

Non-Identity Reasoning and the Hiddenness Argument:

The Love of God for Persons Contingent on Nonresistant Nonbelief

GRANT WALKER BROADHURST

grantwalkerbroadhurst@gmail.com

Abstract: If a theory of identity compatible with non-identity reasoning is accepted, J. L. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument ought to be rejected. The core of non-identity reasoning is that particular persons can only come into existence under certain circumstances. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument depends on a conception of divine love that is relationship-seeking such that God would never allow a capable person to be in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God because he would always be open to relationship. Yet if particular persons can only come into existence under particular circumstances, then given Schellenberg's own conception of divine love, God would be motivated by his love to actualize nonresistant nonbelief in order to bring about (and form relationships with) persons who can only come into existence under circumstances that include other capable persons being in a state of nonresistant nonbelief.

Keywords: Divine Hiddenness, Non-Identity, Hiddenness Argument, Origin Essentialism, Possible Worlds

Introduction

"A silent heaven is the greatest mystery of our existence," declared 19th century Irish policeman-turned-defender-of-the-faith Sir Robert Anderson in the opening line of *The Silence of God* (Anderson 1986, 1). Anderson concluded his preface with this: "In the presence of the stern and dismal facts of life, the faith of earlier days passes away, for surely a God who is entirely passive and always *unavailable* is for all practical purposes non-existent" (*Ibid.*, 10). Yet perhaps such a God is not only "for all

practical purposes non-existent" but *actually* nonexistent. J. L. Schellenberg's revised hiddenness argument is a notably strong and influential formulation of the idea that the hiddenness of God indicates his nonexistence. Schellenberg argues a maximally loving God is not consistent with the existence of capable persons in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t regarding the proposition that God exists.¹ Since nonresistant nonbelief exists, the conclusion is God does not exist. Schellenberg says his hiddenness argument is "to be distinguished from any focus on pain or suffering" and does not trade on God's moral goodness or any supposed immorality or unethicity on God's part (Schellenberg 2010, 54–55). Schellenberg's hiddenness argument is thus a unique part of the case for atheism apart from the problem of evil.²

Following Vince Vitale, Scott Hill, and Robert Adams in their work applying non-identity reasoning to the problem of evil, I shall apply non-identity reasoning to the hiddenness argument. In doing so, I will show that if particular persons can only come into existence under certain circumstances, then on Schellenberg's own concept of relationship-seeking divine love, actualizing nonresistant nonbelief is the sort of thing God would do out of love for created persons. As a brief example,³ if Charlotte being in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t is a part of the particular circumstances of her daughter Marcia's origin (e.g., because Charlotte's nonresistant nonbelief impacts her decisions—such as whom she marries and when she engages in procreative activities—prior to Marcia's conception from a particular egg and a particular spermatozoon), then if Charlotte were never in a state of nonresistant nonbelief, Marcia would never be able to exist. In other words, God cannot actualize the particular person Marcia without actualizing a state of affairs in which Charlotte is—at least temporarily—in a state of nonresistant nonbelief. Yet if God loves Marcia, then his desire for relationship with her would be a motivation for him to actualize nonresistant nonbelief—even if he also loves Charlotte. Many more examples could be given as well such as scenarios involving the nonresistant nonbelief of older siblings, fathers, neighbors, and others who could affect the chain of circumstances that leads to the coming-into-existence of a particular person.

While I will focus on applying non-identity reasoning to the hiddenness argument rather than offer a robust defense of non-identity reasoning itself (which

¹ Going forward, whenever I say, "a person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t ," "nonresistant nonbelief at time t ," "nonresistant nonbelief," or similar terms, I mean "a capable person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t regarding the proposition that God exists."

² For Schellenberg's extensive arguments for this distinction, see Schellenberg (2010, 45–60).

