as an argument from divine hiddenness, when what people really have in mind is again those facts, which would hide God in a certain way if there were a God. When atheists say or imply that God is hidden, therefore, what they should be taken to mean is that the world contains such facts (2015: 14-15).

alone in advancing this kind of argument, his original formulation has been seminal for contemporary discussion and has undeniably received the most attention in the literature.[5]

In what follows, I will set aside the *theistic* variant of the problem of divine hiddenness and home in on the *atheistic* variant, the hiddenness argument against God's existence. I will take Schellenberg's formulation of the argument as my starting point, but I will not restrict my attention to it, nor will I provide an exhaustive account of its development over the years. I will simply rehearse its basic shape and then broaden out to the rest of contemporary discussion and my place in it.

§2 SCHELLENBERG'S HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

Schellenberg's formulation of the hiddenness argument has undergone some significant modifications over the years, but it has consistently taken the concept of *divine love* as its starting point.[6] Contemporary discussion has more or less followed suit. The basic setup goes something like this: according to any well-formulated theism,[7] God is perfectly loving and, in particular, perfectly loving toward human beings.[8] Perfect love seeks to promote the ultimate wellbeing of its

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[5] In recent years, marked efforts have been made to decentralize Schellenberg's argument in the discussion and promote fresh, alternative ways of framing and interacting with the problem of divine hiddenness. See, for example, Anderson (2021) and Anderson and Russell (2021), where the argument is framed as an *evidential* argument, rather than a logical one.

[6] Schellenberg takes what he calls a "top-down" approach to the problem: "I wanted to start by thinking about general properties or characteristics of a God such as justice or love *to see what relevant points might emerge from such reflection*. I came to think of this as starting 'from above' (with abstract reflection on the concept of God) rather that 'from below' (with reference to ordinary human experience and common ideas)" (Schellenberg 2015: 17). Also see Schellenberg (2015: 38).

[7] The phrasing "according to any well-formulated theism…" is drawn from Travis Dumsday's work.

object, so in his perfect love for human beings, God will seek to promote ultimate human wellbeing. In this context, ultimate human wellbeing[9] depends on having a personal relationship with God, so a perfectly loving God will promote having personal relationship with human beings.[10]

Using human love as a guide to divine love, Schellenberg develops this expectation for divine-human relationship promotion in relatively modest terms: if God exists and perfectly loves human beings, God will always be *open to a personal relationship* with them.[11] This openness, Schellenberg stresses, is a very minimal condition. It basically amounts to not being *closed off* to a personal relationship, which Schellenberg takes to mean: God not doing anything that would make it impossible for human beings to enter into personal relationship with himself *just by trying*.[12]

What all goes into 'being in a position to enter personal relationship with God just by trying' is not entirely transparent, but Schellenberg maintains that,

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[8] This is taken to be in addition to God being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. As Schellenberg understands it, being all-loving is not necessarily reducible to being all-good. Love is a perfection of the *personal*, not necessarily of the good.

[9] Or salvation. According to the major monotheistic religious traditions, humans exist in a fallen state and personal relationship with God is salvific, or a necessary condition for salvation.

[10] As will later be acknowledged as an objection to the argument, this portrayal of God as necessarily being motivated to promote personal divine-human relationship limits which conceptions of God can be impacted by the hiddenness argument in its current form. But, as will also be acknowledged later on, this limitation can be sidestepped without too much trouble.

[11] It is worth underscoring that, at this point, Schellenberg need not be so modest. If we accept what has been said up till this point, it would be more than dialectically appropriate to expect God to *actively* promote the development of personal relationship with human beings.

[12] Here it's important to clarify: when Schellenberg says 'just by trying' he does not mean to imply *ease* — just by trying may turn out to be quite difficult. As he states, "Nothing in the argument gives credence to the idea that what finite persons would be able to do when participating in relationship with God 'just by trying' would be easy or, more generally, that participating in personal relationship with God would be a joy ride" (Schellenberg 2015, 109). The main point is that it is something we can bring about *if* we make a real effort — entering into and participating in personal relationship with God is within the scope of human power, even if the process turns out to be demanding.

whatever else it may involve, it minimally involves *believing* that God exists. A personal relationship is "conscious, interactive, and positively meaningful", a reciprocal relationship that you recognize yourself to be in.[13] As such, it is impossible to consider having this kind of relationship with someone unless you first believe they exist. Belief is a *precondition* for considering, entering, and participating in a personal relationship.

To feel the intuitive pull of this claim, consider the kind of relationship you have with a good friend — call her Mira. You might check in with Mira and inquire after how she's doing, reach out to spend time together, ask her advice and perspective, go to her for emotional support or companionship, express gratitude and appreciation for her, and the like. These relational activities constitutive of your relationship with her become unintelligible unless you first believe that Mira exists. And if you think back to the start of the relationship, there was no liminal period before the formation of your friendship where you were in the position to consider having a personal relationship with Mira without also believing she exists. Your belief in Mira's existence was and is an enabling precondition for the personal relationship you have with her, whether it pertains to your initial consideration of and entry into the friendship or your ongoing participation in it. Likewise in the case of divine-human relationship: if human beings are going to be in a position to enter into a personal relationship with God just by trying (and,

[13] In discussing various relational phenomena that are incoherent or impossible in the absence of belief that the other party exists, Schellenberg states: "...how can anyone express gratitude for what she has experienced as a gift of God's grace or try to find God's will for her life or recognize God's forgiveness or do or experience any of the hundred similar things involved in a conscious, reciprocal relationship with God if she does not believe that God exists?" (Schellenberg 2015: 58).

in turn, sustain ongoing participation in that relationship), they need to first believe that *God exists* (and continue to believe as much).[14]

Importantly, this prerequisite theistic belief has been understood as *de dicto* belief, not *de re* belief.[15] Mere encounter with God and belief that the object of our encounter is real is not enough. Humans must believe that God exists *as* God. Why is that? Well, as we have already noted, the kind of relationship God would promote is a conscious, personal relationship we recognize ourselves to be in, one that enables relational closeness and intimacy. So, minimally, we must take ourselves to be in a relationship with another person, as well as have a basic handle on the identity of the person with whom we are in a relationship. *De re* belief in God's existence does not meet these conditions; *de dicto* belief does.

Now, it is this doxastic precondition for personal relationship that generates an expectation for divine self-disclosure, which in turn drives the rest of the argument. If God is perfectly loving and always open to personal relationship with human beings, God will effectively position them to enter a relationship with himself just by trying. That is to say, God will take care of all the basic preconditions that would enable human beings to enter into a personal relationship with him if they so choose. Given that theistic belief is such a basic precondition, God will effectively position human beings to believe that he exists — God will *unambiguously disclose* his existence, making theistic belief a non-

[14] Schellenberg (2017a: 2-3).

[15] There's a question of how to specify the concept of God figuring in the *de dicto* theistic belief (a generic, thin conception *versus* a particular, thick conception). For the sake of discussion, it is sufficient to say: God needs to be conceived of as having the properties characteristically assigned to God by the major monotheistic religions – viz., being all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, and all-loving. Even then, there's still is a question of how conscious or explicit this recognition of God *as* God needs to be.

issue for them.[16] For if God were to withhold such disclosure of himself, he would effectively prevent humans from being in a position to believe that he exists. This would make it impossible for them to enter a personal relationship with him just by trying, which would in turn contradict the *openness to relationship* condition constitutive of God's perfect love. Clear, unambiguous divine self-disclosure is, then, a necessary outworking of God being open to having a personal relationship with human beings.

To motivate this line of thought, Schellenberg asks us to imagine the following scenario: Suppose that you have been adopted and are wondering whether your biological mother is still alive. As it so happens, you *do not* believe she is still alive, but neither are you resistant to the possibility that she is. Now suppose that your biological mother is not only alive but is also living in your area, aware that you are wondering about her existence. She is in a position to let you know she is alive, but she does not do so. At this point, the salient question is this: can you say that your biological mother is open to and interested in having a personal, interactive relationship with you at that time? All things being equal, it seems intuitively clear that she is not.[17] If she was, she would minimally put

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[16] Importantly, for Schellenberg, humans are in a position to believe that God exists *only if* God discloses his existence to them – humans need God to disclose his existence to them in order to be able to believe he exists – because humans can't believe something just by trying. Belief-formation and -maintenance are involuntary processes that require the right sorts of conditions (e.g., the right kinds of evidential cues) in order to occur, and God has a necessary role in realizing these conditions when it comes to the formation and maintenance of theistic belief (Schellenberg 2015: 57-60). Schellenberg states: "Whatever may be true of other attitudes such as assuming or accepting a proposition for the sake of discussion, you can't change or add to your beliefs just by trying to" (Schellenberg 2015: 59). And, "…if you can't produce beliefs at the drop of a hat, and if conscious relationship and belief really do go together, then when you don't believe that God exists, you're not in a position *then* to participate in relationship with God just by trying to" (Schellenberg 2015: 60).

[17] Schellenberg's *Not Open* principle: "If a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with 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

herself on the map for you – i.e. clearly disclose to you that she is alive – so that you could consider whether or not you want to have a personal relationship with her. The fact that she has withheld such disclosure signals that she is not in fact open to having such a relationship with you.[18] So, again: divine love's openness to personal relationship with human beings minimally calls for God's clear and unambiguous disclosure of his existence to us.

Schellenberg explores some of what this divine self-disclosure might look like in his work, but his main focus is on its hypothetical *efficacy* in generating and maintaining theistic belief. He claims that, regardless of how we try to work out the details, we should expect God's self-disclosure to have the following impact: all human beings will believe *God exists* unless they have otherwise incapacitated themselves through some kind of normative deviance.[19]

Schellenberg frames this normative self-incapacitation in terms of *volitional resistance* to God and consequent self-deception regarding his existence.[20] The idea is that God's self-disclosure will constitute such clear and compelling evidence for his existence that any human being who is volitionally open to God's existence (and personal relationship with him) will believe in response to it. The import of the evidence will be so transparent that it would be

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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" (Schellenberg 2015: 50).

[18] Schellenberg (2015: 56-57).

[19] The standing qualification in the discussion is that this applies to all human beings who are "cognitively and affectively capable of personal, conscious relationship." There may be human beings who are not capable of said relationship, in which case these doxastic expectations do not automatically apply to them. What expectations do apply to such individuals deserves investigation, but ultimately falls outside the scope of the current discussion.

[20] Schellenberg (2015: 54-56).

impossible to fail to believe *God exists* unless one is otherwise set against doing so. So, any would-be nonbeliever will have to be *volitionally resistant* to God's existence or the invitation to personal relationship with God, leading them to neglect or distort the available evidence and, in that, deceive themselves into believing that God does not exist.

The main thought, then, becomes: if God exists, his openness to personal relationship with human beings and consequent disclosure of his existence will rule out the possibility of *nonresistant nonbelief* — i.e., nonbelief that is *not* caused by resistance to God. The epistemic situation God's self-disclosure generates will make it so that any would-be nonbelief can only be *resistant nonbelief*. As Schellenberg reiterates,

> ...a loving God's openness to meaningful, conscious relationship with us means that such a God will ensure that we always are in a position to participate in it – unless of course we've disqualified ourselves through self-deceptive resistance toward God. It follows that in the absence of such resistance, a loving God will ensure that you always believe that God exists. [21]

If this is right, then we should expect there to be no nonresistant nonbelievers, i.e., human beings who are both nonresistant to God's existence and in a state of nonbelief regarding his existence. But, Schellenberg claims, nonresistant nonbelief *does* exist. There are many seeking God who cannot seem to find

[21] Schellenberg (2015: 60).

sufficient grounds for theistic belief, as well as many former believers who have lost the belief they once had on account of opposing evidence, and all that with profound grief. This gives us reason to conclude that such a God does not exist. Schellenberg's argument may be formalized as follows:

Schellenberg's Hiddenness Argument

P1. If God exists, God is perfectly loving toward human beings.

P2. If God is perfectly loving toward human beings, God will position human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him *just by trying*.

P3. If God has positioned human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him just by trying, then God has positioned human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them.

P4. If God has positioned all human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there will be no nonresistant nonbelief.

P5. There is nonresistant nonbelief.

C. God does not exist.

§3 THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT BEYOND SCHELLENBERG

Given the central dialectical role that nonbelief has in the argument — viz., facts about God's existence are taken to be readable off of facts about nonbelief — the hiddenness argument has also been called the *argument from nonbelief* against God's existence. Importantly, nonbelief need not be full-blown disbelief. Nonbelief simply tracks any doxastic profile that lacks theistic belief, which can

include agnosticism regarding God's existence as well as the absence of any belief about God's existence at all.[22]

The primary alternative versions of the argument are found in the work of Drange (1993), Keller (1995), and Maitzen (2006). They more or less operate with the same basic setup as Schellenberg but vary with respect to how they specify what nonbelief is relevant to the question of God's existence.[23] Their departures from Schellenberg are typically taken to make for more modest – and for that reason, more plausible – formulations of the argument, but it is questionable whether they in fact do.

To clarify the dialectical landscape, note that nonbelief may be considered with respect to its *kind*, *amount*, or *distribution*: what kind of nonbelief exists, how much nonbelief exists, and how nonbelief is distributed in the world. Schellenberg focuses on the significance of a particular *kind* of nonbelief (viz., nonresistant nonbelief): if God exists, God will rule out the possibility of *this* nonbelief-kind. On this approach, a *single instance* of the nonbelief-kind is enough to problematize God's existence. Drange and Keller, on the other hand, focus on the *amount* of nonbelief in the world: if God exists, God's self-disclosure will ensure that there is *much less* nonbelief in the world than there in fact is, regardless of the kind of nonbelief in question.[24] Finally, Maitzen focuses less on

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[22] Schellenberg (2015: 75); Drange (1993: 18).

[23] Their setup targets Christian theism more explicitly, but the dialectical upshot is equivalent.

[24] Drange states: "if God were to exist, then he would not permit as much non-belief in the world as there actually is. Hence the fact that there is so much non-belief constitutes evidence for God's non-existence" (Drange, 1993: 418). And Keller's formulation of the argument targets "why [God's existence, nature, and will toward humanity] are not clear to more people, indeed to everyone or to virtually everyone" (Keller 1995: 13).

kind and amount and more on the *distribution* of nonbelief: if God exists, God's self-disclosure will prevent nonbelief from occurring on a cultural level — or to be more precise, it will prevent the uneven distribution of theistic belief that we observe across cultures over time.[25]

As mentioned above, these alternative formulations of the argument have been portrayed as more modest (and *prima facie* plausible) than Schellenberg's formulation, but there is reason to doubt whether this is actually the case. To compare their relative modesty and plausibility, there are two premises we need to look at: Premise 4 and Premise 5. In the argument presented above, Schellenberg identifies a particular nonbelief-*kind* that would be ruled out if God exists in Premise 4, and then claims that it exists in Premise 5. The hiddenness arguments from Drange, Keller, and Maitzen give modified versions of each premise (hereafter DKM). Their modified Premise 4 – let's call it Premise 4* – claims that, conditional on God's existence, a particular *amount* or *distribution* of nonbelief would be ruled out. And then their modified Premise 5 – i.e., Premise 5* – goes on to claim that such an amount or distribution of nonbelief does in fact occur in the world.

Now, DKM's Premise 4* *is* more modest than Schellenberg's Premise 4, in the sense that it takes more to satisfy Premise 4 than Premise 4*. But, unfortunately, Premise 4* is hard to motivate without also motivating the stronger premise. It was God's perfect love and corresponding interest in personal

[25] Maitzen states: "According to the argument from divine hiddenness (ADH), God's existence is disconfirmed by the fact that not everyone believes in God. Over the years the argument has provoked an impressive range of theistic replies…However, none of these replies has overcome – or, I suggest, could overcome – the challenge posed by the uneven distribution of theistic belief around the world, a phenomenon for which naturalistic explanations seem more promising" (Maitzen 2006: 177).

relationship with human beings that generated our expectation that God would unambiguously disclose his existence to us. It is unclear why a God with such interests and openness would be content with generating an epistemic setup weaker than the one proposed by Schellenberg. Which is just to say that we lack a principled way to stop short of Schellenberg's stronger premise.

DKM's Premise 5*, on the other hand, actually constitutes a stronger, less modest empirical claim than Schellenberg's Premise 5. All that is needed for Schellenberg's premise to be true is a *single* instance of the relevant nonbelief-kind; Drange, Keller, and Maitzen, on the other hand, need there to be vast amounts of nonbelief or particular cultural distributions of it in order for their modified premises to check out. So even if there may be reasons for thinking Premise 5* true or plausible, it is not dialectically *preferable* to Schellenberg's Premise 5 on the basis of modesty.

Given the relative performance of the original and modified premises, the overall score seems to leave Schellenberg's formulation of the argument in the lead: besides being more or less just as modest as the alternative arguments, its premises are better motivated. So, I will follow Schellenberg and the rest of contemporary discussion in treating the nonbelief-*kind* as the dialectical focal point, rather than nonbelief-amount or -distribution. My account will ultimately make trouble for versions of the argument framed in terms of amount and distribution. It simply will not take them as its direct target. So, I will set these alternative formulations of the argument aside until I can provide an after-the-fact application to them in the final chapter.

I will also follow suit in giving a *normative* gloss to the relevant nonbelief-kind. In his latest work, Schellenberg identifies *nonresistant* nonbelief as the most relevant nonbelief-kind, while his earlier versions of the argument operate with other normative notions – viz., *reasonable* nonbelief or *inculpable* nonbelief.[26] And this normative range has been held in the reconstructions of the argument in the rest of the literature. So, the exact specification of the relevant nonbelief-kind has varied in detail, but it has always been construed as *normative*.

The basic motivation for giving a normative gloss to the nonbelief-kind has to do with human freedom: human freedom introduces the possibility of God doing his part in disclosing his existence and human beings failing to do their part in being open, receptive, or responsive to God's self-disclosure. So the existence of nonbelief *per se* is not surprising given the existence of a perfectly loving God, *if* the nonbelief is attributable to human failure (for which they are normatively responsible). Nonbelief only begins to wreak havoc for theism if it occurs *even when human beings are doing their part*, normatively speaking.

The fact of human freedom, then, requires us to qualify the kind of impact we expect divine self-disclosure to have on the doxastic landscape of human beings: we should not expect God's self-disclosure to rule out the possibility of nonbelief *simpliciter*, but we should expect it to rule out the possibility of *faultless nonbelief* — i.e., nonbelief that is not a function of normative failure. Or, put differently: we should not expect God's self-disclosure to guarantee the formation and maintenance of theistic belief *full-stop*, but we should expect it to guarantee a

[26] Schellenberg (2015: 54-56).

particular *normative status* for theistic belief, such that normative integrity or adherence guarantees the formation and maintenance of theistic belief. Either way, the main point is this: the target nonbelief-kind must be construed as normative in order for the hiddenness argument to be plausible in the face of human freedom.

My exact specification of the normative nonbelief-kind will, however, depart from present-day Schellenberg, shifting away from his notion of "nonresistant nonbelief" back toward a broadly epistemic gloss. What is really doing the work with the concept of nonresistant nonbelief ultimately reduces to something epistemic — it is on account of the *epistemic* impact our volitional posture has *vis-a-vis* matters of God's existence that the notions of resistance and nonresistance have relevance. So, giving faultless nonbelief an epistemic gloss is the more apt and inclusive dialectical choice because it makes the difference-making feature front and center and covers all relevant cases of faultless nonbelief rather than being limited to a single subset of it.

That said, I will wait until the next chapter to put this dialectical choice into effect and, with that, give further explication of the broadly epistemic notion of faultless nonbelief I will be operating with in my account. Here it is necessary to wrap up the overview of the literature with a survey of the available responses to the argument, and for that task it is most expedient to continue to refer to the relevant nonbelief-kind as "faultless nonbelief." Though the notion of faultless nonbelief has been further specified in the literature (in line with the normative range described above), giving adequate treatment to the primary modes of

response does not require further specification. To streamline the discussion, then, I will frame our survey of the available responses in terms of faultless nonbelief, which is, for our present purposes, effectively catch-all. This gives us the following generic formulation of the argument:

Basic Hiddenness Argument

P1. If God exists, God is perfectly loving toward human beings.

P2. If God is perfectly loving toward human beings, God will position human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him *just by trying*.

P3. If God has positioned human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him just by trying, then God has positioned human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them.

P4. If God has positioned all human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there will be no faultless nonbelief.

P5. There is faultless nonbelief.