³ For clarity's sake, this example is based on the real world, but to properly address Schellenberg's argument, I will later discuss how my argument does not rely on facts about human beings.

would take many more pages), the implication is that if a theory of identity compatible with non-identity reasoning is accepted, the hiddenness argument ought to be rejected.

Non-Identity Reasoning and the Categorization of Particular Persons

The core of non-identity reasoning is that particular persons can only come into existence under certain circumstances. In defending non-identity reasoning in 1984, atheist philosopher Derek Parfit asked: "How many of us could truly claim, 'Even if railways and motorcars had never been invented, I would still have been born?'" (1987, 361). Given that my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents all led lives deeply affected by railways and motorcars, it seems fair to me that if they had not been invented, I would not have been born.⁴ The circumstances can be far finer grained, however. The entry on the non-identity problem in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says the identity of a particular person depends on the identity of the genetic parents, the precise circumstances of the conception, and numerous other intricate factors that affect the circumstances of that conception (Roberts 2021). M.A. Roberts writes: "Much of what has been done in human history, had it been done differently, would surely have undone the conceptions of vast numbers of people" (*Ibid.*). The idea that will underpin my argument is that particular and varied circumstances of the coming-into-existence of a particular person—while arguably not *sufficient* for the identity of that person—are nevertheless *necessary* for that person to come into existence.⁵

This concept is not dependent on any single theory of identity. However, for the sake of simplicity I will employ only one going forward: what Vitale categorized as

⁴ For Saul Kripke, accepting this basic idea about origins is in part a matter of reflection, and he provides a helpful scenario: one of Queen Elizabeth being born to Mr. and Mrs. Truman. Kripke asks: "How could a person originating from different parents, from a totally different sperm and egg, be *this very woman*?" He concludes: "It seems to me that anything coming from a different origin would not be this object." See Saul A. Kripke (1998, 113).

⁵ To be clear, when I say that particular circumstances are necessary for a particular person to come into existence, this in no way implies that such circumstances are themselves necessary or that the resulting person is necessary. It's simply that if the particular circumstances fail to obtain, then necessarily the particular person fails to obtain. The particular circumstances (and resulting person) could very well fail to obtain—such as because creatures made choices incompatible with the existence of a particular person (e.g., not performing activities required for that person to be conceived). Moreover, once a person exists, they could make any number of choices. The non-identity thesis—as well as my broader argument—does not require (or lead to) determinism or modal collapse, in other words.

The Complete Causal History View, which is a version of strong origin essentialism. On *The Complete Causal History View*, the identity of something (including a person) depends on “its initial state and the complete causal history leading to its origination” (Vitale 2020, 178). One of the strengths of such a view is it eliminates ambiguity about how much change in the origin is too much change for the object to still be the same object as well as ambiguity about whether a duplicate is identical to the original (Hill 2022, 772–86). For example, a Benjamin Franklin produced by, say, artificial insemination would not be the *same* Benjamin Franklin as one produced by sex—even if both Benjamin Franklins were physically, spiritually, and psychologically indistinguishable. Moreover, if God creates a duplicate of our universe in which we all have doppelgangers, there would be no confusion about which persons are *us* because those persons would have different origins with different materials.

Hill also says that accepting a similar view “yields a gain in explanatory power” for theists (Hill 2022, 773).⁶ Hill notes that philosophers have reason to accept a new view if it explains “something puzzling” about their wider position (*Ibid.*). I am personally attracted to views along the lines of *The Complete Causal History View*, and in general I will refer to this strong view when discussing non-identity reasoning simply because it is easier. Later on, I will discuss how it also works on weaker views.

Now the coming-into-existence of a person might have nothing to do with procreation and yet that person’s identity still be dependent on the circumstances of their origin. For example, on *The Complete Causal History View*, the identity of a particular baseball would have to do with its causal history even though the baseball was assembled in a factory. A silicon-based alien birthed out of a rock would also have a personal identity tied to *that* origin. In this, the necessity of *origins* also applies to persons who are created *ex nihilo* such that if God creates a hundred individuals *ex nihilo* in a chronological sequence, each one will have a different origin—and thus be a numerically different person—even if they all have the same physical-spiritual-psychological configurations. In this, special facts about human reproduction only figure into the identity of persons formed by human reproduction.