C. God does not exist.

§4 AVAILABLE OBJECTIONS TO THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

The objections to the hiddenness argument have been many and varied, but we can reduce them to *four* primary modes of response. Premise 1 has more or less been left unchallenged, so each mode of response targets each of the remaining premises, particularly: the conception of divine love operative in Premise 2, the doxastic precondition for personal relationship in Premise 3, the expectation that

God's self-disclosure will rule out faultless nonbelief in Premise 4, and the existence of faultless nonbelief in Premise 5.[27]

Objection to Premise 2: *"Your operative conception of divine love is limited."* The basic claim here is that the conception of divine love motivating the argument is not representative of some of the major monotheistic religious traditions' conception of God (e.g., Islamic, Hasidic, Eastern, or Apophatic Christian traditions) and so the argument fails to impact them. These traditions emphasize God's transcendence and corresponding ineffability, claiming that God's distinct ontological nature problematizes using human love as a guide to understanding divine love. We cannot simply appeal to features of human love to generate expectations about how a perfectly loving God would relate to us personally. The ontological difference between God and humanity is so profound that the manifestation of divine love may be radically different from that of human love. More to the point, the ontological difference could mean that a perfectly loving God would not be motivated to promote divine-human relationship in the way described in the hiddenness literature.[28] The upshot is that the argument's scope of impact is quite limited relative to monotheism as a whole: if successful, it does not show that God does not exist full-stop, it simply shows that *this particular conception of God* is not viable. And this conception of God does not by any means exhaust the conceptions of God as perfectly loving found in the major monotheistic religions.

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[27] These modes of response more or less mirror the primary responses to the problem of evil. As noted before, the problems are undeniably similar, but the exact nature of their relationship is controversial.

[28] See Green and Stump (2015).

Response to Objection to Premise 2. There are two points I want to make by way of response. First, a minor one: while we can grant that the conception of God animating the argument is not fully representative of all live conceptions of God as perfectly loving, the conception of divine love operating in the argument does track a *prominent* conception of divine love. So, if the argument works, it makes trouble for a major strain of monotheism, and that is a nontrivial result.

But the more substantive point is that these alternative conceptions of God do not ultimately fall outside the reach of the hiddenness argument type. While alternative conceptions of divine love may not promote the kind of personal divine-human relationship that figures in the original argument, the operative conceptions of God still motivate the promotion of some form of divine-human relationship that arguably takes theistic belief as a precondition — e.g., divine-human relationship in which humans are positioned to worship God, yearn for God, or look to God for salvation. Even if we grant that initial entry into such forms of relationship could work with more minimal doxastic states, their full realization would require theistic belief, and God would arguably be interested in their full realization.[29] This is just to say that appealing to alternative conceptions of divine love does not enable these monotheistic religious traditions to sidestep the impact of the hiddenness argument. Their operative conceptions of God still motivate the promotion of some kind of divine-human relationship that takes theistic belief as a precondition, this doxastic precondition in turn generates an

[29] This concession may seem in tension with claiming theistic belief as a *pre*condition to such divine-human relationships, but the phrasing is still apt because theistic belief remains a precondition to the full realization of such relationships.

expectation for sufficient divine self-disclosure, which in turn gives us the rest of the hiddenness argument. So, with a simple modification to the starting premises, the argument still makes trouble for the conceptions of God belonging to the other monotheistic religious traditions.

All of this is just to say that divine love need not be the reigning motivational concept for the hiddenness argument type. What is ultimately doing the work is God's interest in a divine-human relationship that involves human beings believing *God exists*. Depending on the conception of God under consideration, love will play more or less of a part in explaining this interest. Either way, God's promotion of divine-human relationship and corresponding self-disclosure need not be solely explainable by reference to God's love.

Objection to Premise 3: *"Belief is not a precondition for personal relationship."* The basic contention here is that the belief that *God exists* is *not* a precondition for being in a personal relationship with God. There are other doxastic attitudes — viz., *faith* or *acceptance* that God exists — that are sufficient for entry into a personal relationship, and neither doxastic attitude requires full-blown *belief* that God exists.[30] To the point that theistic belief is not a necessary precondition for personal relationship, we should not expect God's promotion of divine-human relationship to involve the kind of self-disclosure described in the argument, viz., divine self-disclosure that generates an epistemic situation in which theistic belief

[30] There has been debate about whether beliefless faith is possible or whether faith necessarily involves belief. The objection clearly takes the stance that faith does *not* require belief, but our discussion can remain neutral on the matter. Ultimately belief will be necessary for the full realization of the personal relationship God would be interested in facilitating with human beings and beliefless faith will, if it is possible, be irrelevant.

is a universal normative requirement for human beings. So, the fact that theistic belief is *not* a universal normative requirement does not violate a legitimate expectation of divine self-disclosure and thereby problematize God's existence. The more legitimate expectation for divine self-disclosure would be something like: God's disclosure of his existence should generate an epistemic situation for human beings that sufficiently supports the formation of *faith* or *acceptance* that God exists. We arguably find ourselves in such an epistemic situation.

Response to Objection to Premise 3. Though there *may* be room for thinking that belief-less faith and acceptance could be sufficient for initial *entry* into a personal relationship with God, it is implausible to think they could ever be sufficient for a fully operative personal relationship with him.

To make this vivid, let's return to your friend Mira. We can rework the case so that your initial point of contact with her is so limited that your doxastic state regarding her existence or identity falls short of full-blown belief and instead resembles something more like faith or acceptance. And, despite the doxastic limitation, this initial point of contact can still plausibly be picked out as the start of your friendship. Perhaps the initial contact came via email without prior context or verification, or perhaps a mutual acquaintance initially acted as a go-between – putting you on each other's radars and relaying messages back and forth. However we fill in the details, this concession is not going to be enough to

upend the conviction that a fully operative personal relationship with Mira requires the belief that she exists.[31]

The same holds with the divine-human case. Even if we grant that beliefless faith and acceptance could be sufficient for relationship-entry, they are definitely not sufficient for more than that. So, even with this concession, the objection could only succeed if we should not expect God to promote anything more than *entry* into a personal relationship. But that's implausible. The original portrayal of divine love leads us to expect God to be interested in a fully operative personal relationship – a relationship that could be plausibly constitutive of ultimate human wellbeing – not in mere non-believing entry into relationship. So, insofar as belief-less faith or acceptance are not sufficient to enable a fully operative personal relationship, this objection fails to make trouble for the argument.

A further issue with this objection is that there is reason to doubt that all humans are sufficiently positioned to have the relevant faith or acceptance. That is to say, not all humans have access to normatively sufficient grounds for faith or acceptance that *this particular God exists*, whether epistemic or practical. It may be that they are operating with an alternative conception of God or are operating with a background picture of the world that prevents theistic faith or acceptance from being a viable option. And while this can be tied to human fault, it need not be. So, even if we grant that belief is not a strict precondition for personal relationship, the argument can be resurrected in terms of faith or acceptance by

[31] Further intuitive motivation for this point: if your doxastic state never moved from beliefless faith or acceptance to belief, we would be disinclined to say you have a personal relationship with Mira.

claiming that there are instances of faultless faithlessness or faultless lack of acceptance, and this would not be the case if such a God exists.

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We now have three objections to Premise 4 challenging the expectation that God's self-disclosure would rule out faultless nonbelief. They can be categorized as: (1) greater goods responses, (2) skeptical theist responses, and (3) appeals to divine transcendence that claim an ineliminable divine-human cognitive gap. Taking each in turn:

Objection 1 to Premise 4: *God has an overriding, morally justifying reason for allowing the existence of faultless nonbelief.*[32]

The basic greater goods response consists of two claims. First: though faultless nonbelief is not itself good, there is some greater good (or set of greater goods) whose realization requires an epistemic setup that enables or allows for the possibility of faultless nonbelief. Second: God would, given his nature and character, be *all-things-considered* motivated to prioritize the realization of this greater good (or set of greater goods) over universally supported theistic belief. So, we should not be surprised to discover faultless nonbelief in a world in which such a God exists because such a God would prioritize the promotion of a greater good (or set of greater goods) that enables or allows it.

To try to address each and every candidate greater good presented in the literature would readily become unruly. Thankfully, doing so is unnecessary for

[32] Schellenberg (2007: 210).

our purposes. All we need is to take a couple of the more promising candidate goods and rehearse the basic shape of the objection with them because the remainder candidate goods will ultimately admit of parallel treatment.[33] The two candidate goods I will address are *moral freedom and motivation* and *relationship readiness*:

> **Moral Freedom and Motivation**. God would ultimately prioritize a setup that enables human beings to determine what kind of person they will be, morally speaking. With that, God would also prioritize a setup that allows human beings to be morally motivated by the right kind of reasons. An environment that enables moral freedom and allows the development of proper moral motivation will be, among other things, one in which humans are not driven by fear of divine retribution or punishment. For in order to have moral freedom, humans must be able to choose between alternative courses of action – particularly, between morally good and bad actions – and in order to have this ability, humans must have psychological access to genuine incentives for either course of action. With that, humans need to be able to psychologically access and be motivated by the right kinds of reasons for action.

[33] Schellenberg (2007: 210) also takes a limited-scope-of-consideration approach to the objection. The range of candidate greater goods roughly track personal development or maturation (moral or spiritual), epistemic or relational posture toward God, relational posture toward others, and divine authenticity. Each good purportedly requires a setup where God's existence is not clear or obvious, and each will be addressed by my response – save for the claim that authentic divine personality may not be compatible with unambiguous self-disclosure. Though it is an important possibility to consider, such a claim is too speculative to effectively disarm the hiddenness argument.

But if there is an overwhelmingly clear and constant awareness of God's existence, the fear of divine retribution or punishment (and/or corresponding desire for divine approval) will remove all incentive to perform morally bad actions and, with that, hijack moral motivation (even for morally good actions). So, to enable moral freedom and support the development of proper moral motivation, God's existence needs to be somewhat obscure or opaque, and this epistemic obscurity and opaqueness brings with it the possibility of faultless nonbelief.[34]

Relationship Readiness. God would ultimately prioritize a setup in which humans can develop the right kind of relational posture *before* making his existence clear to them because this would increase the chances of humans choosing to opt into having a positive personal relationship with God and, with that, reduce the chances of humans rejecting such a relationship. We should, then, expect God to first support the development of the right kind of posture – one that is, say, positively humble, receptive, reverent, trusting, and filial – and, in turn, expect an individual's epistemic position *vis-a-vis* God's existence to correspond to their postural development and maturation along these lines. This means that God's existence will, to varying degrees, be hidden to those who are disposed toward rejection of God or are otherwise not ready for a positive relationship with him. Naturally, this epistemic situation of varying levels of divine hiddenness and disclosure will create room for faultless nonbelief.

[34] Murray and Taylor (2013: 374-375); Schellenberg (2015: 64-65).

> One characterization of the relevant relational posture centers on faith and trust. Basically, it is good for human beings to develop a posture of placing their faith and trust in God. And an environment that effectively supports humans developing and sustaining such trust and faith in God requires uncertainty about God's existence. So, to the point that we should expect God to prioritize the formation of faith and trust in him, we should expect an epistemic environment that allows for faultless nonbelief.

Response to Objection 1 to Premise 4. My response has two parts: (1) there is reason to think that each candidate greater-good is plausibly realizable in a context where God's existence is a non-issue; (2) but even if we grant that each candidate greater good is *not* realizable in a context where God's existence is a non-issue, this is not a good result for theists *because* the concession ends up generating an inverse hiddenness argument against God's existence – one that claims God's existence is *too clear* and should be *more hidden* than it is.

When it comes to *moral freedom and motivation*, God's existence being a non-issue for human beings need not undermine moral freedom or hijack moral motivation because God's existence need not be experientially intrusive or overwhelming in order to be settled for human beings. As Schellenberg states:

> All the hiddenness argument claims is that those who are nonresistant will believe: it doesn't say that this will be the case because God is present to their experience – and it certainly doesn't say or even suggest that God

> would constantly and overwhelmingly or intrusively be present to anyone's experience.[35]

So, to the point that it is the constant, experientially intrusive or palpable sense of God's existence that interferes with moral freedom and motivation, an epistemic environment in which God's existence is settled without ongoing psychological intrusion should be just fine.[36] It should be possible for humans to psychologically access incentives for morally good and bad actions and to be motivated by the right kinds of moral reasons.

But there is a deeper problem with this objection that requires attention. The objectors draw the primary tension between moral freedom/motivation and God's existence being intrusive and overwhelming. And that on account of the way the epistemic intrusion and overwhelm of God's existence would generate fear of divine retribution or desire for divine approval that effectively undermines moral freedom and motivation. But, at the end of the day, it is the fear of divine retribution (and/or desire for divine approval) that is really doing the work in their objection, and theistic belief – regardless the epistemic salience of God's existence – is arguably enough to generate that morally hijacking fear (or desire).

If this is right, then the objection ultimately hurts theism more than it helps. Because if we should expect God to prioritize a setup that enables moral freedom and the development of proper moral motivation, and if the objectors are right about the moral-psychological impact of fearing divine retribution (and/or

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[35] Schellenberg (2015: 66-67).

[36] One intuitive way of motivating this point is to consider actual theists for whom God's existence is settled, despite the absence of an experientially intrusive and overwhelming sense of God's existence.

desiring divine approval), then an alternative, inverted version of the hiddenness argument can be leveled against theism – one that claims God's existence should be even more hidden than it is. Arguably, God's existence should be *entirely* hidden. Because if (1) God's top priority is enabling human moral freedom and motivation, (2) fear of divine retribution (or desire for divine approval) compromises moral freedom and motivation, and (3) belief in God's existence is sufficient for said fear (or desire), then we should actually expect God to configure our epistemic situation so that it *does not* support belief in God's existence. Indeed, we should expect a setup that universally supports theistic *nonbelief*. This inverted version of the argument can then claim that theistic belief is too well-supported, rather than not supported enough, and this epistemic support for theistic belief ironically counts as evidence against God's existence. —Needless to say, this is not a good result for theists.

When it comes to *readiness for relationship*, it is plausible that God would disclose his existence in a way that optimizes for humans accepting his invitation to personal relationship as opposed to rejecting it. But that this would require God's existence being doubtful or deniable on good normative terms seems less plausible. Sharing Schellenberg's qualm with the objection, it seems that relational withdrawal – the absence of the felt presence of God – could create the space necessary for those disinclined toward God's invitation to personal relationship to develop the qualities that would make them more open and responsive to it. —But that's actually not my main concern with the objection.

My main concern targets the feasibility and efficacy of the proposed epistemic setup – i.e., whether a person-specific epistemic setup is feasible and whether it would actually better promote openness to relationship as suggested – as well as the plausibility of characterizing our actual epistemic setup as being person-specific. Starting with feasibility.

The proposed epistemic setup is one in which some humans are positively disposed toward God while others are negatively disposed, and their respective epistemic positions toward God's existence are tailored to their respective positive or negative dispositions toward God. If there is a positive disposition toward God and his invitation to personal relationship, then God's existence is more clear and obvious to them. If there is a negative disposition, then God's existence is more obscure to them, potentially to the point of being completely hidden. And the idea is that, with God's existence being unclear or deniable, negatively disposed humans have a better chance of developing the qualities they would need to be positively open and responsive to God's invitation to personal relationship. There's just one problem: we are not epistemically isolated beings. While some aspects of our epistemic situation are private and can be particular to us, there's ultimately significant overlap between all of our respective epistemic situations. Basically, it is unclear how our respective epistemic positions toward God's existence could be kept sufficiently separate so as to be effectively tailored to us and our respective readiness for personal relationship with God.

But beyond the feasibility concern, it is also unclear why an epistemic setup in which God's existence is doubtful or deniable would be more conducive

to the development of relational readiness for those who are otherwise disinclined. An epistemic setup that does not support believing in God's existence may actually promote the development of qualities that make them *less* amenable to God and his invitation to personal relationship. For example, such a setup could actually support the development of a nihilistic disposition toward life, which would not optimize for human acceptance of God's invitation to personal relationship. Either way, it is at the very least *unclear* that the proposed epistemic setup would better promote the development of a positive disposition toward God for those who otherwise lack one.

And, lastly, even if we grant that the epistemic setup is hypothetically feasible and effective, it is questionable whether our current epistemic setup *vis-a-vis* God's existence can plausibly be described as being person-specific in this way. While a person-specific setup resonates with some aspects of our lived epistemic experience, it seems as though there are plenty of humans negatively disposed toward God who have access to the same kind of epistemic support for God's existence as those who are positively disposed, and vice versa.

To address the construal of relationship readiness as having faith and trust in God, note that there are two kinds of faith and trust and only one requires epistemic uncertainty. Though both occur within a context of some kind of uncertainty, the first kind of faith and trust tracks cognitive assent to the existence of God despite limited and nonideal epistemic conditions, while the other kind of faith and trust tracks volitional dependence on or surrender to God despite uncertainty about God's loving provision and care. The first kind of faith and trust

involves uncertainty about whether God exists, while the second kind involves uncertainty about whether God is good or loving, i.e., whether we can entrust ourselves and our wellbeing to God. Now, it is unclear why the first kind of faith or trust would be a condition of relational readiness, but the second kind does seem organically connected to the kind of relational posture God would be interested in promoting. Which is just to say that uncertainty regarding God's relational presence and goodness would suffice for developing the kind of faith and trust that is plausibly constitutive of right relational posture toward God. Uncertainty regarding whether God exists, however, seems unnecessary. So, on this front, we do not have reason to expect God to generate an epistemic situation in which his existence is unclear.

Even so, it is important to underscore that, while the greater-good response type as we have represented it does not succeed in showing Premise 4 to be false, it does effectively demonstrate the controversial nature of the premise, and that is not a trivial result. Premise 4 is key to the argument's success, so showing it to be questionable forestalls the success of the argument, even if it does not disengage it in a definitive manner.

Objection 2 to Premise 4: *"There may be a morally justifying reason for God to allow for the existence of faultless nonbelief, even if we cannot discern it."*

A related but distinct challenge to Premise 4 is the skeptical theist response. The skeptical theist concedes that faultless nonbelief is not good and so God needs to have some overriding reason for allowing its existence. But they insist that, even if we cannot successfully identify the relevant greater-good that God would be

motivated to promote at the cost of enabling faultless nonbelief, this does not mean that there is no such good.[37] Absence of evidence isn't (automatically) evidence of absence, as it were. In fact, we should not be surprised, but should even positively expect, that we would be unable to identify the relevant greater good, given the interplay between divine transcendence and finite human cognition. Given our cognitive finitude, there is reason to think that we are not in a position to appreciate the reasons God may have in setting things up the way he does, including the evidential ambiguity surrounding his existence — "if there is a God, he knows of many more goods, many more strategies for obtaining goods, and many more contingent facts than your average human."[38] To the point that the hiddenness argument needs us to be able to say that there is in fact no overriding reason why God would remain hidden despite his interest in promoting divine-human personal relationship, it cannot succeed.

Response to Objection 2 to Premise 4. Like the greater-good response type, the skeptical theist response succeeds in demonstrating how unobvious and controversial Premise 4 is. It also does well to underscore our cognitive limitations *vis-a-vis* matters pertaining to God and, with that, highlight the need for heightened intellectual humility when it comes to forming expectations about what kind of epistemic situation God would generate for his existence. But, also like the greater-good response type, the skeptical theist response fails to show

[37] McBrayer and Swenson (2012).

[38] McKim (2001: 87-91, 104); McBrayer and Swenson (2012: 145); Murray and Taylor (2013: 371-373).

Premise 4 to be *false* (and thereby disengage the argument) in a definitive manner. And more besides, their argumentative approach can never do so.

To see as much, note that skeptical theists wield divine transcendence to undermine positive claims about what we should expect the world to be like if a perfectly loving God exists. In the context of the problem of evil, for example, skeptical theists maintain that, for any target evil, there *may* be some overriding reason why God would permit its occurrence, one that we cannot ascertain from our limited cognitive position. To the point that the argument from evil needs us to say that there is in fact no overriding reason, the skeptical theist line obstructs its success.

Importantly, however, this does not mean there is in fact an overriding reason for the target evil. It's just to say that, as far as we know, we are not in a good position to settle the matter. And while this goes a long way in blunting the impact of premises like Premise 4, and promoting intellectual humility besides, there are real limitations to this kind of response and this kind of appeal to divine transcendence should be met with some caution.

At the end of the day, we want to avoid wielding divine transcendence in a way that prevents us from making positive claims about God's nature, character, and purposes and, with that, making claims about what we should expect the world to be like if such a God exists. Such claims and forms of reasoning play a crucial role in God's existence being confirmable or disconfirmable, which helps ground the epistemic credibility of theistic belief. To be clear, the skeptical theist is not setting out to undermine making such claims or employing such forms of

reasoning across the board, but there is a question of what keeps the argumentative approach from having that effect.

In our discussion of divine hiddenness, we are taking for granted that, despite divine transcendence, we can have a positive, informative conception of God's nature, character, and purposes and that the God in question is cognitively accessible enough to make a meaningful, personal relationship with him possible. To the point that we take divine transcendence to be compatible with making such positive claims about God, it is compatible with making positive claims about the implications of God's nature and character in the world. Once we are in a position to make positive claims about the implications of God's nature and character in the world, then we are in a position to make positive claims about whether the world matches what we would expect is such a God exists. If there is a match, this lends support for God's existence. If there is a mismatch, this lends support against God's existence. We need this mode of reasoning to be viable in order for God's existence to be confirmable or disconfirmable.

Now, the hiddenness argument simply claims things are not as we would expect them to be if a perfectly loving God exists – such a God would disclose his existence to human beings in a clear and unambiguous manner, but God's existence is in fact unclear and ambiguous – and so this mismatch should count as evidence against God's existence. And to my mind, the best dislodger of such an expectation is going to be one that gives us positive reason for rejecting the *content* of the expectation, rather than one that recommends suspending having

any expectations at all. Skeptical theists fail to give such a positive reason, even if they successfully call the expectation into question.

Objection 3 to Premise 4: *"The possibility of faultless nonbelief is an unavoidable result of divine transcendence."*

This objection also appeals to divine transcendence but wields it differently. The basic thought here is that the interplay between divine transcendence and human finitude generates an ineliminable cognitive gap between God and humans such that epistemic grounds for theistic belief will *always* be indeterminate. This means that, regardless of what goods God might be interested in prioritizing, God's disclosure can never make theistic belief a normative requirement and the human epistemic situation will always be one that is susceptible to faultless nonbelief. So, given the cognitive gap generated by the ontological disparity between God and human beings, the claim that God's self-disclosure could rule out faultless nonbelief for human beings is false.

Response to Objection 3 to Premise 4. The conception of God operative in the argument, and with that the constitutive conception of divine transcendence, is one that is compatible with the promotion of personal relationship with human beings and the theistic belief that enables it. Insofar as the conception of God and divine transcendence operative in the objection precludes the possibility of effective promotion of divine-human personal relationship and the corresponding precondition of theistic belief, it marks a departure from the conception of God operative in the argument and so is dialectically irrelevant.

Last but not least, we have a final objection that targets Premise 5:

Objection to Premise 5: *Faultless nonbelief does not in fact exist.*

The basic contention here is that we do not actually observe faultless nonbelief in the world because it does not exist. The background story here typically appeals to the noetic effects of sin or the fallenness of human cognition. The upshot is that there is in fact no such thing as faultless nonbelief: all nonbelief is a function of normative failure on the part of nonbelievers. Since we have already agreed that nonbelief resulting from normative failure does not signal the absence of adequate divine self-disclosure, it does not signal the nonexistence of God.

Response to Objection to Premise 5. In addition to it being intuitively implausible to claim that all nonbelief is resultant of normative failure, there is a methodological issue here. The objection centers on an empirical claim but gives no empirical support for it, only an expressed outlook that already presupposes the truth of the objection (and theism, for that matter). Empirical claims should, in principle, be verifiable or falsifiable by empirical methods. As it stands, no such empirical support is available for the objection. Even more, empirical observation only seems to lend *prima facie* support to the existence of faultless nonbelief. If we consider the characteristic markers of faultless belief or nonbelief generally, they seem to be present in many cases of theistic nonbelief. (Or, alternatively, if we consider the characteristic markers for *at-fault* nonbelief, as it were, they appear absent in many cases of theistic nonbelief.) To accept the objection's claim would be to 'revise the appearances' without a methodologically appropriate way

of justifying the revision. For these reasons, the objection fails to disengage Premise 5.

§5 A PROMISING POINT OF PUSHBACK

As it stands, then, none of the responses on offer are successful or decisive as-is. And those targeting Premises 2, 3, and 5 seem to lack promise altogether. To the point that we acknowledge the limited but still significant scope of the argument's impact and/or modify the target divine-human relationship type figuring in the argument, accept that theistic *belief* is a precondition to fully operative personal relationship, and maintain that an empirical claim should be in principle empirically verifiable or falsifiable, Premises 2, 3, and 5 appear safe.

However, Premise 4 – If God has positioned all human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there will be no faultless nonbelief' – remains a viable target. As I stated above: though the available objections fail to neutralize it, they successfully highlight how unobvious and controversial the premise is. So, in what follows, I will take Premise 4 as my target. But rather than supplementing or modifying the available objections in an attempt to make them successful, I will develop my own alternative line of response to Premise 4. My account will contain some elements of the available responses, but they will be developed differently and, importantly, put to work at a different point of the argument.

Chapter 2: The Limits of Divine Self-Disclosure

In the last chapter, my primary goal was two-fold. First, to explicate the core of the hiddenness argument and give my preferred formulation of it. Second, to survey and evaluate the available objections to the argument and identify the most promising point of push-back. To recap, the hiddenness argument centers on violated expectations for relationship-enabling divine self-disclosure and can be formalized as follows:

Basic Hiddenness Argument

P1. If God exists, God is perfectly loving toward human beings.

P2. If God is perfectly loving toward human beings, God will position them to participate in a personal relationship with him.

P3. If God has positioned human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him, then God has positioned them to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them.

P4. If God has positioned human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there is no faultless nonbelief.

P5. There is faultless nonbelief.

C. God does not exist.

The argument is valid, so one of the premises must be rejected if we are to resist its conclusion. The upshot of the last chapter was that none of the available objections to the argument are successful. Objections to the conception of divine love in Premise 2, to the doxastic precondition for personal relationship in

Premise 3, and to the existence of faultless nonbelief in Premise 5 lack promise altogether. One viable line of objection remains, however: objecting to Premise 4 — the expectation that God's self-disclosure would rule out faultless nonbelief.

In this chapter and the next, I will take up this line of objection and argue that Premise 4 is indeed false. I will, however, take an alternative approach to problematizing it than the objections on offer. Though there are points of resonance with the available objections, my account nevertheless remains distinct from them. Before getting into the details, I will highlight what sets these respective approaches apart.

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To set up the contrast, note that there are two primary expectations about divine self-disclosure that are driving the hiddenness argument. First, that God will, in his perfect love for human beings, disclose his existence in order to enable having a personal relationship with them. Second, that God's self-disclosure will necessarily impact the normative landscape for theistic belief in a particular way: it will generate an epistemic situation that makes it impossible to have nonbelief on good normative terms — i.e., one that rules out the possibility of faultless nonbelief. We have, then:

> *Disclosure*. God will position human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them.
>
> *No Faultless Nonbelief*. On account of God's self-disclosure, there will be no faultless nonbelief.

The occurrence of faultless nonbelief in turn violates these joint expectations, and to the point that they are legitimate, their violation constitutes evidence that God does not exist.

Importantly, the argument does not simply hinge on the expectation that God will disclose his existence (*Disclosure*) but the additional expectation that his disclosure will make faultless nonbelief impossible (*No Faultless Nonbelief*). It is this latter expectation that ultimately fixes the negative evidential import of faultless nonbelief: divine self-disclosure has been made a condition for God's existence, faultless nonbelief signals the absence of said disclosure, and so faultless nonbelief signals God's nonexistence. Without *No Faultless Nonbelief*, there is no valid inference from *Disclosure* and the existence of faultless nonbelief to the denial of God's existence.

Now, the expectation *No Faultless Nonbelief* tracks the consequent of our target premise, Premise 4 (while *Disclosure* tracks the antecedent). Available objections to Premise 4 rightly call the legitimacy of this expectation into question, but most do so by challenging its volitional *propriety*: God *could* rule out the possibility of faultless nonbelief, but there are reasons why he would not be *all-things-considered* motivated to do so. It is by clarifying divine purposes and priorities that the expectation's illegitimacy is supposed to become salient. But there is another — and, I will argue, better — way to challenge its legitimacy. And that is by challenging its *feasibility*, whether the content of the expectation is something God can actually bring about.

Arguably, a basic condition for the legitimacy of an expectation is that it is *possible* to fulfill — legitimate expectations cannot be impossible to meet. I can't legitimately be expected to walk through walls and you can't legitimately be expected to read other people's minds because it is not possible for us to do these things, and so such expectations would be in principle impossible for us to meet.[1] Consequently, in order for *No Faultless Nonbelief* to have hope of being a legitimate expectation and, with that, a potential condition for God's existence, it must first be *possible* for God to rule out faultless nonbelief by his self-disclosure. — Well, is it?

That it *is* possible has been more or less assumed by both proponents and opponents of the argument alike.[2] Schellenberg provides some minimal motivation for thinking so by appealing to divine omnipotence (discussed primarily in terms of God's "infinite resourcefulness"), but his appeal does not sufficiently acknowledge the fact that divine omnipotence is not an unqualified concept, but rather a constrained one.[3] Importantly, omnipotence is constrained by what is *possible*.[4] God cannot by his omnipotence will not to be omnipotent, for

[1] Importantly, "in principle impossible to meet" is different from something being practically unmeetable. Consider ideals. Ideals are not possible for us to meet, practically speaking, but they are still legitimately applicable to us and our conduct. They are not meetable, but they are qualities that we can make principled movements toward, qualities we can approximate to an ever-increasing extent. The same does not hold true for an expectation that is "in principle impossible to meet." "Be a good and honest person" is meaningfully different from "be a square" or "be the color red."

[2] The primary exceptions are those who believe divine transcendence and human finitude generate an intractable cognitive gap. These exceptions are not relevant to our discussion because they are not operating with the conception of God that is animating the discussion.

[3] Schellenberg (2012: 210-211).

[4] There has been extensive contemporary debate about how to explicate the concept of divine omnipotence, but it has been agreed that divine omnipotence cannot plausibly be understood as involving the ability to do *anything*, including the impossible. As stated in Hoffman and Rosekrantz (2022):

example, because it is *not possible* for God to give up an essential attribute. Nor can God create, say, a stone he cannot lift, because it is *not possible* for such a stone to exist. Omnipotence cannot override impossibility. So, appealing to God's omnipotence to motivate the claim that the target expectation is possible to meet — viz., that it *is* possible for God's self-disclosure to rule out faultless nonbelief for creatures like us — is dialectically inappropriate. The appeal to omnipotence cannot do the work it is called on to do. We must first determine whether the content of the expectation is in principle *do-able* before we can claim that it is within God's power to do.

This is the task I will undertake in my account. I will argue that Premise 4 is false, but not due to there being some overriding reason for God to allow or enable faultless nonbelief. Rather, my strategy will be to show that, once we have an adequate account of the nature and mechanics of disclosure (and in particular, divine self-disclosure), it will become clear that it is *not possible* for God to rule out faultless nonbelief by disclosing his existence to us. So, the *No Faultless Nonbelief* expectation contained in Premise 4 is illegitimate, not because of

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> Many philosophers accept the principle that if an agent has the power to bring about a state of affairs, then this entails that, possibly, the agent brings about that state of affairs. If this principle is correct, then the foregoing absolute sense of 'omnipotence' is incoherent.

Traditional support for the view that God cannot bring about impossible states of affairs may be found in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (1947) and Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* (1904). Non-exhaustive reference points for contemporary discussion of the concept and its attendant difficulties may be found in Pearce and Pruss (2012), Clark (2017), and Wreen (2018). Further debate tracks remaining difficulties with the concept, e.g., how to constrain the notion of possibility (especially how to ground that constraint in the being and nature of God) without getting the wrong extensional results for the concept (i.e., things that are clearly not omnipotent counting as omnipotent).

overriding divine purposes or priorities, but because the expectation is in principle impossible for God to meet.[5]

To wrap up this contrast in argumentative strategies with a concrete illustration, consider the following case. It's nighttime and Laura, a mother, is putting her child Theo to bed. She tucks him in, turns on his nightlight, and locks the windows to prevent any would-be predators from coming in. Before leaving the room, Laura reminds Theo that he's safe and loved, and wishes him a good night's sleep. Suppose, however, that at some point in the night, left alone in his room, Theo does not *feel* safe (he either feels outright unsafe or is simply unsure of his safety). And let's take for granted that he is not in the grip of some unreasoning, psychological pathology. Perhaps he has read stories with monsters hiding in closets or under beds, or perhaps he overheard a news story about a child being kidnapped from their bedroom. Either way, *felt* safety is lacking. And, having expected his mother's love to secure his felt safety, Theo reasons as follows: "If my mother really loves me, she will ensure that I feel safe. But I do not feel safe. Therefore, my mother does not love me." With that, Theo slumps under his covers, fretfully awaiting sleep.

Now, two lines of objections can be leveled against Theo's line of reasoning that are analogous to the available objections to Premise 4 and my preferred line of objection, respectively. As a shared starting point, it *is* very plausible to expect a loving mother to always seek her child's wellbeing, and this includes her doing what she can to keep her child safe from harm. So, it is right

[5] A resonant approach is found in Anderson (2017) and (2018). Anderson uses the notion of *defeaters* to frame what God would need to do to satisfy the expectations of the hiddenness argument.

for Theo to associate his mother's love with his safety. But, unfortunately for Theo, the following expectation is not at all plausible: if a mother loves her child and always seeks her child's wellbeing, she will ensure that her child always *feels* safe. Both lines of objection target this further expectation but employ different strategies for delegitimizing it.

The first line of objection is to say that, although it is true that a loving mother will do what she can to protect her child from harm, there may be overriding reasons for her to offer her protection in a way that does not guarantee her child's felt safety. This means that, even though Laura *could* protect Theo in a way that guarantees he feels safe, she may have an overriding concern – say, his maturation – that keeps her from doing so. So, once we clarify the purposes and priorities of a loving mother, we will see that Laura should not be expected to protect Theo in a way that guarantees his felt safety. This argumentative strategy tracks available objections to Premise 4.

But another – and to my mind, better – line of objection is to say that, while a loving mother will do what she can to protect her child from harm and there is often a connection between the child being protected and the child feeling safe, there is nothing a mother can do to *guarantee* her child will feel safe on account of her protection (there is also no guarantee that her protection will keep the child safe from harm, for that matter). So, once we get clear on what Laura can do to position Theo to feel safe, it will also become clear that her efforts can never guarantee his felt safety. The expectation that Laura *would* guarantee Theo's felt safety is, then, illegitimate because it is *impossible* for Laura to meet.

As a result, its violation cannot constitute evidence that Laura does not love her son.

This second argumentative strategy tracks my preferred line of objection to Premise 4: once we get clear on what God can do to position us to believe *God exists*, it will also become clear that God's efforts cannot guarantee that we believe on pain of normative failure — i.e., God's self-disclosure cannot rule out faultless nonbelief. So, the expectation that God's self-disclosure *would* rule out faultless nonbelief is illegitimate and the hiddenness argument depending on its legitimacy fails.

Before getting into my argument, however, some additional stage-setting is needed: (1) further specification of the normativity relevant to the concept of faultless nonbelief; (2) further clarification of my main claim in light of the updated specification of faultless nonbelief; and, (3) an introduction to doxastic positioning, my preferred theoretical framework for modeling the nature and mechanics of divine self-disclosure and its limitations. Taking each in turn.

(1) As noted in the first chapter, there is reason to prefer an *epistemic* gloss for faultless nonbelief over a morally or spiritually charged gloss that picks out a moral or spiritual feature of the individual as the salient feature that should be incompatible with nonbelief. The principal issue at hand concerns humans being positioned to form true, accurate beliefs regarding God's existence, so it's most apt to explicate faultless nonbelief in terms of the normativity that answers directly to the values of truth and accuracy, viz., *epistemic normativity*. This is not to say that moral and spiritual features of the individual are irrelevant. It is just to

say that they are relevant only to the point that they make a legitimate epistemic impact — i.e., enable or interfere with an individual's *epistemic integrity* with respect to their beliefs about God's existence. The respective relevance of moral and spiritual factors – including Schellenberg's notion of volitional nonresistance – will be accounted for, then, by giving faultless nonbelief an epistemic gloss, and other relevant instances of nonbelief will be accommodated besides.

Epistemic normativity will, in turn, be understood in terms of epistemic rationality, making *rational nonbelief* our final specification of faultless nonbelief. Premise 4 becomes:

> P4. If God has positioned all human beings to believe that *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there is no rational nonbelief.[6]

And the expectation embedded in Premise 4 becomes:

> *No Rational Nonbelief*. On account of God's self-disclosure, there will be no rational nonbelief.

This expectation presupposes that God's self-disclosure *can* rule out rational nonbelief. And, again, my main contention is that it *cannot* do so.

(2) Here I want to preempt confusion about what I am and am not committing myself to with this further specification of my main claim. Note that my contention that God's self-disclosure cannot rule out rational nonbelief can be unpacked as a content- *neutral* claim or a content-*sensitive* claim. The stronger, content-neutral claim is that, for any belief-content, it is impossible to rule out

[6] And Premise 5, naturally, becomes: P5. There is rational nonbelief.

rational nonbelief *vis-a-vis* that content. Whatever the proposition — *It's raining*, *2+2=4*, *The Earth is round*, *God exists* — rational nonbelief can never be ruled out. The weaker, content-sensitive claim is that, for *some* belief-contents, it is not possible to rule out rational nonbelief *vis-a-vis* that content, and *God exists* is one such content. With the first disambiguation, it is *never* possible to rule out rational nonbelief, regardless of the belief-content under consideration. But with the second, it all depends on the target belief-content: rational nonbelief may be ruled out *vis-a-vis* some belief-contents but not others. And *God exists* falls in the latter category.[7]

Importantly, my account only needs the weaker, content-sensitive claim, not the stronger, content-neutral one. I do not need to claim that it is *never* possible to rule out rational nonbelief regarding any belief content whatsoever. I leave that as an open question. I only claim that, minimally, rational nonbelief cannot be ruled out *vis-a-vis* some belief contents, and *God exists* is one such belief-content.

Here it is important to reiterate: in the context of the hiddenness argument, ruling out rational nonbelief for *God exists* is not simply a matter of preventing nonbelief from being a rational option at some point in time, or under certain circumstances or conditions. Rather, it is a matter of generating an epistemic situation for human beings that removes the *possibility* of rational nonbelief altogether. Theistic belief must be the only possible rational option regarding

[7] The positive counterparts that I reject: (1) For any belief content, it is possible to rule out rational nonbelief *vis-a-vis* that content; (2) For some belief content, it is possible to rule out rational nonbelief *vis-a-vis* that content and *God exists* is one such content.

God's existence at a time and over time, in any and all circumstances – an *absolute* rational requirement – so that all human beings believe that *God exists* on pain of irrationality. It is this epistemic situation I am contending is impossible for God to generate when I claim that God's self-disclosure cannot rule out rational nonbelief.

Importantly, this does not mean that theistic belief can *never* be a rational requirement, or that nonbelief can *never* be irrational. I heartily grant that theistic belief can be a rational requirement for some individual at some point in time or under certain circumstances or conditions. And to the point that theistic belief is rationally required in such circumstances, nonbelief is not a rational option – it is *irrational*. But I maintain that such a situation can only occur *conditionally*, not absolutely or universally. So, God's self-disclosure cannot generate an epistemic situation in which theistic belief is the only rational option for all human beings at all times, under all conditions or circumstances. But this is compatible with it making theistic belief the only rational option for some individual at some point in time, under certain conditions or circumstances. Again, the key will be getting clear on the nature and mechanics of disclosure – particularly divine self-disclosure – and the kinds of doxastic results it can and cannot guarantee.

(3) To investigate the nature and mechanics of divine self-disclosure, I will work within the theoretical framework of what I call *doxastic positioning*: the process of positioning someone to form or maintain a belief. This process may be construed in a purely descriptive or psychological manner – i.e., what can get someone to believe something regardless of how it is done. But in this context,

doxastic positioning is to be understood as a *normative* process, constrained by the norms of epistemic rationality. In modeling the nature and mechanics of doxastic positioning, its limitations – and, with it, the limitations of divine self-disclosure – will become salient.