Now such non-identity reasoning has an implication: The identities of persons (human or not) in many logically possible worlds are metaphysically interdependent on one another such that a particular mother (for example) must

⁶ Hill’s discussion revolves around *Assembly Origin Essentialism*, which is markedly similar to *The Complete Causal History View* but more concerned with the materials involved in person or object’s origin.

exist⁷ and conceive her child under certain circumstances in order for that particular child to exist. A set of particular persons comprised of the mother (M) and her offspring (O), then, would be a set of metaphysically interdependent persons (M, O) in which O is necessarily contingent on M existing. By “necessarily contingent on M existing,” I mean that O is contingent on M in all logically possible worlds in which O exists. That is, in no logically possible world does O exist without M’s existence in that world.

This further means we can categorize all persons in all possible worlds as follows:

Type A person: A person S who exists in at least one possible world in which circumstance X does not obtain.

Type B person: A person S who exists *only* in possible worlds in which circumstance X obtains.

These categories are mutually exclusive such that no Type A person is *also* a Type B person for any given circumstance X such as “M gets pregnant.” But simply because person S exists in at least one possible world where circumstance X doesn’t obtain doesn’t mean that person S exists *only* in possible worlds where circumstance X doesn’t obtain. For example, if “circumstance X” is “M gets pregnant,” then O is a Type B person and M is a Type A person, given non-identity reasoning. We could also broaden this out to a less specific circumstance X, such as the circumstance X “someone gets pregnant.” Assuming M and O were both born via a pregnancy, this means both M and O are Type B persons given non-identity reasoning. For both M and O *only* exist in possible worlds in which someone gets pregnant (their respective mothers). Note we can divide persons among these categories regardless of whether God exists or even what theory of identity we embrace.

Indeed, one category might be entirely empty. This categorization scheme also works for logically impossible circumstance X’s: All persons are Type A persons in regard to logically impossible circumstance X’s. This categorization scheme also works for necessary circumstance X’s: All possible persons are Type B persons with regard to necessary circumstance X’s. For no one exists in a logically possible world in which a necessary truth is false since there are no such logically possible worlds. Thus, for some circumstance X’s, one or the other category is empty of any persons—but never both.

⁷ By “exist” in possible worlds, I mean that in possible worlds there exist persons in the sense that if a given possible world was actual then the persons who exist in that possible world would actually exist.

With all that in mind, let's plug in "a capable person is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t " as our circumstance X . I will discuss in more detail what that means in a moment. But given the preceding discussion, there are two categories of persons across all possible worlds. The terms are as follows:

Type A person: A person S who exists in at least one possible world in which "a capable person is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t " does not obtain.

Type B person: A person S who exists *only* in possible worlds in which "a capable person is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t " obtains.

Going forward—unless otherwise noted—whenever I refer to Type A persons and Type B persons, I will use the above definitions, not the broader definitions.

The Hiddenness Argument, Reviewed

We can now review Schellenberg's argument.⁸ I will follow Daniel Howard-Snyder in substituting "created persons" for "finite persons" for clarity's sake (Howard-Snyder 2018, 128).⁹ With that redaction, Schellenberg's hiddenness argument is as follows:

- (1) If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such created persons as there may be.
- (2) If God is perfectly loving toward such created persons as there may be, then for any capable created person S and time t , God is at t open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with S at t .
- (3) If God exists, then for any capable created person S and time t , God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t .
- (4) If for any capable created person S and time t , God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t , then for any capable created person S and

⁸ I shall draw from Schellenberg's 2015 iteration of his argument, which is identical to the wording he used in 2021. See Schellenberg (2021, 63–66).