My account will proceed as follows. In §1, I will present a generic model of doxastic positioning: I will identify the basic movements that constitute the process, specify success conditions, and highlight limiting factors. In §2, I will make an application of this model of doxastic positioning to divine self-disclosure and reiterate my main claim within the doxastic positioning framework. And in §3, I will provide a taxonomy of possible evidence for God's existence and begin to draw out how the limiting factors from §1 play an important role in preventing such evidence from ruling out rational nonbelief regarding God's existence. The upshot, I will show, is that no matter what evidence God provides of his existence, there will always be room for rational nonbelief.

§1: DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE AS DOXASTIC POSITIONING

Divine self-disclosure – God disclosing his existence to human beings – is an instance of doxastic positioning: the process of positioning human beings to rationally form or maintain the belief *God exists*. In this section, I will model doxastic positioning in terms of *evidence transmission* and highlight the primary factors that impact the process and, most importantly, its success. I wrap up by highlighting two emergent epistemic dynamics that significantly limit the kind of results doxastic positioning can guarantee.

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Your *doxastic position* tracks what you are in a position to rationally believe at any given time. This could be considered in a global way, as a catalog of all the propositions you are in a position to rationally believe (in general or with respect to some domain). But we will be considering it in a local way, as tracking your rational standing *vis-a-vis* some target proposition — "The flight lands at 1:55pm," "Plato was a student of Socrates," "The avocados on the counter are ripe and ready to eat", "Morning light exposure helps regulate human circadian rhythms," and so on. Your doxastic position *vis-a-vis* the target proposition is determined by the import of your *total evidence*, as it bears on the proposition. The import of, say, your experience or memory of the flight selection process and the confirmation email you received after purchase, the Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy course you took in college, the softness of the avocado and its easily removable, brown nub, or the Huberman Lab Podcast you listened to on your morning walk — and that against the backdrop of everything else you know regarding airlines, philosophical history, conditions of avocado ripeness, and neurobiological health research.

Doxastic positioning, on the other hand, is the process of positioning someone *else* to rationally form or maintain a belief, of trying to make their doxastic position *vis-a-vis* some target proposition a positive one.[8] Given that rationality is a function of believing in accord with total evidence, doxastic positioning centers on *evidence transmission* – providing someone with evidence

[8] Though we can think of inquiry as a kind of auto-doxastic positioning – positioning yourself to form rational beliefs vis-à-vis some proposition or subject matter.

that supports the proposition you want them to believe. This positioning can take the form of *partial* efforts that improve the rational status of the belief without yet making it rational to believe, but our focus will be fixed solely on efforts to provide *full* evidential support for a target proposition, i.e., evidence *sufficient* for making the target proposition rational to believe.[9, 10]

So, suppose your partner is picking you up from the airport and you want them to believe the correct flight arrival time: "The plane lands at 1:55pm." You in turn write it on the calendar or forward the email confirmation, and text your flight info. Or perhaps your friend is having trouble regulating her sleep schedule and is looking for solutions, so you share the Huberman Lab podcast episode covering research that shows "Morning light exposure helps regulate human circadian rhythms." In both cases, you are trying to give your partner and your friend the evidence they need to rationally form and maintain the target belief.

Crucially, however, providing sufficient evidence (i.e., full evidential support) for the target propositions does not guarantee that they will rationally form the target beliefs. Your partner may have missed the note on the calendar, the email confirmation may have gone to their spam folder, or their phone may have been without reception when you texted. Your friend also could have been

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[9] What it is to provide such evidence depends on our operative model of evidence. I will assume that evidence is propositional content that gives either logical or probabilistic support to other propositions. This means that evidence-provision will involve the doxastic positionee coming to know the propositional content constituting the evidence. With that, there is a question of whether evidence has actually been provided if the doxastic positionee is not in a position to know it.

[10] Talk of "evidence sufficient to make the target proposition rational to believe" invites the question: for whom? Or against what epistemic backdrop? Evidential import is not determined in a vacuum — what bearing one proposition has on the truth-value of another proposition presupposes some epistemic context — but it is controversial whether to construe it in a more objective or subjective manner. This issue of evidential import determination will crop up throughout our discussion. And while we won't be able to settle it one way over another, the hope is that we have enough of an intuitive handle on the notion of evidential import to proceed constructively.

distracted while listening to the podcast episode and failed to track the content. The evidence you provided may *ceteris paribus* sufficiently support the target proposition, but that doesn't matter if it is never received and recognized or registered and understood.

There are, then, three conditions relevant to doxastic positioning success: (1) evidence-*provision*, (2) evidence-*possession*, and (3) evidence-*appreciation*. Sufficient evidence for a proposition needs to be made available, the available evidence needs to be encountered, apprehended, and stored by its intended recipient, and the proposition-specific import of the evidence needs to be registered and understood. So, to position your partner to rationally believe "The flight lands at 1:55pm," it is not enough for you to text your flight info. Your partner also needs to receive, read, and understand your text. And to position your friend to rationally believe "Morning light exposure helps regulate human circadian rhythms" it is not enough for you to share the podcast episode with her. She also needs to listen to it, and do so attentively, so she can effectively track the content.[11]

The main takeaway here is that you, as a doxastic positioner, cannot guarantee doxastic positioning success all on your own. The success of your efforts inevitably depends on your *doxastic positionee*, as it were – your partner,

[11] Generally, what goes into possessing available evidence and appreciating its import depends on the nature of its content or subject matter, along with its respective mode of presentation. With evidence-possession, some evidence lands right in our lap without any effort while other evidence needs to be intentionally sought out or searched for – or can only be gathered gradually over time even though it is available in its entirety from the start. With evidence-appreciation, some evidence is such that salient reception of its import is simple, straightforward, or immediate, while for other kinds of evidence the process is more gradual, complex, or delicate. The evidence we have for, say, the existence of peaches and pears is much different in quality and texture from – and much less demanding than – the evidence we have of another person's interest, love, or character. While appreciation of the first simply requires us to open our eyes and look, the other requires, for better or worse, much more work on our part.

your friend – because doxastic positioning success depends on evidence-possession and -appreciation over and above mere evidence-provision, both of which fall outside your direct control as a doxastic positioner.[12]

For our discussion of the hiddenness argument, however, our portrayal of doxastic positioning success requires further nuance. Doxastic positioning success is ultimately about facilitating a positive rational standing toward some proposition, and there are different grades of positive rational standing one can have toward a proposition. I want to highlight three such grades that make for more minimal and more maximal notions of success, and then specify which is most pertinent to our discussion:

GRADES OF DOXASTIC POSITIONING SUCCESS

Superminimal success	*Minimal success*	*Maximal success*
P is a rational option for S	P is a rational requirement for S	P is rationally believed by S
Sufficient evidence for P is available and possessable by S	Sufficient evidence for P is available, possessed, and appreciable by S	Sufficient evidence for P is available, possessed, and appreciated by S

Superminimally, doxastic positioning success consists in making P an accessible rational option for S without yet making it a rational requirement.[13] S has been given evidence such that, were they to attend to it, they would possess it and, if appreciable, would be rationally required to believe P, but in the absence of doing so, can rationally suspend judgment. *Minimally*, success consists in making belief

[12] This does not mean you cannot exert influence on evidence-possession or -appreciation. You just cannot do so in a way that guarantees they occur.

[13] It may be more apt to construe superminimal success in terms of rational *opportunity*: the doxastic positioner creates an opportunity for the doxastic positionee to form a rational belief about the target proposition. The doxastic positionee may or may not take up the opportunity to rationally believe the target proposition, but they have been provided with what they need to do it.

in P the *only* rational option for S: if S fails to believe P, by either believing not-P or suspending judgment, then S is irrational. Believing P is not merely a rational option for S, but a rational requirement. *Maximally*, success consists in actually getting S to rationally believe P. This moves us beyond the categories of rational permission and requirement to actual rational belief-formation and -maintenance.

So, you superminimally position your partner to believe "The flight lands at 1:55pm" when your partner has access to the evidence you made available and just needs to give it a certain amount of attention before it is rational for them to form the target belief. (Here it could even be that the evidence simply requires a conversion of time zones in order for your partner to land on the correct arrival time.) The scope of consideration here is available *possessable* evidence. Minimal positioning is achieved when your partner has attended to the evidence enough to possess it and is in a position to appreciate its import. "The flight lands at 1:55pm" is not merely an accessible rational option for them but a rational requirement. The scope of consideration here is *appreciable* possessed evidence. And finally, maximal positioning is achieved when your partner in fact rationally believes "The flight lands at 1:55pm" on the basis of the evidence you provided. The scope of consideration is *appreciated* possessed evidence.

The initial portrayal of doxastic positioning success was suggestive of the maximal notion of success, but it is actually the *minimal* notion that is most pertinent to our discussion of the hiddenness argument. The argument is chiefly concerned with God making theistic belief a rational requirement – *the only rational option for human beings* – not with God making all human beings

rationally believe he exists.[14] Nor with God making theistic belief an accessible rational option among others, for that matter. So, moving forward we will set aside both the superminimal and maximal notions of doxastic positioning success and operate strictly with the minimal notion of success.[15]

Though, to be clear, operating with one success notion over another doesn't change the doxastic positioner's ability (or rather, *inability*) to guarantee success. Each grade of success depends on factors that are outside the scope of the doxastic positioner's direct control. So, even when we operate with the minimal instead of the maximal notion of success, my earlier point still stands: you, as a doxastic positioner, cannot guarantee doxastic positioning success.

One modification to my account *is* called for, however. When we shift from the maximal to the minimal notion of success, we need to revise the third success condition: evidence-*appreciation*. Evidence-appreciation generates the *actual* formation or maintenance of rational belief, so it's necessary for maximal success, but not for minimal success. Instead, the appreciation-adjacent condition necessary for minimal success is evidence-*appreciability* — the live capacity to appreciate the import of possessed evidence, whether or not one in fact does. Because, given one's total evidence, it is the evidential import one has the *capacity to appreciate* that determines what rationality requires. Our updated conditions for doxastic positioning success are, then: (1) evidence- provision, (2) evidence-possession, and (3) evidence-*appreciability*.

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[14] Human freedom means that God cannot *make* humans believe he exists, rationally or otherwise.

[15] The difference between superminimal/minimal and maximal success can be thought of as the difference between succeeding in *doing what you can* to get the result you want and succeeding in *getting* the result you want.

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Now, there are a variety of factors that impact the process of doxastic positioning. These factors can positively enable and support a doxastic positioner's efforts, but they can also *interfere* with these efforts and impede their success. The following represents the primary factors that can make such an impact.

INTERNAL FACTORS[16]

Cognitive profile: the processes and tasks human cognition is capable of performing, relative to basic faculty, innate talent, or developed skill: e.g., conceptual-linguistic mastery; information representation, organization, and navigation; memory and recollection; imagination and creativity; abstraction; reasoning and deduction. Also: background information and operative epistemic methods, standards, and practices.
Emotional profile: the shape and objects of human affections and emotions, the way they holistically figure into an affective-emotional outlook, temperament, or mood-state that is more or less defined or integrated, the quality and texture of their phenomenological contribution
Conative profile: the shape and objects of human desires or aversions, approvals or disapprovals, interests, motivations, intentions, or plans, and the way they holistically figure into a volitional profile that dictates openness, receptivity, focus, and decision
Spiritual profile: postural humility and prayerfulness, sense of the sacred and transcendent, tolerance for mystery and paradox, search for meaning and purpose, redemptive impulse, existential resilience

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Epistemic community: testimony from members of community (particularly from epistemic peers or authorities); community-endorsed epistemic methods, standards, and practices; community interpretive frameworks and plausibility structures
Technological infrastructure: information technology and how it is designed to organize and represent information; tech-enabled modes of communication
Natural environment: features of natural world that impact habitability and functionality

[16] To be more complete, we could include *physiological* profile, but it is only relevant insofar as it impacts the psychological (i.e., cognitive, emotional, conative, or spiritual) profile of human beings.

These factors impact our capacity to access, register, and rationally respond to our respective epistemic situations — in particular, what evidence we can (or do in fact) possess or appreciate.[17] They do so by impacting *what* we perceive, attend to, and engage with, *how* we represent, navigate, and interact with what we encounter, and *what* we ultimately think, trust, or believe as a result:

They impact what ideas and possibilities we are open or receptive to; what questions we are in a position to ask or pursue; what views we are ready and able to entertain or endorse; what we take to be legitimate starting points and the methods, standards, and procedures we trust to make progress; the conceptual-linguistic frameworks with which we operate and how they organize and inform our perception, thought, and communication; the quality, strength, and definition of our intuitions; our sense of promise and plausibility; what we look for and what we expect to find; what we focus our attention on; what we attend to, sit with, and give time to digest, what we breeze over, ignore, or neglect; what we remember, what we forget; how we interpret, construe, or represent ourselves and our situations; the quality of our judgment and discernment; the nature, shape, and texture of our cognitive sensibility, temperament, and overall sense of life — and with that, the evidence we encounter and come to possess and the connections we make or fail to make between evidential inputs and target propositions.

All that to say, given the kind of impact these factors have on the possession and appreciability conditions of doxastic positioning success, they

[17] They also might impact what evidence can be made available to us by impacting what evidence is possessable by us. —This admission may feel in tension with the claim that evidence-provision is within the doxastic positioner's direct control, but the tension is only apparent: something can be in your direct control while also being affected by external factors.

have the power to help or hurt a doxastic positioner's efforts, depending on how they are configured for the doxastic positionee.

Along these lines, I want to highlight two dynamics generated by these factors that will be relevant to our discussion later on, both of which target evidence-appreciability in particular — our capacity to appreciate the import of the target evidence. The first has to do with the *transparency* of evidential import – whether or not the evidential import is cognitively accessible when it is held fixed. The second has to do with the *stability* of evidential import in evidence transmission – whether or not the import remains stable through transmission or undergoes change.

> *Import-transparency*. Evidential import of E is not automatically salient but, depending on the epistemic profile, can be opaque and, with that, cognitively inaccessible.
>
> *Import-stability*. Evidential import of E is not fixed but, depending on the epistemic profile into which E is integrated, can change, making the initial import cognitively inaccessible.

I will discuss these dynamics in greater detail later on, but to have a quick reference point for the import-transparency dynamic, think of a mathematical proof that establishes the truth of some theorem: without the relevant background information, cognitive facility, and attentional capacity, the import can be opaque to us to the point of being *completely* lost on us. And for the import-stability dynamic, think of a set of data where, relative to certain epistemic methods and

standards, it establishes a particular conclusion about some economic or environmental policy, but relative to other epistemic methods and standards, it does not.[18] If we are operating with the latter epistemic methods and standards, or trusting members of our epistemic community who are, the initial evidential import will undergo change as it is integrated into our epistemic profile, rendering it inaccessible to us.

So, on account of the kinds of internal and external factors presented above, evidential import can be opaque to us or undergo change during transmission. In both cases, the initial import is cognitively inaccessible to us and so fails to be appreciable.

§2: APPLICATIONS TO DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE

To integrate this account of doxastic positioning with our discussion of the hiddenness argument, recall my main claim: God's self-disclosure cannot make theistic belief a universal rational requirement and thereby rule out rational nonbelief. That is, God cannot disclose his existence in a way that guarantees theistic belief is the *only rational option* for us at all times. With this account of doxastic positioning in place, the claim can be restated as: God, as a doxastic positioner, cannot universally guarantee doxastic positioning success for theistic belief. Because even if God provides evidence that sufficiently supports *God exists*, God cannot guarantee on pain of irrationality that we, as doxastic positionees, will possess or be in a position to appreciate the available evidence.

[18] Following Kelly (2013) and Schoenfield (2014), I will take it for granted that, while there are constraints on what can count as legitimate epistemic methods and standards, legitimate methods and standards still admit of a range, which can make for different determinations of evidential import.

To show as much, I will draw out a basic taxonomy of the possible modes of evidential support for *God exists* and demonstrate how, regardless what mode of evidence we consider, there will always be room for failure *vis-a-vis* the possession and appreciability conditions of doxastic positioning success — failure that is *not* a function of insufficient provision on the part of the doxastic positioner (i.e., God), nor irrationality on the part of doxastic positionees (i.e., human beings).[19]

The surprising upshot is that, when it comes to *guaranteeing* doxastic positioning success for theistic belief, God shares in some of the same limitations as human beings.[20] Though God undoubtedly enjoys a variety of distinct advantages, the factors and resultant dynamics that can keep human doxastic positioners from guaranteeing success can also prevent God from doing so in his efforts to position us to believe he exists.[21]

§3: EVIDENCE FOR "GOD EXISTS"

God exists is an existential proposition – a proposition affirming the existence of some entity, viz., God – and the various modes of evidential support for existential propositions track the distinct kinds of epistemic access we can have to the entity under consideration. This epistemic access ranges from *direct* to *indirect*:

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[19] Though evidence-provision failures *are* possible, I will assume that evidence has been successfully made available and instead limit my attention to evidence-possession and -appreciability failures.

[20] As will be discussed later on, this is on account of the fact that the limitations are *process*-generated, not agent-generated. Any agent engaging in the process will be subject to the limitations of the process.

[21] God's efforts are actually subject to additional constraints that human efforts are not — viz., constraints generated by God's ontological distinctness and God's moral perfection or perfect love.

DIRECT ACCESS EVIDENCE

Perceptual: A perceptual experience where the target entity is constitutive of the intentional content of the experience.

INDIRECT ACCESS EVIDENCE

A priori: There is a proof from premises known *a priori* that the target entity exists.
Explanatory: An existent object or phenomenon is best explained by the existence of the target entity.
Transcendental: An existent object or phenomenon metaphysically presupposes the existence of the target entity; the target entity is a necessary, enabling condition for the object or phenomenon.
Testimonial: Testimony given by someone (or some group) who has had direct access to entity via perceptual experience, or indirect access via explanatory, transcendental, conceptual, or testimonial information and reasoning.

With *direct access evidence*, the entity is an immediate object of our experience. We directly encounter it and, in this encounter, directly access the fact that it exists. Any additional information we access – e.g., facts about its nature or identity – depends on the kind of relationship or interaction we have with the entity, but the mere fact of its existence is settled by our direct experience of it.

With *indirect access evidence*, the target entity is accessed in a mediated way via conceptual, explanatory, transcendental, or testimonial information and reasoning. It could be that the existence of the entity is provable from *a priori* premises, or best explains certain data, or is a necessary condition of some observable phenomenon, or is knowingly testified about by members of our epistemic community. Either way, our epistemic access to the entity is mediated – we do not directly access its existence but infer it.

So, in our perceptual experience of the people around us — our partner, our friend, or the couple walking down the street with their overly excitable, grunting French bulldog — we get immediate access to the fact of their existence. But with, say, historical figures or particular celebrities or politicians, our access to their existence is mediated through historical records, news outlets, or social media. Instances of the other kinds of mediated access might look like the existence of our friend's parents whom we have yet to meet and know nothing about, but whose existence is metaphysically implied by our friend's existence. Or those critters in the backyard we have yet to catch sight of but whose existence best explains the half-eaten fruit hanging from (or strewn on the ground below) the persimmon and avocado trees.

These direct and indirect modes of evidence exhaust the basic ways an entity's existence is epistemically accessible to us. So, when we take God as the target entity, they represent the possible modes of evidential support for *God exists* – i.e., the full range of possible evidence for theistic belief. In employing this taxonomy, however, it's important to remember: with divine self-disclosure, it is not simply a matter of evidence for God's existence *per se*, but evidence for God's existence *as* God – i.e., evidence for *de dicto* theistic belief over and above *de re* theistic belief. So, when we take God as the target entity, we want to consider to what extent these modes of evidence facilitate divine *identity*-disclosure over and above *mere existence*-disclosure.

Beginning with *direct access evidence*, God could disclose his existence in the form of some quasi-perceptual experience, presenting himself in some mode

or other to our conscious awareness. Drawing from Alston's account in *Perceiving God,* we can think of this as a kind of *mystical perception*.[22]

Mystical-Perceptual. A mystical-perceptual experience where God is constitutive of the intentional content of the experience.

In a perceptual experience, an entity is presented to us as being phenomenally qualified in one way or another — as being, say, brown, furry, and four-legged or as green, scaly, and slithering. So, in a mystical experience, God could present himself to our conscious awareness as being, say, powerful, knowing, loving, or forgiving.

With *indirect access evidence*, God's disclosure can take a variety of forms. First, God's existence could be provable from *a priori* premises.

A priori. There is a proof from premises known *a priori* that God exists.

This proof could, for example, be some version of the ontological argument where God's existence is taken to follow from the concept *God*. The basic idea is that, once we understand the concept of God and what could source such a concept, we see that God alone can source the concept of God. In having the concept of God, then, God's existence would be "disclosed" to us.

When it comes to the *explanatory* mode of evidence, God's existence could be disclosed by being the best explanation for the existence of some acknowledged entity or phenomenon.

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[22] Alston (1991).

Explanatory. An existent object/phenomenon is best explained by the existence of God.

Perhaps we want an explanation for the existence of a universe like ours. In particular, we want to explain how and why our universe is fine-tuned for life. One explanation is that the universe is fine-tuned for life because it was created by God and designed to be so. If the God-explanation out-performs rival explanations – if it, say constitutes the best explanation for fine-tuning – then the fine-tuning of the universe would disclose the existence of God to us.

With the *transcendental* mode of evidence, we shift from explaining the existence of some object or phenomenon to giving the metaphysical grounds for its existence. The basic application here would be that God's existence is metaphysically implied by some acknowledged existent object or phenomenon because God alone can metaphysically ground the target object or phenomenon. The object or phenomenon cannot exist unless God exists because God sources the metaphysical infrastructure or resources needed for the target object or phenomenon to exist; God is the necessary, enabling condition of the target object or phenomenon:

Transcendental. An existent object/phenomenon metaphysically presupposes the existence of God; God is a necessary, enabling condition for the object/phenomenon.

So, perhaps we acknowledge the reality of a normative or moral order and are investigating what metaphysical grounds would be needed for the existence of such an order. God's existence could be disclosed through transcendental

reasoning if God alone constitutes adequate metaphysical grounds for the existence of normativity or morality.

Testimonial evidence for God's existence involves testimony of God's existence from members of our community who have purportedly had direct or indirect access to God's existence.

> *Testimonial*. Testimony given by someone (or some group) who has purportedly had direct access to God by way of perceptual experience of God, or indirect access by way of conceptual, explanatory, transcendental, or testimonial information and reasoning.

On account of the social nature of the epistemic enterprise and the fundamental role of epistemic trust in that enterprise, we can indirectly access God's existence by way of someone else's direct or indirect access to God. This could take the form of growing up in a religious family, community, or culture, actively participating in a religious tradition, or engaging with historical documents that record spiritually significant events and subject matter.

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Resuming our main line of discussion, the hiddenness argument only works if God can provide evidence of his existence that renders theistic belief a universal rational requirement and thereby rules out rational nonbelief. So, given what modes of evidence are at God's disposal, the salient question is: can God provide evidence that rationally requires all humans to believe he exists at all times? Could any of the possible modes of evidence for God's existence be enough to rule out rational nonbelief?

Here the hiddenness argument proponent will insist that, given his infinite resourcefulness, God is surely more than capable of configuring the various modes of evidence to rationally compel theistic belief for all human beings. And given that God wants humans to be positioned to believe he exists, we should expect all humans to have such evidence readily available to them. But such evidence for God's existence is *not* available to all human beings, leaving rational nonbelief an ever live possibility and, indeed, a quite common reality in our world. Hence, we have reason to conclude that such a God does not exist.

—But, contrary to the hiddenness argument proponent's contention, there is no direct or indirect access evidence for God's existence that can rule out rational nonbelief. I will show how this holds true with indirect access evidence first and reserve treatment of direct access evidence for the next chapter.

Before getting into theoretical support for such claims, however, it is worth underscoring that, on an intuitive level, we just have no positive reason to think that there *could* be indirect access evidence that rationally compels all human beings to believe *God exists* (at all times, under all circumstances). If we consider the indirect access evidence available to us now – arguments from fine-tuning or from morality, for example – it is more than clear that human beings can rationally resist theistic belief in the face of such evidence.

Take the intricacies of explanation and the fundamental physical constants figuring in the fine-tuning argument or the philosophical nuances of metaphysical grounding mobilizing the argument from morality. Most human beings are not positioned to take in and register the full force of such considerations – whether

on account of a lack of requisite cognitive facility, background knowledge, cognitive investment, or practical opportunity – and, importantly, they are no less rational for it. But even for those who can more or less access and appreciate these arguments in their full force, they ultimately depend on considerations that admit of significant rational disagreement. This is just to say, from an intuitive standpoint, the import of indirect access evidence seems bound to fall short of settling God's existence for us, and it is not at all clear what could be done to change that fact. This does not mean that such evidence is unable to generate significant rational support for theistic belief. It can arguably do just that. It's just that it can only do so *conditionally* – e.g., when handled by individuals with the requisite cognitive facility, investment, and expertise, or when joined with additional, reinforcing considerations.

So, indirect access evidence may very well rationally support theistic belief for some individuals (at some time, under certain circumstances) – perhaps even to the point of making it a rational requirement for them – but this falls short of making theistic belief an absolute, universal rational requirement for human beings. The proponent of the hiddenness argument gives us no positive reason for departing from this intuitive standpoint, just an appeal to God's infinite resourcefulness, which we have already shown to be dialectically inappropriate.[23] Needless to say, if there is no indirect access evidence that can rule out rational nonbelief, then we shouldn't expect God to make it available to us. And, by the

[23] See introduction of this chapter where I distinguish my argumentative approach from that of available objections.

same token, the absence of such evidence shouldn't constitute evidence against God's existence.

But, as I have forecasted throughout my account, we have principled *theoretical* motivation for thinking no configuration of indirect access evidence can rule out rational nonbelief. Simply put: there is a vulnerability to rational nonbelief that is not and will never be a function of what quality of evidence is available for God's existence. Instead, the target vulnerability is tied to ineliminable features of the *process* of doxastic positioning itself — in particular, the possession and appreciability conditions of doxastic positioning success. These success conditions will always be subject to uncontrollably variable features of human beings that fall outside the purview of epistemic rationality or are not strictly regulated by it. To the point that this vulnerability is an ineliminable feature of the process of doxastic positioning, rational nonbelief will always be a live possibility, no matter what evidence God makes available for his existence.

Again, I will show how this holds true with indirect access evidence first, reserving treatment of direct access evidence for the next chapter. For the sake of discussion, I will even grant that there *could* hypothetically be indirect access evidence with import that, *if* universally possessed and appreciable, rules out rational nonbelief. But I grant this only to show that, even if such evidence *were* possible and available, rational nonbelief would remain an ineliminable possibility because the satisfaction of the possession and appreciability conditions cannot be guaranteed on pain of rationality.

That said, before jumping into these theoretical considerations, I will pare down our discussion by homing in on explanatory and transcendental evidence for God's existence, setting aside *a priori* evidence and testimonial evidence. The possibility of there being *a priori* evidence that is cognitively accessible to all human beings in the way needed to rule out rational nonbelief is so *prima facie* implausible that little benefit comes from discussing it. And the capacity of testimonial evidence to rule out rational nonbelief arguably matches that of the other, remaining modes of indirect access evidence, so independent treatment is unnecessary.

To proceed: the core idea is that evidence-possession and -appreciability are impacted by various internal and external factors that either fall outside the purview of epistemic rationality or are not strictly regulated by it. So, depending on how these factors are configured, humans may fail to possess available evidence for God's existence, or fail to be in a position to appreciate it once it is possessed, and that without rational failure. Furthermore, such possession- and appreciability-failures effectively prevent the available evidence from rendering theistic belief a rational requirement for us, so failure to form theistic belief in the face of such evidence can be rational.

Take *evidence-possession*. Whether or not we come to possess available evidence is impacted by all sorts of factors, but especially those that impact our focus and attention, and our capacity to know the propositional content constituting the evidence. Our values, interests, and priorities, for example, impact what we notice and where we focus our attention, which directly impacts

whether we are alert to the evidence that is available to us. Depending on how these factors are configured for us, we may be inattentive to the available evidence to the point of missing it altogether. But even if we are attentive to it, our conceptual-linguistic competence and cognitive facility may, for example, prevent us from knowing or understanding its constitutive content.

In saying this, however, there is actually a simpler way to claim that evidence-possession failures can be rational, and it's this: evidence-possession depends on evidence-acquisition, which falls outside the purview of epistemic rationality, and so evidence-possession failures are never failures of epistemic rationality. Basically, evidence-acquisition depends on the *actions* we take. But epistemic rationality does not govern actions, it governs *belief*. More specifically, epistemic rationality dictates what proper belief-management looks like given the evidence *we already possess*. It does not tell us to go out and get more. There may be other modes of normativity that pressure us to acquire more evidence – e.g., our investment in some question may generate practical pressure to acquire evidence that can help us answer it, or there may be moral pressure to be informed about some socio-political issue in order to act as a responsible citizen – but the normative pressure to acquire evidence will never come from epistemic rationality. In this way, failures of evidence-possession are not (and can never be) failures of epistemic rationality.

That leaves us with *evidence-appreciability*. Even if we were to grant that sufficient indirect access evidence for God's existence is not only available to all human beings but also possessed by them, there will still be room for rational

nonbelief due to factors impacting the cognitive accessibility of its import. If the relevant import is cognitively inaccessible to us, we cannot appreciate it. And if we cannot appreciate it, then it cannot generate rational requirements for what we should believe – more pointedly, it cannot rationally require us to believe *God exists*.

There are two main ways evidential import can be cognitively inaccessible to us and thereby fail to be appreciable. They are outworkings of the epistemic dynamics featured in §1. First, lack of import-*transparency*: the initial import of provided evidence is stable through transmission, but it is cognitively opaque to us, and we are unable to appreciate it as a result. Second, lack of import-*stability*: the import of provided evidence is not fixed but changes in transmission once it is integrated into our epistemic profile. The initial evidential import is not cognitively accessible or appreciable because it is "no longer with us," as it were.

When it comes to *import-transparency*, being able to discern and register the bearing one proposition has on another depends on having information relevant to their truth-indicating relationship as well as the capacity to navigate that information in a way that makes that relationship salient – i.e., to see what logically follows from what or what probabilifies what and to what extent. And beyond having the relevant information and facility, the information needs to be on hand and the capacities need to be online, along with adequate opportunity to put them to work. The internal and external factors highlighted above, however, may be configured for human beings in ways that prevent these conditions of evidence-appreciability from being met.

As gestured at earlier, the capacity to appreciate the import of the fine-tuning argument, for example, will depend on having a solid grasp on certain background information about the universe as well as a certain level of cognitive facility and mastery of the concept of explanation and its corresponding logic. Not all human beings have the relevant background information, cognitive facility, or conceptual mastery, but this need not make them any less *rational* in their interaction with the evidence, even if it prevents them from getting things right. Likewise with the argument from morality. The capacity to appreciate the bearing of a moral order on the existence of God depends on an in-depth grasp of the nature and operation of morality as well as a certain level of cognitive facility and mastery of matters pertaining to metaphysical grounding. And, again, most of the human population lacks the relevant background information, cognitive facility, and conceptual mastery, leaving them unable to appreciate its import but no less rational for it.

Now, when it comes to *import-stability*, there are two main mechanisms for import-change that I want to highlight: (1) having epistemic methods and standards that assign different import to the evidence than the initial import; (2) trusting members of our epistemic community who assign different import to the evidence than the initial import.

With respect to the first mechanism, the basic idea is that, while there are limits to what can count as a legitimate epistemic method or standard, there is still a range of permissible epistemic methods and standards. And within the range of permissible epistemic methods and standards, there can be different

determinations of import for some given body of evidence.[24] So, when it comes to evidence for God's existence, we may rationally operate with epistemic methods and standards that assign different import to the evidence. And this difference in import-determination might mean that what we are rationally required to believe given our evidence falls short of theistic belief.

With respect to the second mechanism, the basic idea is that, while there are limits to when it is rational to trust members of our epistemic community, there are plenty of instances where we can rationally trust them and their verdicts, even when they have gotten things *wrong*. That is to say, if we otherwise have reason to count the community member as epistemically trustworthy or reliable, we can rationally trust their determination of the evidential import even when they have missed the mark, whether by honest mistake or rational failure. So, when it comes to evidence for God's existence, we may rationally be misled if we rationally trust members of our epistemic community who assign different import to the evidence, viz., import that does not require us to believe that *God exists*.

The upshot, then, is this: insofar as possession and appreciability are impacted by factors that either fall outside the purview of epistemic rationality or are not strictly regulated by it, there will always be room for possession- and appreciability-failures that are not failures of rationality. And these failures will prevent the available evidence from making theistic belief a rational requirement. —Which is just to say that no matter what quality of indirect access evidence God provides, it will not be able to rule out rational nonbelief for human beings.

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[24] See Kelly (2013) and Schoenfield (2014).

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We are then left to consider *direct* access evidence – i.e., mystical-perceptual evidence of God – and whether it has a better chance of ruling out rational nonbelief. Might its directness allow it to bypass the issues of possession and appreciability plaguing indirect access evidence? And, with that, patch up the outstanding vulnerability to rational nonbelief? Though the directness of mystical-perceptual evidence suggests greater promise for ruling out rational nonbelief than the various modes of indirect access evidence, the next chapter will be devoted to showing why this apparent promise is ultimately misleading.

Chapter 3: The (False) Hope of Mystical Perception

The previous chapter was devoted to setting up and developing my objection to Premise 4 of the hiddenness argument: If God has positioned human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there is no rational nonbelief. Before getting into the details of my account, I distinguished my argumentative approach from that of the available objections. Premise 4 embeds the expectation that God's self-disclosure *will* rule out rational nonbelief if it has occurred. The primary objections on offer challenge the *propriety* of this expectation, while I challenge its *feasibility*. The expectation assumes it is *possible* for God's self-disclosure to rule out rational nonbelief for creatures like us. I contend it is *not*. The assumption is then false and the corresponding expectation illegitimate: Premise 4 is false.

To develop this line of objection, I modeled divine self-disclosure as an instance of doxastic positioning and set out to show that, given an adequate model of doxastic positioning paired with a basic taxonomy of possible evidence for God's existence, it becomes clear that God's self-disclosure cannot rule out rational nonbelief. The repeated contention was that, regardless of what evidence God can make available, rational nonbelief will always remain a live possibility by way of the possession and appreciability conditions of doxastic positioning success. I showed how this holds true with indirect access evidence for God's existence, leaving direct access evidence still to be addressed.

In this chapter, I resume the task with direct access evidence for God's existence – i.e., *mystical-perceptual evidence* – and aim to show that, despite its

prima facie promise, it does not fare any better than indirect access evidence. Taking William Alston's account of mystical perception as my starting point, I show how this perceptual mode of evidence is also unable to generate an epistemic situation in which theistic belief is a universal rational requirement and rational nonbelief is ruled out. After demonstrating as much – and with that, wrapping up my account of the limitations of evidential approaches to theistic belief facilitation via divine self-disclosure – I wrap up the chapter by considering a non-evidential approach: making theistic belief innate. Though this approach has intuitive merit, I will show it ultimately lacks the resources to revitalize the hiddenness argument.

The plan for the chapter is, then, as follows. In §1, I will present Alston's account of mystical perception as developed in his work, *Perceiving God*. In §2, I will highlight reasons why we might think it has a better chance at ruling out rational nonbelief but show why they fall through (and with that wrap up my main account). In §3, I will shift gears to consider the option of innate theistic belief and show why this non-evidential approach to theistic belief facilitation cannot give proponents of the hiddenness argument what they need to succeed.

§1 ALSTON'S PERCEIVING GOD

In his work *Perceiving God*, Alston presents an account of what he calls *mystical perception*: putative direct experiential awareness of God.[1] He does so with the aim of showing that such putative awareness of God can provide *prima facie*

[1] To avoid presupposing theism, Alston cancels out the success implication of "perception" by using "putative" as a qualifier (Alston 1991: 1).

justification for beliefs about God — including, naturally, the belief *God exists*. That said, Alston does not set out to show that such mystical experiences are in fact veridical, or that God exists at all. Any support either claim receives from his account is only ever indirect.[2] His main aim is to establish mystical perception's justification-conferring power *vis-a-vis* beliefs about God. But, since justification-conferring power typically follows truth-tracking doxastic practices, establishing this for mystical perception is indirectly suggestive of its veracity, and with that, God's existence.

His strategy is to draw a parallel between putative awareness of God and paradigmatic modes of perception – modes of sense perception such as vision, audition, and touch – and with that, defend parallel epistemological treatment of the doxastic practices based on each respectively.[3] If it can be shown that putative awareness of God and sense perception are parallel perceptual epistemic modalities, and if we grant that sense perception can confer direct *prima facie* justification on our beliefs about the environment, then we should also grant that mystical perception can do the same for beliefs about God.[4]

In rehearsing Alston's account, my focus will be limited to his basic model of mystical perception rather than his treatment of the doxastic practice

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[2] Alston (1991: 10).

[3] Here *doxastic practice* simply means "belief-forming practice," where this may be understood as a distinct, principled way of forming beliefs (Alston 1991: 10).

[4] This sets Alston against the standard way of construing religious experience, viz., as affective states with a superadded explanation. Put simply, some view alleged experiences of God as merely subjective affective states. The subject only directly experiences particular feelings and emotions. That God is appearing to the subject is then a superadded explanation to the experience, an after-the-fact attempt to interpret and explain. If this is right, it directly impacts how we go about evaluating the veracity of these experiences. Construed subjectively, we are left with a hypothesis-testing approach to evaluation. But on a perceptual model, we can gauge veracity in the same way we would with sense perception: innocent until proven guilty (Alston 1991: 39, 49-50, 67).

based on said perception. The whole point of rehearsing his account is to have a working model of mystical perception so we can resume our primary task: assessing whether mystical-perceptual evidence for God's existence can (hypothetically) rule out rational nonbelief. Having shown the various modes of indirect access evidence to be incapable of achieving such a result, proponents of the hiddenness argument need this mode of direct access evidence to be able to do the job if their argument is to have hope of success. Unfortunately for them, the evidence of mystical perception is, as I will show, just as susceptible to rational possession- and appreciability-failures as indirect access evidence, and so cannot rule out rational nonbelief. No matter the mode of divine self-disclosure, then, rational nonbelief will always remain a live possibility. But first, Alston's account of mystical perception.

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Taking cues from experiential reports given by "professional contemplative mystics" as well as "humble laypersons," Alston develops and defends a *perceptual model* for putative awareness of God. He maintains that "if we think of perception in the most general way, in which it is paradigmatically exemplified by but not confined to sense perception, putative awareness of God exhibits this generic character."[5] For the sake of compact, parallel terminology, Alston calls this putative awareness of God *mystical perception*, and the mode of experience involved in this perception *mystical experience*.[6] Importantly, Alston is not trying

[5] Alston (1991: 9).

[6] Alston states several caveats regarding this terminological choice (Alston 1991: 11).

to account for *all* alleged experiences of God with his account of mystical perception, much less all would-be religious experiences. Instead, his attention is limited to those that purport to be *direct experiential awareness of God*.

To explicate these terms, however, we need to have some concrete examples of mystical perception in hand. What follows are a few select reports Alston consults to develop his account that I take to be sufficiently representative. Once they are out on the table, I will explicate the terms demarcating the category of mystical perception.

> (1) . . . all at once I . . . felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether . . . I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in humility and poverty , leaving him, The Almighty God, to judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted . . . . I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization . . . . But the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him. (Anonymous report in James 1 902, pp. 67-68)

> (2) One day when I was at prayer . . . I saw Christ at my side—or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul [the imagination]. He seemed quite close to me and I saw that it was He. As I thought, He was speaking to me. Being completely ignorant that such visions were possible, I was very much afraid at first, and could do nothing but weep, though as soon as He spoke His first word of assurance to me, I regained

my usual calm, and became cheerful and free from fear. All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be at my side, but as this was not an imaginary vision I could not see in what form. But I most clearly felt that He was all the time on my right, and was a witness of everything that I was doing . . . if I say that I do not see Him with eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul , because this is no imaginary vision, how then can I know and affirm that he is beside me with greater certainty that if I saw Him? If one says that one is like a person in the dark who cannot see someone though he is beside him. or that one is like somebody who is blind, it is not right. There is some similarity here, but not much, because a person in the dark can perceive with the other senses, or hear his neighbor speak or move, or can touch him. Here this is not so, nor is there any feeling of darkness. On the contrary, He appears to the soul by a knowledge brighter than the sun. I do not mean that any sun is seen, or any brightness, but there is a light which, though unseen, illumines the understanding. (St. Teresa 1957, chap. 27, pp. 187-89)

(7) There was one thing that I was ignorant of at the beginning. I did not really know that God is present in all things; and when He seemed to me so near, I thought that it was impossible. Yet I could not cease believing that He was there, since I seemed almost certainly to have been conscious of His very presence. Unlearned persons told me that He was there only in His grace. But I could not believe this, because, as I have said, He seemed to be really present. (St. Teresa 1957, p. 127)

(10) Then, in a very gentle and gradual way, not with a shock at all, it began to dawn on me that I was not alone in the room. Someone else was there, located fairly precisely about two yards to my right front. Yet there was no sort of sensory hallucination. I neither saw him nor heard him in any sense of the word 'see' and 'hear' , but there he was; I had no doubt about it. He seemed to be very good and very wise, full of sympathetic understanding, and most kindly disposed towards me. (P. 122)

(11) There was no sensible vision, but the room was filled by a Presence which in a strange way was both about me and within me. I was overwhelmingly possessed by Someone who was not myself, and yet I felt I was more myself than I had ever been before. (P. 122)

Alston distills what these reports share in common: "(A) They report an experiential awareness of God. (B) The awareness is direct. (C) The awareness is reported to be of God."[7] I will address (A) - (C) in turn.