⁹ To be clear, I have no intention of begging the question regarding whether such persons are created by God or any other entity. Rather, I mean such persons have been brought into existence by *something* outside of themselves, which would not be the case with God, if he exists.

time t , it is not the case that S is at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

- (5) If God exists, then for any capable created person S and time t , it is not the case that S is at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (6) There is at least one capable created person S and time t such that S is or was at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (7) It is not the case that God exists. (Schellenberg [2015] 2018, 24)

First, Schellenberg says that (1), (2), and (4) are necessary truths¹⁰ (Schellenberg 2015, 62), and from them it follows that (3) and (5) are also necessary truths. It is only in (6) that Schellenberg introduces “an empirical fact” about the actual world, which is not alleged to be a necessary truth (*Ibid.*; see also Weidner 2021, 5). Thus, the argument does *not* purport to show that the conclusion is a necessary truth (see Weidner 2021, 4). However, since the argument is deductively valid, the conclusion is true if each premise is true. I will counter (2) by showing that it is *not* true given non-identity reasoning. My argument for why (2) is false relies on accepting Schellenberg’s own concept of divine love, which drives his argument. To be clear, this strategy is not *inherently* at odds with independently rejecting (6), any other premise, or Schellenberg’s underlying concept of divine love. For those who reject such elements, what this paper will do is offer *additional* reason to reject Schellenberg’s argument.

Indeed, Schellenberg’s argument arguably addresses an all-too-narrow, or even erroneous, concept of God. Michael Rea has argued that Schellenberg’s argument only deals with the existence of a particular concept of God, which not all theologians would accept and is indeed “a straw deity” rather than the God of traditional Christian theism (Rea 2018, 211). Additionally, Jon McGinnis has noted that Schellenberg’s concept of divine love is one that historical Islamic thinkers would have rejected (McGinnis 2018, 158–59). Schellenberg himself recognizes that theistic thought is not always in line with his concept of God’s love (Schellenberg 2018, 22). Indeed, if Schellenberg’s argument is sound, then it provides reason to reject the very concept of divine love that drives it!

Schellenberg has not left himself without defense regarding his concepts of God and divine love, however. Theology, as he rightly points out, is influenced by the nature of the world we observe—including the apparent hiddenness of God (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰ This was not always Schellenberg’s approach. See also Schellenberg (2005, 204) and Veronika Weidner (2021, 5).

But according to Schellenberg, in philosophy—unlike in theology—there is “no right to say such a thing as that God’s love should be interpreted in a limited way because this is all that is compatible with the actual world, and we know that God exists and has created the actual world!” (*Ibid.*). In his view, philosophy is in the business of considering what “ultimate divine reality” would be like if thought of in personal terms apart from such constraints (*Ibid.*). His basic strategy is to argue that any unsurpassably great person must have the great-making property of being “unsurpassably loving,” which means that if God is thought to be an unsurpassably great person (as he generally is thought to be), then God must be unsurpassably loving (Schellenberg 2018, 17; see also Schellenberg 2015, 89–102). It is from reflection upon this unsurpassable love that other elements flow (see Schellenberg 2018, 18–22, and Schellenberg 2021, 237–40).

We’ll explore those other elements in a moment, but I will not take issue with Schellenberg’s concepts of God and divine love for four reasons. First, if even Schellenberg’s strong and rather parental concepts of God and divine love cannot sustain the hiddenness argument, then the hiddenness argument will be of even less threat to concepts of God and divine love that envision a less parental God and/or a love that is less relationship-seeking. Second, I happen to *like* Schellenberg’s overall concept of God and divine love. As Rea noted, even if Schellenberg’s argument fails against certain concepts of God, it “still poses a threat to belief in a God about whom Schellenberg’s theological assumptions are true” (Rea 2018, 224). Rea says for theists who accept such notions, this should give them pause and reason to reconsider their theological views about divine love (*Ibid.*, 224–25). Or, as I am doing, challenge Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument. Third, I believe Schellenberg’s understanding of divine love has explanatory power for why nonresistant nonbelief exists and perhaps even why *we* exist, and so I count this as reason to accept his concept of divine love.¹¹ Fourth, if Schellenberg’s own concept of divine love—the concept that drives his argument—can be turned against his argument, then I consider this an especially devastating response to the hiddenness argument. Therefore, I will not reject Schellenberg’s concept of God and divine love but rather embrace it in refuting his hiddenness argument.