By *experiential*, Alston means that something, namely God, has *appeared* or been *presented* to a subject's consciousness, "in generically the same way…objects in the environment are (apparently) *presented* to one's consciousness."[8] So, just as it might be said that the cup of coffee and laptop in front of me are experientially *given* to my consciousness as I sit down to write, it may be said that God is *given* to the subject's conscious awareness in mystical experience. And this dynamic of appearance, presentation, and givenness is what sets experiential consciousness apart from, say, merely thinking about or imagining God. In drawing the contrast between experiential and non-experiential cognition, Alston states: "It is the difference between presence (to consciousness) and absence." To be an experiential mode of consciousness, the target object, in this case God, must be *present* to the subject.[9] There can be no direct experiential awareness of God in God's absence, as it were.

By *direct*, he means that the subject perceives God without having to perceive something else – God is presented to one's consciousness directly.[10] Though it is true that the subject inevitably experiences God through a conscious state that is distinct from him, the subject does not perceive God through the

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[7] Alston (1991: 14).

[8] Alston (1991: 14).

[9] Alston (1991: 15).

[10] Alston (1991: 21).

perception of something else. The difference here may be compared to that of looking at a person face-to-face as opposed to, say, viewing them through a mirror or computer screen. In looking at someone face-to-face, it is true that we inevitably view them by way of a conscious state that is distinct from them, but it is not through the *perception* of something else, e.g., a mirror or computer screen. This mode of directness is an instance of what Alston calls *mediated immediacy*.[11] It falls short of absolute immediacy – something we only experience with our own conscious states – but is not entirely mediated either.

Last but not least, the direct experiential awareness is putatively *of God*. Acknowledging the difficulty and controversy involved in specifying a set of necessary conditions for an object's being God, Alston focuses on the characteristics "deemed to be most central to God in the leading theistic religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam…characteristics on which there is a massive consensus, provided we don't insist on too much precision in the specification of each."[12] With that qualification in place, he states that, in order for an experience to be (putatively) of God, the subject needs to take the object of her experience to have the following, characteristic God-making properties: viz., "…*being the source of existence of all other than itself, goodness, justice, moral lawgiver, having a purpose for the creation, and offering salvation to mankind*,"[13] and with

[11] Alston distinguishes three modes of immediacy: "(A) Absolute immediacy. One is aware of X but not through anything else, even a state of consciousness. (B) Mediated immediacy (direct perception). One is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X , and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived. (C) Mediate perception. One is aware of X through the awareness of another object of perception." Since subjects take themselves to be directly perceiving God but are able to distinguish their states of consciousness from God, their experiences count as instances of mediated immediacy. *Perceiving God*, 21-22.

[12] Alston (1991: 29).

[13] Alston (1991: 29).

that, being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving. Alston continues, "So long as S is thinking of the perceived object as being (roughly) within this (roughly demarcated) territory, she is identifying the object as God."[14] This does not mean that the subject has to immediately and explicitly register the object as God, but it does mean she needs to be disposed to register the object of her experience in roughly this manner.

One additional constraint Alston places on his account: he restricts his attention to *non-sensory* instances of such experiences because he takes them to have the best chance at being a genuine presentation of a being like God.

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To make his case for mystical perception counting as a legitimate mode of perceptual consciousness, Alston draws out basic conditions of perception *generically* construed.[15] These conditions divide into two categories: *intrinsic* (or *internal*) conditions and *extrinsic* (or *external*) conditions. Intrinsic conditions track the phenomenological profile of perceptual experience — the internal *what-it's-like* of perceiving an object. Extrinsic conditions track whether or not the would-be perceived object actually exists and stands in the right relationship to the subject to be perceived — the external enabling conditions of object presentation and awareness. The question is, then, whether the sample reports of mystical perception plausibly satisfy these conditions.

[14] Alston (1991: 29).

[15] Alston (1991: 36).

With intrinsic conditions of perception, the matter is more or less straightforward. Simply put, the phenomenology of perception involves the apparent presentation of an object "as being or doing so-and-so" – i.e., the object presents as having particular features or qualities or performing particular actions. By *appearing* or being *given* to the subject in this way, object perception sharply contrasts with anything the subject can "conjure up in imagination, memory, or abstract thought."[16] Though there is undoubtedly significant philosophical controversy surrounding the nature of perception, Alston nevertheless maintains that, on an intuitive, commonsensical level, this apparent object presentation is what "most centrally differentiates perceptual consciousness from other modes of consciousness."[17]

So, whether mystical perception satisfies the intrinsic conditions of perception comes down to "whether it is, phenomenologically, a case of God's experientially appearing to the subject *as* such-and-such…[that is,] whether it involves an (apparent) presentation of something (God) to the subject as being or doing so-and-so."[18] Alston claims that the sample reports straightforwardly exhibit this feature of perception: "...it seems clear that the experiences reported are naturally construed in terms of *presentation* and *direct awareness*."[19] So, unless the subjects in question are fundamentally confused about the

[16] Alston (1991: 37).

[17] Alston (1991: 37).

[18] Alston (1991: 38-39).

[19] Alston (1991: 39).

phenomenological character of their experience, we should grant that mystical experience satisfies the intrinsic conditions for being a mode of perception.[20]

—Almost, anyhow. There is an issue here that requires further attention: the "such-and-such" or "so-and-so" component of our construal of perceptual consciousness. That is, the notion that the perceived object is being presented to the subject in a *phenomenally qualified* way. Alston notes that while "the generic notion of perception is not tied to any particular selection of phenomenal qualities," it *does* require that there be *some* selection of phenomenal qualities.[21] The trick, then, is to delineate the phenomenal qualities distinctive of mystical experience. Are there any such qualities?

In the reports we have considered, subjects putatively experience God as *being* certain ways – e.g., all-good, -powerful, and -loving – and as *doing* certain things – e.g., strengthening or forgiving. But it is natural to ask: can something really "present itself to one's experience as good or powerful, or as strengthening or forgiving one, in the same sense [that something] can [present itself] as red, round, acrid, or bitter?"[22] Such modes of mystical appearance do not seem to consist of *phenomenal* qualities. In highlighting this, Alston voices the attendant worry: "It looks as if the subject was expecting to be aware of God and hence

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[20] This is not to say that subjects cannot be so confused – their account of their experience *is* fallible – but it is to say that *they are in the best position to determine what their experience is like* – and in particular, whether their experience is, phenomenologically, a case of something presenting itself to them as being so-and-so (*Perceiving God*, 40). An additional reason Alston gives for accepting subjects' account of the phenomenology of their experience is this: "the more sophisticated of them explicitly consider alternative construals and reject them in favor of the view that God Himself is present to their experience…The fact that these people can make these distinctions and are confident in characterizing their experience now in one way and now in another, adds to the credibility of their reports" (Alston 1991: 42-43).

[21] Alston (1991: 43).

[22] Alston (1991: 44).

took herself to be aware of a being that is powerful, supremely good, and infinitely loving. That [however] is not something that could be read off the phenomenal surface of experience." [23] Put simply, the concern is that the subjects are not actually encountering an all good and powerful being who is strengthening or forgiving them but are instead projecting these properties onto their experience.

To engage with this worry, Alston highlights that there are different ways of conceptualizing and, in turn, describing appearances. And while the sample reports do not explicitly employ phenomenal concepts, the concepts they employ *do* presuppose particular phenomenal content. Basically, when we describe the appearances of objects, we employ a variety of appear-concepts that go beyond the basic phenomenal features of the experience but also presuppose that there is a base phenomenal character to the experience: viz., comparative, doxastic, and epistemic.[24] He states, "...when we report appearances by the use of comparative, doxastic, or epistemic appear-concepts, we are conceptualizing appearances by some of their relational features. But something can enter into relations only if it has an intrinsic nature to constitute what enters into those relations; this intrinsic nature is what is captured by a phenomenal concept."[25] So using such concepts in

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[23] Alston (1991: 44).

[24] See Alston (1991: 44-45). For Alston, *comparative* conceptualization of an object tracks what sort of object can be expected to appear, under normal conditions, as this object is appearing: *Doxastic* conceptualization of an object tracks what beliefs the object appearance can be expected to generate. *Epistemic* conceptualization of an object tracks what beliefs the object appearance can justify. So, suppose a red apple has been presented to me and I say: "This apple looks red to me." The comparative construal would be: "This object looks to me now as a red apple would be expected to look under normal conditions." The doxastic construal would be: "This apple looks so as to normally lead someone to believe that it is red." And, last but not least, the epistemic construal would be: "If one formed the belief that the apple was red on the basis of the way it looks, that belief would be justified."

[25] See Alston (1991: 45).

place of explicitly phenomenal concepts to describe our experience does not mean the experience is devoid of distinctive phenomenal content. On the contrary, it actually presupposes said phenomenal content: without the phenomenal backdrop, the non-phenomenal description of the appearances would be meaningless.

Returning to the reports of mystical perception, Alston concedes that the appear-concepts figuring in such reports – e.g., goodness, power, plenitude, and love – are not themselves phenomenal concepts. He stresses, however, that this does not mean the subjects are not "accurately reporting how God appears to their experience by using such concepts."[26] They are simply employing *comparative* concepts to specify how the object of their experience, purportedly God, appears to them.[27] In this way, they can be understood as saying: "I was aware of God as presenting the kind of appearance it would be reasonable to expect a supremely powerful (good, loving) being to present."[28] The fact that they do not use phenomenal concepts to describe their experience does not mean, then, that they are failing to report how God appears to them in a phenomenally meaningful way.

Alston acknowledges that this appeal to comparative appear-concepts does not tell us much about the actual phenomenal content of such experiences, but this on its own does not constitute a good reason for thinking there is no distinctive phenomenal content. As it stands, there is no good reason to doubt that there could be "a distinctive way in which a good, powerful, compassionate being, or

[26] Alston (1991: 45).

[27] Alston (1991: 46-47).

[28] Alston (1991: 47).

one who is speaking, forgiving, or comforting, appears to one's experience."[29] Furthermore, our inability to delineate such phenomenal qualities is actually to be expected since we lack "the most elementary prerequisites for analyzing divine appearances into phenomenal elements, cataloging them, associating them intersubjectively with names, dimensionalizing them, and so on."[30] Due to the lack of stimulus control and unavoidable internality and privacy characteristic of mystical modes of perception, mystical experience does not lend itself to intersubjective theoretical exploration, examination, and systematization in the way that sensory experience does.

Unable to circumvent these conceptual-linguistic limitations of mystical phenomenal content, Alston leaves off with two points of consolation: (1) we fortunately do not have to be able to "isolate and identify basic phenomenal qualities" to experience them, we have the capacity to " learn to respond to complex phenomenal totalities without analyzing them into their ultimate constituents."[31] And, (2): we always have recourse to analogy with phenomenal qualities for which we do have intersubjective conceptual-linguistic frameworks. The practice of analogistic expression of mystical experience is long-standing and particularly well represented in, for example, the doctrine of the "spiritual senses" developed within the Catholic mystical tradition.[32] The main upshot here is that

[29] Alston (1991: 47).

[30] Alston (1991: 49).

[31] Alston (1991: 51).

[32] Alston (1991: 51-54).

the conceptual-linguistic limitations plaguing mystical perception need not prevent it from counting as a legitimate mode of perception.

With that, we are left granting mystical perception qualified satisfaction of the intrinsic conditions of perception: the phenomenological profile of mystical experience *does* match the internal what-it's-like of perceptual experience, it's just that we cannot readily articulate its distinctive phenomenal content. Given the usage of comparative concepts, however, there is *prima facie* reason for thinking it does have such content and no substantive reason for thinking it does not.

Now for the *extrinsic* conditions of perception. Unlike his treatment of the intrinsic conditions, Alston does not attempt to show that the extrinsic conditions of perception are *in fact* met. These external conditions of perception track the success conditions of the term 'perceive'," and so showing that they are met in mystical perception would be tantamount to showing that God in fact exists and that people actually stand in the right relation to directly perceive him.[33] And this, as we have already noted, falls outside the scope of his main project. Instead, Alston only sets out to show that, whatever theory of perception we prefer, it is *possible* for the corresponding external requirements of perception to be met. Basically, if God exists, there is no good reason for thinking the reported experiences could not be genuine perceptions of him.

Alston proceeds by drawing out the basic shape of the primary theories of perception and the extrinsic conditions associated with each.[34] On his preferred

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[33] Alston (1991: 36).

[34] Importantly, Alston is targeting our *concept* of perception, as opposed to the psychological state or process of perception.

theory, the phenomenon of object perception is "fundamental and unanalyzable": for a subject to perceive God is simply for God to appear to the subject as being phenomenally qualified in one way or another.[35] Both sensory experience and object perception share an act-object structure and there is nothing that needs to be added to the sensory experience for it to count as a genuine instance of perception – as opposed to, say, hallucination – provided that an object is in fact presenting itself to the subject. This means we may be mistaken about whether our experience is genuinely perceptual, but that doesn't change the fact that sensory experience can only occur when actual objects are present to the subject.

On other theories of perception, however, sensory experience does not intrinsically involve a cognitive relationship to an external object. That is to say, sensory experience is what it is regardless of whether the would-be perceived object is in fact present to the subject. So, something needs to be added to sensory experience in order to make it a case of genuine object perception. The two primary kinds of candidate conditions are *causal* and *doxastic*. For S to be perceiving X, X needs to figure in the causal chain of S's sensory experience in the right kind of way, or X needs to be related to S so as to generate beliefs (or tendencies to beliefs) in S about X.

This leaves us with the following candidate extrinsic conditions for perception. The would-be perceived object needs to be able to be (1) what is appearing to the subject, (2) figure in the causation of the experience in such a way as to count as what is being perceived, or (2) generate beliefs (or tendencies

[35] Alston's preferred theory: the *Theory of Appearing*. The alternative theories he considers are iterations of *Sense Datum Theory* and *Adverbial Theory* (Alston 1991: 55).

to beliefs) in the subject about itself. Whether it is *possible* for mystical perception to satisfy these conditions depends, then, on whether it is possible for God to (1) be the object appearing to the subject having the experience, (2) figure in the causation of that experience so as to count as what is being perceived, or (3) generate beliefs (or tendencies to beliefs) in the subject about himself.[36]

The main takeaway here is that, though we may not know the mechanism by which God does so, there do not seem to be any *a priori* constraints on what can appear to our experience; (2) what can figure as a cause of our perceptual experience; or (3) what can relate to us in a way that generates beliefs about it and what it is like.[37]

If we accept Alston's perceptual model of mystical perception as sufficiently motivated, there are direct ramifications for how we evaluate the doxastic practice of forming beliefs on the basis of such perception. In particular, our mode of evaluation should match how we evaluate the doxastic practice of forming beliefs on the basis of sense perception. It may turn out that the deliverances of sense perception are veridical while those of mystical perception are not. But in the absence of such a verdict, they are both instances of the general doxastic practice of forming *perceptual* beliefs and the respective standards and modes of evaluation should be consistent between them.[38]

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[36] Alston notes that these theories need not be mutually exclusive; they may inform each other (Alston 1991: 58-59).

[37] Alston (1991: 59-67).

[38] Alston (1991: 10).

§2 MYSTICAL PERCEPTION CANNOT RULE OUT RATIONAL NONBELIEF

Returning to our main order of business, we want to know: can mystical perception generate an epistemic situation that makes theistic belief a universal rational requirement and, with that, rules out rational nonbelief? Can the perceptual content of mystical experience be such that its evidential import always makes theistic belief the only rational option for any subject having the experience? If the answer is yes, then the hiddenness argument remains standing: it *is* possible for divine self-disclosure – taking the form of mystical-perceptual evidence – to rule out rational nonbelief and my objection to Premise 4 falls through. In what follows, I will provide reason for answering in the negative.

My contention here is that, like indirect access evidence, mystical perception can generate rational support for theistic belief and, in some cases, make it a rational requirement, but it can only do so *conditionally*. Furthermore, the conditions on which it can do so are not themselves rational requirements. So, failure to meet these conditions does not constitute rational failure. This two-fold dynamic leaves room for rational nonbelief *vis-a-vis* mystical perception.

The relevant conditions have to do with whether an individual is in a position to register the object of their mystical experience *as* God, and in that, track the basic ways an individual may *fail* to recognize God as the object of their experience. There are a variety of factors that could make an impact here, but I will limit my attention to *conceptual* factors. Basically, whether a mystical experience can rationally support or require *de dicto* theistic belief depends on whether the individual can apply the relevant God-concept to the object of their experience. There are, however, a number of ways an individual can fail to do so.

First, the individual might lack the relevant God-concept altogether. They might lack a concept of the divine entirely or simply be operating with an alternative, incorrect conception of God. In such cases, mystical experience cannot rationally support the *de dicto* belief *God exists*, much less rationally require it, because rationality cannot support or require us to believe propositions containing concepts we do not possess.

To give intuitive motivation for this line of thought, consider an ordinary case of sense perception. Suppose you and I are looking at an elephant. For one reason or another, you have the concept of elephant and I do not. And let's stipulate that you register the conditions of concept-application as being met: your sensory experience is such that you see the object of your experience *as* an elephant. In the absence of complicating factors, your experience rationally supports, and perhaps requires, the belief that "This is an elephant." I, on the other hand, lacking the concept of elephant, cannot see the object of my experience *as* an elephant but can only register it as a creature presenting particular phenomenal qualities (e.g., being large, gray, four-legged, floppy-eared, trunked, etc.). As a result, my doxastic position *vis-a-vis* "This is an elephant" is importantly different from yours. Your sensory experience rationally supports believing the proposition, perhaps even renders it a rational requirement. My sensory experience, on the other hand, does not rationally support believing the proposition, much less require it.

Likewise in the God case. If I am having a mystical experience but lack the relevant God-concept, the experience cannot rationally support, much less

rationally require, *de dicto* theistic belief for me. I cannot be rationally pressured or required to believe a proposition containing concepts I do not possess.

But suppose we make concept-possession a non-issue and stipulate that all human beings have the relevant God-concept – let's say God has ensured as much. Does this fix the problem? That is, does default possession of the relevant God-concept ensure that mystical perception will generate rational support for theistic belief, and more importantly, render it a universal rational requirement? I contend it does not. Because even if we possess the relevant God-concept, we still might not be in a position to *apply* it. More precisely, we might not be able to register the conditions of concept-application as being met by the object of our experience (and that through no fault of our own).[39] Being unable to apply the relevant God-concept while having a mystical experience in this way would put us in the same functional position as one who lacks the concept altogether: in either case, we cannot register the object of our experience *as* God. As a result, the mystical experience cannot, *ceteris paribus*, generate rational support for theistic belief for us, much less render it a rational requirement.

But how could we fail to apply the concept of God to the object of our experience? How could we not see the conditions of application as being met? Though there could be a variety of factors at play, I want to suggest that the main mechanism behind the concept-application failure here is this: the primary properties constitutive of the relevant God-concept are not directly perceivable.

[39] Possessing a concept is a necessary condition for being in a position to apply it, but the suggestion here is that it is not a sufficient one. Being in the position to apply a concept we possess marks one of the metrics by which we gauge *conceptual mastery*, over and above mere concept-possession.

That is to say, the relevant God-making properties are not perceptually transparent and cannot be directly read off of the phenomenal surface of perceptual experience, effectively leaving room for concept-application failures.

Properties can fail to be directly perceivable – *hidden* from direct perception, as it were – in a number of ways, and this perceptual hiddenness can be either circumstantial or inherent. Take the property of being a vertebrate, for example. Toads are vertebrate creatures. But if you were to happen upon one during a nature hike, you would not be able to directly perceive as much. Now, if you took the toad to a lab and dissected it (poor toad!), then the property of being a vertebrate could become directly perceivable. But not just by looking at it in the wild, fully alive and structurally intact. The toad's property of being a vertebrate is, then, perceptually hidden, but only circumstantially so.