For Schellenberg, although unsurpassable love as a great-making property entails benevolence, love is more than mere benevolence for unsurpassable love also includes a desire for relationship (Schellenberg 2018, 18). Specifically, this love includes wanting to be in a personal relationship with the object of one’s love (*Ibid.*).

¹¹ I don’t claim, however, that this explanatory power *alone* makes his account of divine love the best explanation or more probable than not.

By “personal relationship,” Schellenberg means “a conscious, reciprocal relationship, and a conscious relationship is a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in” (*Ibid.*, 23). The relationship cannot be unconscious on either party’s side—that is, a relationship where one party is not aware that they are in the relationship. Moreover, both parties must know of each other’s existence to even begin a personal relationship, according to Schellenberg (*Ibid.*).¹²

For Schellenberg, “valuing personal relationship for its own sake belongs to the very nature of such love” (*Ibid.*, 19). Schellenberg is clear that the phrase “for its own sake” is essential because such love isn’t merely about *God being benevolent* but also about *God valuing the relationship itself* (*Ibid.*, 20). This is not unlike how a parent-child relationship might be valued by the parent not only because the parent has benevolent intentions toward his child but because the parent wants to be in a relationship with his child. For Schellenberg, God values the relationship for its own sake because he also values the participants in the relationship for their own sakes (*Ibid.*, 19). Schellenberg continues: “Now God, being perfect, *will* value God’s own being and that of *every* other person for its own sake, recognizing their great intrinsic value” (*Ibid.*; emphasis in original). That rules out no one. Moreover, it also does not begin at any point in time. Schellenberg writes: “If God is unsurpassably loving, then God must always love finite creatures and so the attitude will be one that we should expect God always to display” (*Ibid.*, 20). And, of course, if God is always loving created beings, then he is always valuing them and his relationships with them for their own sakes.

What makes each created person in the relationship *that* person rather than some other person is also important to God as the ultimate lover. Schellenberg explains:

If God values a finite person for her own sake then God values for its own sake whatever makes her the person she is as distinct from other persons. This will involve valuing for their own sake whatever central dispositions contribute to making her the person she is as distinct from other persons. (*Ibid.*, 19)

That God loves *particular persons* rather than nonspecific persons who can be swapped out is an important point for my non-identity response, and so I will quote

¹² However, as Daniel Howard-Snyder has pointed out, there is a difference between *de re* and *de dicto* awareness in which a person is in a relationship with another person but not aware of that person by a particular description (Howard-Snyder 2018, 138). Applying this to God, a tribesman may not know of God by anything even approaching an orthodox description. But this does not mean the tribesman is not in a conscious, reciprocal relationship in which he knows of God’s existence in a *de re* sense. This strategy is not at odds with my own.

Schellenberg again:

If God values me for my own sake then it must be me as distinct from other persons that is valued. A generic valuing of me as an instance of humanity, for example, would hardly do. For then if another human were instantaneously substituted for me, nothing would change: an instance of humanity would remain available for valuing. But surely if God values me for my own sake and I cease to exist, something of value *would be* lost. (*Ibid.*; emphasis in original)

Thus, if God exists, God loves J. L. Schellenberg for his own sake and so desires a relationship with J. L. Schellenberg for its own sake. Even closely similar persons—say, clones with all J. L. Schellenberg's memories—are no substitute, even if God loves them too.