But if we were to take a different kind of property – the property of being a synesthete, say – the matter would be different. To see as much, suppose we are sitting next to a stranger on the subway who, unbeknownst to us, happens to have a form of synesthesia that causes them to perceive numbers as inherently colored. In such a situation, we cannot learn that they are a synesthete just by looking at them. But unlike the toad-vertebrate case, there are *no* circumstances under which the property could become *perceptually* transparent to us. It's not a matter of simply modifying or optimizing our perceptual position *vis-a-vis* this stranger (we don't need to just "get a better look"). We can never read "synesthete" off of the phenomenal content of our experience. So, the property of being a synesthete is,

like the property of being a vertebrate, a perceptually hidden property, but its perceptual hiddenness is inherent, not circumstantial.

Returning to the God case: I want to suggest that the primary God-making properties are not directly perceivable and that their perceptual hiddenness is *inherent*, and that in at least two ways. First, the primary God-making properties are *infinite*, *boundless* properties: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and so on. As such, they cannot be fully contained by or represented in the finite perceptual content of mystical experience. We may perceive the object as being powerful, knowledgeable, and good or loving, and we may not perceive *limits* to these properties, but this is different than perceiving something *as* limitless.

To make this intuitively salient, suppose there exists a road that goes on endlessly – an *infinitely* long road, as it were. If we were to look at such a road, we would see that it stretches far into the distance, without an end in sight. But in doing so, we could not say that we *see* that the road is infinitely long. And, importantly, we could never do so. The property of being infinitely long outstrips our perceptual faculties – it's perceptually inaccessible to us – and so we'd need additional background motivation or support for believing that the property of being infinitely long was being exemplified by the road in front of us.

So it is with the God case. Even if we can directly register the object of our mystical experience as being powerful, knowledgeable, and good or loving, and that without a perceivable limit, this is not the same as directly perceiving the object as being *all*-powerful, *all*-knowing, *all*-loving. The movement from the former to the latter would require additional background motivation and support,

support that goes beyond the perceptual content of the experience itself. In the absence of such support, we may fail to see the conditions of concept-application as met and, with that, fail to be in a position to apply the relevant God-concept to the object of our experience.

Now, there are other primary God-making properties that are perceptually hidden, but not on account of being infinite or boundless. Properties like being the ultimate source of existence or being the creator of the cosmos — *had-to-be-there* properties, as it were (and we weren't). Like infinite properties, these properties are not directly perceivable, but the mechanism for the perceptual hiddenness is different. They are tied to states, events, processes, or phenomena that we did not – and *cannot* – observe or witness. The upshot, however, is the same: these properties cannot be directly read off of the phenomenal surface of mystical experience. In having the mystical experience, we cannot directly perceive these properties (e.g., the property of being the ultimate source of existence) as being exemplified by the object of our experience. So, in the absence of additional background motivation and support, we may fail to apply the relevant God-concept to the object of our experience, even though we possess it.

The basic upshot here is this: because God's essential properties are not directly perceivable – and that on account of being *infinite* or *had-to-be-there* properties (and we weren't) – we might fail to register the conditions of concept-application as met by the object of mystical experience and, as a result, fail to register the object of our experience *as* God. In such a case, failing to apply the

relevant God-concept effectively prevents the experience from being able to rationally support or require theistic belief for us.

This covers the territory of the first claim that mystical perception can only rationally support or require theistic belief *conditionally*. To recap: whether mystical perception can generate rational support or requirement for theistic belief is *conditional* on whether the individual having the mystical experience possesses the relevant God-concept and can apply it to the object of their experience. If the individual fails to possess or apply the concept, the experience cannot generate rational support for theistic belief, much less render it a rational requirement. — This brings us to the second claim: viz., that the conditions on which mystical perception can rationally support or require theistic belief are not themselves rational requirements. And so failures of concept-possession and -application are not rational failures. If this checks out, mystical perception cannot rule out rational nonbelief.

Put simply: rationality does not require us to possess certain concepts, nor require us to apply a concept in any and all circumstances in which we encounter an object satisfying the concept. We can fail to possess the relevant God-concept, or fail to apply it once possessed, and that without being any less rational. So, the conditions on which mystical perception can rationally support or require theistic belief are not themselves requirements of rationality. *We can rationally fail to meet them.* And insofar as we can rationally fail to meet the conditions on which mystical perception rationally supports or requires theistic belief, there will always be room for us to have a mystical experience, not believe God exists, and

be rational in our nonbelief. In short: despite its initial promise, mystical perception *cannot* rule out rational nonbelief. So, unfortunately for the proponents of the hiddenness argument, direct access evidence does not fare any better than indirect access evidence.[40]

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This concludes my main discussion of whether divine self-disclosure can render theistic belief a universal rational requirement and thereby rule out rational nonbelief. Having investigated all possible modes of divine self-disclosure – i.e., all modes of direct and indirect access evidence for God's existence – we are left to conclude that divine self-disclosure *cannot* rule out rational nonbelief, which effectively problematizes Premise 4 of the hiddenness argument. Premise 4 represents the expectation that God's self-disclosure *will* rule out rational nonbelief if God exists, which assumes it is *possible* for God's self-disclosure to do so. But if my account is right, we have reason to reject this assumption and count the corresponding expectation as illegitimate. Needless to say, the hiddenness argument depending on this assumption-expectation pair cannot succeed.

[40] This result may seem surprising given the *immediacy* of mystical perception, but this just goes to show that guaranteeing the right kind of evidential uptake (i.e., the uptake needed to rule out rational nonbelief) cannot be a function of evidential immediacy. Having evidence that affords immediate access to some object or phenomenon does not mean we will automatically register it for what it is or what it supports and to what extent. Ultimately, the quality we're looking for is evidential *transparency*, joined with evidential fixity and salience: the import of the evidence needs to be fixed, the evidence needs be hard if not impossible to miss, and its status as evidence, along with its proposition-specific import, needs to be apparent. In this way, the main issue for the hiddenness argument is that the evidence for *God exists* cannot be fixed, salient, or transparent enough to guarantee the evidential uptake needed to rule out rational nonbelief.

Before wrapping up, however, I want to briefly acknowledge and address a *non-evidential* approach to facilitating theistic belief and ruling out rational nonbelief: viz., innate or implanted theistic belief.

§3 INNATE THEISTIC BELIEF

The basic idea here is this: If God cannot rationally guarantee theistic belief by his self-disclosure – i.e., if God cannot rule out rational nonbelief by providing direct or indirect access evidence of his existence to us – why doesn't God just implant theistic belief in all human beings from the start and be done with it? Why bother with evidence-provision at all? By making theistic belief innate, God could sidestep the limitations of doxastic positioning and thereby prevent the occurrence of rational nonbelief in a much simpler manner. The hiddenness argument could then be revitalized in terms of innate theistic belief: If God exists, theistic belief would be innate. The occurrence of rational nonbelief signals that theistic belief is not innate. So, the occurrence of rational nonbelief signals that God does not exist.

While this pivot to innate theistic belief may appear promising, the apparent promise here is just that – *apparent*, not real. Put simply, the maneuver only works in favor of the hiddenness argument if innate belief cannot be rationally revised or lost — i.e., if there can be no rational departures from theistic belief once it is rendered innate. Only then could this strategy guarantee the prevention of rational nonbelief. But rational departures from theistic belief will always be possible, regardless of whether it has innate status. So, contrary to the

above suggestion, the pivot to innateness cannot help the hiddenness argument after all.

Before addressing the ineliminable possibility of rational revision, however, I want to flag a concern about the *rational status* of innate theistic belief. In order for innate theistic belief to have a chance at excluding the possibility of rational nonbelief, it seems it would need to be itself rational – that is, unless there is no rational stance to take toward God's existence. But in the absence of evidential support or verification of its source, the optics do not look good for its rational status, despite its being true and reliably so.

One way to motivate the concern is to think of Bonjour's case of Norman the Clairvoyant or Lehrer's case of Mr. Truetemp.[41] Norman is clairvoyant and by his clairvoyant powers finds himself believing that the President is in New York City. He has no evidence for or against the possibility of there being a cognitive power of clairvoyance, or that he has the relevant cognitive power, nor does he have any evidence regarding the location of the President. Mr. Truetemp, on the other hand, has had a device implanted in his brain ("tempucomp") that reliably generates true beliefs about the weather. He has no idea that such a device has been implanted in his brain, nor does he have evidence for the ambient temperature, but finds himself believing that the temperature is 104 degrees. And the intuitive upshot is supposed to be that, in both cases, the beliefs are true and reliably formed, but fail to be justified, and so reliability is not sufficient for justification.

[41] Bonjour (1980) and Lehrer (1990).

The concern is that the same would hold true for innate theistic belief: the belief would be true, reliably formed, but not justified – or in this context, not rational. Human beings would just find themselves believing God exists without the right kind of epistemic backing or support for the belief or verification of its source. If this is right, then innate theistic belief would fail to be rational and, unless there are no rational stances to take toward God's existence in such circumstances, nonbelief would be a rational option. –Which is just to say that, if innate theistic belief is not itself rational, it cannot play the role of preventing rational nonbelief, as would be needed by the hiddenness argument.[42]

But I want to suggest that, even if we grant that the rational status of innate theistic belief is a non-issue and that God can implant *rational* theistic belief in human beings from the start, the hiddenness argument still cannot be revitalized in terms of it. The main reason is that being rational does not render a belief immune to rational revision, regardless of whether it is implanted by God. So, despite its initial rational status, innate theistic belief would always be susceptible to rational revision. —In which case, it still would not be able to prevent rational nonbelief.

Here it is crucial to remember the epistemic backdrop that motivated the pivot to innate belief in the first place. The epistemic backdrop was one in which the possible evidence for God's existence cannot render theistic belief a universal rational requirement – i.e., cannot rationally compel theistic belief for all human

[42] Another angle on why this would be an issue: God would not be content with us having merely true belief that he exists but would be interested in us having well-supported theistic belief that could constitute knowledge.

beings at all times. There will always be room for circumstances in which our total evidence supports or requires nonbelief over the belief that *God exists*. Making theistic belief innate, and rational at that, does nothing to change this fact. So, even if God implants theistic belief and the belief counts as rational at the start, there is no guarantee it will maintain this status over time. Rational departures from theistic belief will always be a live possibility. So, unfortunately for the hiddenness argument, the above claim still holds: making theistic belief innate (and rationally so) cannot guarantee the prevention of rational nonbelief.

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Having concluded my main account of the limitations of divine self-disclosure, and having addressed the approach of innate theistic belief besides, the next and final chapter will be devoted to making an application of my account to the alternative formulations of the hiddenness argument, followed by some general thematic takeaways and an acknowledgement of outstanding issues deserving of further treatment.

Chapter 4: Applications and Upshots

In the first three chapters, I set up what I take to be the most basic and intuitive version of the hiddenness argument, evaluated available objections to it, and developed my own alternative response centering on the nature and limitations of divine self-disclosure, developed within the framework of doxastic positioning. My account showed that the hiddenness argument fails because it depends on a false assumption about what results God's self-disclosure can achieve *vis-a-vis* the occurrence of rational nonbelief. The argument runs on the dual expectation that God will disclose his existence to human beings *and* that his self-disclosure will effectively rule out the possibility of rational nonbelief —which assumes it is *possible* for God's self-disclosure to achieve such a result. In order for the argument to have hope of success, then, there'd need to be viable conditions on which God's self-disclosure *can* rule out rational nonbelief. My account shows there are no such conditions, rendering the operative assumption in the argument false.

We can, then, draw the two-fold conclusion forecasted at the start: (1) the hiddenness argument depends on an assumption about what results God can achieve in positioning humans to believe he exists – viz., that his self-disclosure can rule out rational nonbelief – and (2) an adequate account of disclosure (framed in terms of doxastic positioning) shows this assumption to be false. This does not mean that God's disclosure can never rationally support or require theistic belief. It's just to say that it can only do so *conditionally*, which falls short of ruling out rational nonbelief. The expectation that God's disclosure *would* rule

out rational nonbelief is, then, illegitimate, and the hiddenness argument depending on it fails.

In this final chapter, I will make good on my promise to make an after-the-fact application of my account to the *alternative* formulations of the hiddenness argument highlighted in Chapter 1 – viz., those framed in terms of nonbelief-*amount* and nonbelief-*distribution* rather than nonbelief-*kind*. After addressing these alternative formulations *vis-a-vis* the disclosure-related constraints generated by the nature and mechanics of doxastic positioning, I will also highlight important disclosure-related constraints generated by God's perfect love. To draw the chapter to a close, I will highlight some thematic takeaways from my account regarding the nature of evidence, epistemic normativity, and social-religious epistemology. These include the personal nature of belief, the constraints on cognitive influence, the limitations of normative guidance, and the need for a model of evidence that better illuminates the process of evidence transmission over and above the nature and structure of knowledge or rational belief. Points deserving of further attention will be noted besides.

§1 THE ARGUMENTS FROM NONBELIEF-AMOUNT AND -DISTRIBUTION

The first alternative formulation of the hiddenness argument takes issue with the *amount* of nonbelief in the world. Basically, even if we grant that the existence of *some* nonbelief is compatible with God's existence, there should be much less of it than there in fact is. God's disclosure of his existence should be so compelling as to make nonbelief a rare (or much *rarer*) phenomenon.

Basic Hiddenness Argument (Amount)

P1. If God exists, God is perfectly loving toward human beings.

P2. If God is perfectly loving toward human beings, God will position them to participate in a personal relationship with him.

P3. If God has positioned human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him, then God has positioned them to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them.

P4. If God has positioned human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then the amount of nonbelief is minimal.

P5. The amount of nonbelief is not minimal.

C. God does not exist.

To capture the intuitive line of thought here, imagine the following scenario: there exists an incredibly wealthy and good-hearted individual – call her Vida – who wants to be a universal benefactress to humanity and, with that, wants all human beings to be aware of her existence and her good will toward them. She has unlimited resources and connections and can utilize any platform of communication she wishes. But, as it turns out, *significant* portions of the human population do not believe she exists. —All things being equal, something does not add up here. While we may grant that *some* Vida-nonbelief is compatible with Vida's existence, it should be scarce. The fact that there is *so much* Vida-nonbelief gives us reason to believe that Vida does not exist after all.

The second alternative formulation of the hiddenness argument claims that the *distribution* of belief and nonbelief in the world goes against what we should expect it to be if God exists. The basic thought here is that we should expect theistic belief and nonbelief to be more uniformly distributed throughout the world than it in fact is.

Basic Hiddenness Argument (Distribution)

P1. If God exists, God is perfectly loving toward human beings.

P2. If God is perfectly loving toward human beings, God will position them to participate in a personal relationship with him.

P3. If God has positioned human beings to participate in a personal relationship with him, then God has positioned them to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them.

P4. If God has positioned human beings to believe *God exists* by disclosing his existence to them, then there is a uniform distribution of theistic belief and nonbelief.

P5. The distribution of theistic belief and nonbelief is not uniform.

C. God does not exist.

One intuitive way of motivating this line of thought is in terms of evidence distribution: if God exists, we should expect him to provide equal epistemic opportunity for human beings to believe he exists.[1] Given that theistic belief is

[1] Talk of equal opportunity presupposes we know what it is to have opportunity as well as who has what opportunity. While we can have an intuitive handle on the matter, sorting it out in a principled way is trickier than it appears. Same holds for epistemic opportunity.

facilitated by evidence, God should evenly distribute evidence for his existence throughout the world. And, importantly, this uniform distribution of evidence should make for a more uniform distribution of theistic belief and nonbelief. The actual distribution of theistic belief in the world is, however, quite inconsistent across cultures over time – which gives us reason to believe that such a God does not exist.

Revisiting the Vida case, the basic idea would be: regardless of what amount of nonbelief we think is or is compatible with her existence, we would be very surprised if some parts of the world believed she existed, while other parts of the world had minimal to no awareness of her existence. Such an inconsistent distribution of belief and nonbelief would suggest that Vida neglected to equally distribute evidence for her existence, which would not be the case if she in fact existed. So, the uneven distribution of belief and nonbelief constitutes evidence that Vida does not in fact exist.

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Now, there are a number of ways we could respond to these alternative formulations of the hiddenness argument. We could contest the portrayal of how much nonbelief actually occurs in the world, or how unevenly distributed it really is. We could also question how proponents of the arguments are determining what amount or distribution of nonbelief is compatible with God's existence. The most immediate point of application of my account, however, targets the feasibility (and, with that, the legitimacy) of the expectations driving the alternative formulations of the argument — viz., the expectation that God's self-disclosure

would ensure less nonbelief and the expectation that God's self-disclosure would ensure a more uniform distribution of nonbelief, respectively. The application can be posed in the form of the question: by what mechanism *could* God control the amount and distribution of nonbelief, as expected by these alternative arguments?

As stated in Chapter 1, expectations can only be legitimate if they are in principle possible to meet. So, the expectation that God would have greater control over the occurrence of nonbelief – either in the direction of ensuring less nonbelief or in the direction of ensuring a more uniform distribution of it – can only be legitimate if there is in fact a viable mechanism by which God *can* control the occurrence of nonbelief.[2] Now, a parameter for the discussion has been that God needs to utilize an *epistemic* mechanism to facilitate theistic belief and thereby stave off nonbelief: to position human beings to believe he exists, God needs to *disclose* himself to human beings by providing *evidence* of his existence to them. So, in having the target expectations, the arguments assume that God can provide evidence of his existence that guarantees less nonbelief will occur in the world or that it will be more evenly distributed across cultures over time.

My account, however, gives us reason to reject this assumption. The basic carryover-contention is this: the factors preventing God from ruling out rational nonbelief also effectively prevent God from controlling the amount or distribution of nonbelief in the world. And if God cannot control the amount or distribution of

[2] Reminder that this is a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. Other considerations are relevant when it comes to determining the overall legitimacy of an expectation. Feasibility is simply a starting condition.

nonbelief in the world, then the expectations that he would do so are illegitimate and the alternative arguments depending on them fail. Let's unpack this.

In my account I showed that God cannot rule out rational nonbelief by his self-disclosure because, regardless of what evidence God provides of his existence, God cannot guarantee – on pain of irrationality – the universal possession or appreciability of the evidence he makes available. There will always be room for humans to rationally fail to possess the available evidence or fail to be in a position to appreciate it once it is possessed. And this ineliminable possibility of rational possession- and appreciability-failures directly prevents the evidence God provides from making theistic belief a universal rational requirement and thereby ruling out rational nonbelief. God cannot, then, control the occurrence of rational nonbelief by way of evidence-provision.

Now, a parallel line of reasoning can be used against the amount- and distribution-formulations of the hiddenness argument. The only real shift that needs to take place here is from evidence-*appreciability* to evidence-*appreciation*, because in this context we are concerned with the actual occurrence of theistic belief and nonbelief, not just their normative status. The parallel thought, then, is this: regardless of what evidence God provides of his existence, God cannot guarantee the universal possession or appreciation of the evidence he makes available. It will always be possible for humans to fail to possess or appreciate the provided evidence, especially since such failures *need not be rational*. And to the point that God cannot control whether human beings possess or appreciate the evidence he makes available to them, God cannot control how much nonbelief

occurs in the world, or how it is distributed across cultures over time, by the evidence he provides.

Proponents of the alternative arguments may resist this parallel treatment by claiming that, even if humans can readily fail to possess or appreciate the evidence that is *currently* available for God's existence, it is highly implausible to suggest that this is the best God can do. In many ways, this is the whole point of the alternative arguments: if God exists, he should be able to provide us with *better*, more universally compelling evidence for his existence — evidence we cannot so readily ignore or misunderstand. But, given my account, this begs the question: What exactly would make the evidence for God's existence better? That is, in what respects *could* the evidence for God's existence be better?

To engage this question, it helps to highlight that evidence quality really boils down to two things: degree of epistemic support and degree of psychological accessibility or salience. There's the propositional content constituting the evidence and the extent to which it logically implies or probabilifies the target proposition. Then there's the carrier of that content, its mode of presentation — the vehicle by which the content and its import are conveyed to the human mind — and how easily the human mind can access, register, and interact with the content and corresponding import. So, to provide better evidence for his existence, God would need to be able to provide evidence that boasts either greater epistemic support or is more psychologically accessible and salient.

But what would such hypothetical evidence look like? That is, what evidence could hypothetically lend greater (universal) epistemic support for God's

existence, or be more (universally) psychologically accessible and salient? How much clearer, stronger, or louder could the evidential signal for God's existence be? And how confident can we be that this hypothetical evidence would actually perform better in the long run? Because there is a limit to what can constitute legitimate evidence for any given proposition. And for what does constitute legitimate evidence, there are limits to how psychologically accessible and salient it can be (the evidential signal can only be clarified so much and its volume can only be turned up so loud, as it were).[3] And, in this context, it is not simply a matter of the evidence being better at a time or under certain circumstances, but over time and under all circumstances. That's just what it is to claim the possibility of better, more universally compelling evidence for human beings.

The upshot of my account, however, was that it is not at all clear what more universally compelling evidence for God's existence would look like, and with that, whether there *could* be more universally compelling evidence for the existence of a being like God.[4] The taxonomy of evidence for God's existence exhausted the basic possible modes of epistemic support for theistic belief, and for any given mode, there is no clear indication of what could guarantee greater psychological accessibility or salience across the board. In the absence of some principled reassurance, then, the claim that there could be meaningfully better,

[3] And in some cases, only the individual can further clarify the signal or turn up the volume. God can broadcast the evidence, but only human beings have direct control over the receiver controls.

[4] This sets the God case apart from the Vida case described above. Because in the Vida case, it is clear what universally compelling evidence would look like for Vida's existence, and in that respect, it is clear that universally compelling evidence for Vida's existence is possible. The same does not hold true for a being like God. This is why the hiddenness argument type may work when a being like Vida is taken as the target entity, but not when the target entity is God.

more compelling evidence remains unsubstantiated and, given my account, highly unlikely.

My suspicion here is that, behind the stated expectation for "better evidence," there are other, additional strategies proponents have in mind when they expect God to ensure less or more consistently distributed nonbelief. These strategies include, but need not be limited to: (1) improving epistemic support of available evidence for theistic belief by filtering out misleading evidence; (2) improving psychological accessibility and salience of available evidence by modifying the psychological profiles of human beings; (3) shifting from an epistemic mechanism for facilitating theistic belief to a psychological one by generating conditions that are psychologically effective in triggering belief-formation and -maintenance, regardless of epistemic support.[5]

(1) *Filtering out misleading evidence*. Overall epistemic support is not simply a function of supporting evidence but also counter evidence. So, the epistemic support for theistic belief is not simply a function of what positive evidence is available for *God exists*. It is also a function of what counter evidence is available – e.g., evidence that supports a non-theistic picture of the world – which in this context would constitute *misleading evidence*.[6] In order to increase overall epistemic support for theistic belief, God can filter out misleading evidence against his existence (God can clarify the evidential signal by filtering out evidential noise, as it were). For example, the most compelling evidence

[5] Importantly, none of these strategies need to rule out nonbelief altogether. They just need to ensure less nonbelief or a more even distribution of it.

[6] The context being a world in which God exists. This does assume that, conditional on God's existence, it is possible for there to be misleading evidence.

against God's existence is, arguably, the existence of evil and suffering in the world. So, to employ this strategy, God could reduce human awareness of said evil and suffering and thereby improve the overall epistemic support for theistic belief (for at least some of the human population, anyhow).

(2) *Modifying psychological profile*. Whether or not humans possess or appreciate available evidence for God's existence is partly determined by their psychological profile – e.g., whether they are interested and invested in the question of God's existence, whether they have the cognitive facility or conceptual framework needed to appreciate the evidence they possess, and so on. In order to facilitate greater psychological accessibility and salience of available evidence, God could modify those aspects of human psychological profiles that are interfering with or blocking the possession and appreciation of available evidence for God's existence.

(3) *Shifting from epistemic to psychological mechanism*. Actual belief-formation and -maintenance is not always a function of humans being responsive to epistemic factors or support. Sometimes humans believe what they do on account of factors that have little or nothing to do with the truth of the matter at hand — e.g., whether there is an association with things they already like or dislike, whether they are in a positive or negative mood or psychological state, whether there is cultural buy-in, whether there is support or opposition coming from their close relationships, and the like. Having full knowledge of the psychological profiles of human beings, God could generate conditions tailored to

what would prove psychologically effective or persuasive to them, regardless of epistemic support.

Now, on a certain level, we can grant straight away that strategies in the neighborhood of (1)-(3) would need to be employed if God were going to have greater control over the amount or distribution of nonbelief in the world. But unfortunately for proponents of the alternative formulations of the argument, none of these strategies can be employed by God. Here's why.

Up till now, we have focused on the disclosure-related constraints generated by the nature and mechanics of doxastic positioning: God can provide evidence to human beings but cannot control whether the evidence is possessed or appreciable. This was enough to address Premise 4 of the primary argument in the earlier chapters, and swapping the notion of appreciability for appreciation, this is enough to address the alternative arguments — *when* their driving expectations for less or more evenly distributed nonbelief are construed simply as expectations for *better evidence*. But more is needed to show why God cannot decrease or regulate the occurrence of nonbelief by employing the strategies represented in (1)-(3). To establish their unavailability, we need to turn our attention to other important disclosure-related constraints — viz., those constraints generated by God's *perfect love*.

The core claim here is that perfect love respects, and cannot violate, the nature of its object. The bearing this has on our discussion is two-fold. First, because God is perfectly loving toward human beings, God's strategies for facilitating theistic belief must respect the nature of human beings. Second, the

strategies represented in (1)-(3) violate the nature of human beings, making them unavailable to God. To the point that the arguments from nonbelief-amount or -distribution need such strategies to be viable, they cannot succeed.

Before unpacking these claims, however, I want to clarify the function of this moral argument and its relationship to the epistemic argument constituting my main account. Unlike the epistemic argument, the moral argument here does not take Premise 4 as its target – i.e., it does not take aim at the claim that God's self-disclosure would rule out rational nonbelief – instead it takes aim at additional, backup strategies for facilitating theistic belief that go beyond evidence-provision. The considerations figuring in the moral argument are not necessary for disengaging Premise 4; the resources of the epistemic argument are sufficient for that task. These moral considerations only become relevant when we shift our focus beyond Premise 4. In this way, the moral argument is *supplemental* to my main account and the success of my main account does not depend on its viability.

Now, returning to the first claim: God's strategies for facilitating theistic belief must respect the nature of human beings. There may be all sorts of reasons for God to create humans the way that they are — to create them with the capacity to get things right *or wrong*, to succeed *or fail*, to make a meaningful contribution to life processes and, with that, a meaningful difference to the corresponding life outcomes, for better *or worse*. I will not speculate on the matter. The main point here is that, once humans are the way they are, their nature generates constraints on how they are to be treated, even by God. Besides basic creative integrity – God is not at cross-purposes with himself or his creative choices – God's perfect love

can only make movements toward human beings that preserve, protect, and perfect their nature.

There are different dimensions of human nature we could home in on here, but as gestured at above, I will focus on the *agential* nature of human beings – their agency and autonomy – and that as it relates to the *epistemic* domain. The strategies represented in (1)-(3) are instances of epistemic influence and, as such, most directly pertain to the epistemic affairs of human beings, so it makes sense to home in on the agency associated with such affairs. With that, the two-fold claim becomes: God's strategies for facilitating theistic belief must respect the agential nature of human beings – particularly their epistemic agency and autonomy – *and* the strategies represented in (1)-(3) violate the epistemic-agential nature of human beings, making them unavailable to a perfectly loving God. To show as much, I will present a basic model of agency and autonomy, contextualize it to the epistemic domain to have a model of epistemic agency and autonomy, and then draw out how the (1)-(3) strategies constitute violations of said agency and autonomy.

Though, it is worth underscoring: I will only be presenting what I take to be the standard conception of autonomy on offer in the literature. I will not try to give a defense of it or tackle any longstanding debates. I will simply give a basic characterization of the concept of autonomy I am operating with and, trusting its intuitive merit, bring it to bear on the strategies represented in (1)-(3).

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The basic, recurring conception of autonomy in the literature is that of *self-governance*.[7] Human beings are reflective agents. As such, we have the unique capacity to direct and govern ourselves and our affairs according to values and principles that are in some meaningful sense *our own*. We are capable, not simply of orchestrating action, but of orchestrating action that aligns with values and principles we have personally endorsed, independent of external, manipulative, or coercive pressures.[8] In effect, we have the capacity to decide who we will be and what course our lives will ultimately take. And it is in the realization of this multifaceted capacity that we are autonomous.[9]

In this way, autonomy goes beyond the ontological endowment of reflective agency to include both an *authenticity* condition (values and principles endorsed free of coercion) and a *competence* condition (psyche-action alignment). To be autonomous, we have to cultivate an authentic psychological profile — we need to be able to reflect upon, evaluate, and endorse our values and principles. And we have to develop the capacities that enable us to exercise our agency in alignment with our psychological profile — we need to be able to, say, engage in rational thought processes and form accurate pictures of ourselves and the world,

[7] See Buss and Westland (2018), Christman (2020), and Stoljar (2024).

[8] As John Christman writes: "Put most simply, to be autonomous is to govern oneself, to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self" (Christman 2020: 3). And further: "[The autonomous agent is] able to act, reflect, and choose on the basis of factors that are somehow her own (authentic in some sense)" (Christman 2020: 6).

[9] There is a question of whether to view autonomy as a default capacity and state that we have by virtue of being agents or to model it as an achievement – i.e., the virtuous exercise of the target capacity and corresponding state. It seems most plausible to view autonomy as admitting of a spectrum in which some baseline autonomy is enjoyed by virtue of being an agent, but the full realization of autonomy is an achievement.

as well as foster executive functionality, self-regulation, and follow-through, free from debilitating pathologies. Because without authenticity, there is no self in self-governance. And without competence, there is no effective governance.

Another recurrent claim in the literature relevant to our discussion is that being reflective agents not only enables the capacity for self-governance but also *commands respect* for this capacity in ourselves and others. That is to say, there is a kind of *self-sovereignty* embedded in the endowment of reflective agency: the agent not only has the capacity to govern themselves but also the *right* to do so. So, as reflective agents, we not only have the capacity to be autonomous, but also the right to be.

This last claim of self-sovereignty is functionally equivalent to my earlier claim that permissible treatment of human beings is nature-respecting treatment. Human beings are reflective agents, so nature-respecting treatment will be treatment that respects their ontological status *as* agents. And respecting human beings *as* agents involves respecting their capacity for autonomy and self-governance. So, permissible treatment of human beings is *autonomy-respecting* treatment.[10]

Autonomy-respecting treatment can be construed negatively and positively.[11] Negatively, the exercise and cultivation of the capacity for autonomy is not to be *acted against* or *undermined* by ourselves or others. Positively, the

[10] As a constraint on human activity, this may be understood as commanding respect for God's creation. As a constraint on divine activity, this may, as stated earlier in the chapter, be understood as the internal constraint of integrity and the internal constrain of love. God is not at cross purposes with himself, and if God created human beings to be reflective agents, it is hard to see how he could fail to treat them as anything but that. And, on account of God's perfect love toward human beings, God will only interact with human beings in a way that is nature-respecting.

[11] See Kant (2012).

exercise and cultivation of this capacity is to be *actively supported, encouraged,* and *honored*. The negative construal marks out a kind of minimal condition for respect (the bare minimum, as it were), while the positive construal constitutes a more complete manifestation of respect. Either way, the upshot is this: by being endowed with reflective agency, we not only have the capacity for self-governance but also the right to cultivate and exercise this capacity in the world, whether this amounts to merely being *allowed* to do so or being actively *supported* in the process.

With this basic characterization of autonomy *simpliciter* in hand, we can now home in on *epistemic autonomy*, which tracks agency exercised within the epistemic domain of human existence. Basically, epistemic autonomy is self-governance over our *epistemic affairs*, which include (but are by no means limited to) the following epistemic activities, processes, and states: belief-formation and -maintenance and our resultant doxastic profiles, concept acquisition and mastery and our operative conceptual frameworks, the questions we ask and our ongoing epistemic projects, the epistemic methods and standards we employ to make epistemic progress, and the like. In short, everything that comprises our epistemic lives.

As was the case with autonomy *simpliciter*, epistemic autonomy consists not only in the ontological endowment of epistemic agency and corresponding capacity to direct our epistemic affairs, but in the *authentic* and *competent* exercise of that capacity. It involves governing our development as epistemic agents and determining what course our epistemic lives take, and that in a way

that is authentic and integrous to who we are and what we care about, whether it's in the questions we ask, the epistemic projects we take up, the way we carry them out, or the views we entertain and ultimately endorse.[12]

And, finally, this epistemic agency embeds a kind of epistemic self-sovereignty. The ontological endowment of epistemic agency not only enables the capacity for epistemic autonomy but commands respect for it as well: humans are to be treated *as* epistemic agents, which involves respecting their capacity and right to govern their epistemic affairs, by either *allowing* or *actively supporting* their exercise and cultivation of this capacity. Permissible treatment of human beings is *epistemic autonomy-respecting* treatment.

This condition of permissible human treatment serves as a constraint on permissible *epistemic influence*, which tracks any influence exerted over the epistemic affairs of human beings — what they believe or wonder about, what conceptual frameworks organize their thought and experience, what methods they trust and employ, and the like. Permissible epistemic influence respects epistemic autonomy, either by allowing or supporting it, while problematic epistemic influence violates epistemic autonomy, either by interfering with it or undermining it. —Which brings us back to the strategies represented in (1)-(3). The main claim here is that these strategies are problematic modes of epistemic influence because they *do* directly interfere with or undermine human epistemic

[12] Here there may be concern that talk of epistemic autonomy is misplaced because autonomous agency implies a kind of control over our epistemic affairs that we seemingly lack. But (1) we don't have that much less direct voluntary control in the epistemic domain than other (practical) domains of human existence and (2) where we lack direct voluntary control, we have an abundance of indirect voluntary control, and this is enough for meaningful self-governance over epistemic affairs.

agency and autonomy. As a result, they constitute nature-violating modes of human treatment and are unavailable to a perfectly loving God.

There are a number of ways we could make this violation salient. We could draw out specific conditions of epistemic-autonomy respect and show how the strategies violate these conditions — i.e., derive principles from the above characterization of epistemic autonomy and then show how the strategies fail to uphold them. These respective conditions and principles could look something like: epistemic influence must not involve deception, epistemic influence must operate by epistemic means, epistemic influence must support the epistemic agent's authenticity and competence, and so on. Relative to such conditions, a cursory report would show that: (1) is problematic because there is no way to filter out evidence of evil and suffering without significant deception; (2) is problematic because it interferes with the authenticity of the agent's psychological profile and capacity to bring their affairs into alignment with said psychological profile; and, (3) is problematic because it bypasses the agent's epistemic processes and tries to facilitate belief by non-epistemic means.

Though there is merit to this approach, it is more than we can properly execute in this context. Thankfully there is a simpler way to make the violation of epistemic autonomy salient, and that is by asking why God would hypothetically employ such strategies in the first place. What value do strategies like (1)-(3) have over and above the basic strategy of providing evidence? What are these strategies able to accomplish that evidence-provision does not and why?

I want to suggest that, however we fill in the details, we inevitably get back to some iteration of the following answer: without strategic epistemic interventions like (1)-(3), humans would be able to make up their own minds regarding God's existence. And with that, humans could make up their minds against it.[13] Put simply, the strategies are systematic ways of taking the epistemic matter of God's existence out of human hands, of preventing them from being able to make a meaningful contribution – and with that a meaningful difference – to the epistemic process and outcome of determining what they believe about whether or not God exists. —Which is just to say that they directly interfere with and undermine the cultivation and exercise of human epistemic autonomy *vis-a-vis* matters of God's existence.[14] By doing so, these strategies constitute nature-violating forms of epistemic treatment and cannot be employed by God to facilitate theistic belief and control the occurrence of nonbelief, as expected by the alternative arguments.

For all these reasons, the alternative hiddenness arguments from nonbelief-amount and -distribution do not fare any better than the argument from nonbelief-kind (i.e., rational nonbelief), and the conclusion of my account holds: hiddenness arguments depend on false assumptions about what results God can guarantee by positioning human beings to believe he exists. God's disclosure of his existence cannot *guarantee* no rational nonbelief will occur, nor can it

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[13] Strategies like (1)-(3) only become attractive in the context of theistic belief facilitation if we admit that providing evidence for God's existence cannot guarantee better results.

[14] *Minimally*. It is worth stressing that beliefs are not isolated, standalone entities but intricately interconnected and web-like. This holds true all the more when it comes to worldview-determining beliefs. What we believe about God connects up to beliefs about a whole host of subject matter, so controlling for that belief will inevitably involve controlling for other, interconnected beliefs.

guarantee that there will be less or more evenly distributed nonbelief in the world. And the strategies that try to get around this limitation are nature-violating and ultimately unavailable to a perfectly loving God. So, *contra* the hiddenness argument: the fact that rational nonbelief *does* exist in the world – or that there is as much nonbelief as there is, or that nonbelief is distributed the way that it is – does not constitute evidence that such a God does not exist.

§3 PHILOSOPHICAL UPSHOTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

I want to leave off by highlighting some takeaways from my account, as well as acknowledging the primary points deserving of further attention.

The first takeaway is that much more of us figures into what we believe than we often realize or acknowledge, and this is made salient when we consider what it would take for someone else to determine or control what we believe. Our beliefs about things that matter are not psychologically isolated entities but intricate outworkings of everything that makes us who we are.

The second takeaway is that there is only so much that can be done for us, *if* our agency or autonomy is going to be respected. Others can help provide supporting conditions, but the rest is for us to take care of. — Though, it is always open to us to delegate what is by default ours to do by giving others permission to do it in our stead.

The third takeaway is that the attempt to inform others holds no guarantees, even under the best circumstances. That is to say, even if we have done all there is that can be done to position someone else to form or maintain some belief, our efforts can never guarantee that there will be the right kind of

uptake – and the person we wish to inform or influence may be no less rational for it. To guarantee a particular doxastic result, we would have to prevent them from making a meaningful contribution or difference to the epistemic process and outcome, i.e., we would have to keep them from autonomously exercising their epistemic agency in the matter at hand. — Which resonates with the Rawlsian sentiment that consensus cannot be guaranteed without oppression.

The fourth and final takeaway is the reminder that normative guidance can only get us so far. Normative adherence doesn't guarantee that we will get things right. —But it is still our best chance at getting things right. And when we get it right, we've gotten it right the right way.

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There are a number of dialectical limitations and points deserving of further attention that are worth acknowledging, in the discussion in general and my account in particular. The general discussion, for example, organizes itself around *de dicto* theistic belief, as opposed to *de re* theistic belief. In the context of personal relationship facilitation, we can appreciate the eventual need to believe that God exists *as* God, but given the developmental nature of human beings and personal relationship, as well as the unspecified timeline for realizing divine purposes and priorities, the importance of *de re* theistic belief may be underappreciated here. Furthermore, the operative conception of human beings in the discussion is a bit underspecified, tracking generic adult cognitive-relational functionality without acknowledging the various developmental stages of human beings as well as the wide cognitive variance across the human population.

Points deserving of further attention target our operative model of evidence, the determination of evidential import, and the determination of rational requirement given the flexibility introduced by failures of evidence-appreciability.

Modeling evidence to illuminate transmission. Our current models of evidence do well in illuminating the nature and structure of rational belief and knowledge. They do not effectively illuminate the process of evidence *transmission*. Theoretical supplementation is needed, particularly, a model of what evidence is – an ontology of evidence – that can better illuminate the process of evidence-provision and evidence-acquisition, what it is to make evidence available and what it takes to possess the evidence that is available to us.

Determination of evidential import. Our ways of talking about what the evidence supports and how evidential import is determined tend to be inconsistent, oscillating back and forth between more objective and more subjective construals. For example, we talk as though there can be evidence for God's existence with standalone import that can be provided to human beings, but then we talk of the import of some body of evidence being a function of an individual's epistemic profile – their total evidence along with their operative epistemic methods and standards.

Rational requirement and flexibility. On my account, it is not entirely clear what an individual should believe given their evidence when they are not in a position to appreciate its full import – particularly when the inability to appreciate the import is due to lack of import-transparency. The lack of appreciability may render the evidence functionally inert, but more would need to be said to what that

means for what the individual is rationally required to believe given their evidence.

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At the end of the day, we cannot sort out everything. All we can do is try to say something to the point, something that generates further thought and insight, even if we do not (and cannot) say everything that deserves to be said. My hope is that the foregoing account has succeeded in at least that effort.

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