For our discussion, however, it is important to note Schellenberg's own understanding of the first premise does not necessarily mean God would love or create *us*. This is also crucial for this paper, and so I shall again quote Schellenberg at some length:

The argument does not say, in its first premise, that a God would be unsurpassably loving toward *us* or toward *human beings*. Indeed, that premise is compatible with God not creating any finite persons at all. . . . All of this is more important than it might seem, since if the finite persons referred to by the argument are thought to be human beings, then it may mistakenly be supposed that facts about human beings determine whether God has reason to permit nonresistant nonbelief or not. (*Ibid.*, 26; emphasis in original)

The temptation, then, in developing a non-identity response to Schellenberg's argument is to focus on certain facts about human beings—or more specifically, *us*. I am resisting that temptation—hence the discussion applying non-identity reasoning to nonhuman persons.

But if God is perfectly loving toward whatever created persons may in fact exist—which may or may not include *us*—it is also the case that God is *always* open to being in personal, reciprocal relationships with those persons in the sense that a person could enter such a relationship “just by trying,” according to Schellenberg (*Ibid.*, 27). The central idea here is that God, being the sort of person who desires a relationship with capable created persons, would *never* be closed off to a relationship at any point in time. Thus, God will *never* allow a capable person to be in a state where he does

not believe God exists, despite not resisting God in any way.¹³ For belief that the other person exists is a necessary prerequisite for any personal relationship (Schellenberg 2015, 23).

Now without the time restriction—the idea that God would *never* be closed to relationship such that a person could not begin a relationship with him just by trying—the theist could simply respond that while God may be hidden such that some persons whom he loves are in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t, God will be open to such a relationship later and provide sufficient conditions for belief later, perhaps even after their deaths and resurrections. But there *is* that time constraint in Schellenberg's argument. Although sometimes misunderstood as something like *God will provide persons (either actual or whatever persons as may be) with sufficient evidence for belief*, Schellenberg's argument trades on the idea that there will *never* be a person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief (Schellenberg 2015, 27; 2005, 206). After all, belief that the other person exists is a necessary prerequisite for any personal relationship—and that is what God wants (Schellenberg 2018, 23).

Applying Non-Identity Reasoning to the Hiddenness Argument

But this does not go deep enough: the most basic requirement for any conscious, reciprocal personal relationship is that both participants exist. A person cannot know anything if he does not exist. Thus, if God desires relationships with created persons S_1 and S_2 , then he will need to bring them into existence to form those relationships. This is not unlike how a would-be parent must first have children to have relationships with those children. Therefore, if God loves created persons who do not (yet) exist in Schellenberg's sense of divine love, he has a strong motivation to actualize them for their own sakes and for the sake of relationships with them.

Indeed, in his original book on the topic, Schellenberg wrote:

We might go on to point out once more that God would, at any time, desire personal relationship with us for its own sake as well. A loving God, we might expect, would bring us into existence *so that* he might enter into fellowship with us—for our sakes, but also for its own sake as well. (Schellenberg [1993] 2006, 26; emphasis in original)

¹³ Schellenberg operates from the idea that God would give human beings libertarian free will, including the ability to resist him, which functions as a constraint on his argument. Thus, he does not argue from nonbelief that has its root in the created person resisting God—such as through sinfulness. See Schellenberg (2015, 53-54).

Remember: When Schellenberg says that God is *always* loving toward created persons, there is no limit on it. If God always displays a loving attitude toward creatures, then there is no point at which God *begins* to display a loving attitude toward creatures—a point preceded by a period where God “loved not” the very same creatures. If there were, then his being closed to a personal relationship at time *t* might be no issue at all.

Keeping both that and non-identity reasoning in mind, consider the following possible scenario: At time *t* S_1 is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief, and while in that state, S_1 plays a role in the origin of S_2 . If S_1 were *not* in that state of nonresistant nonbelief, then the circumstances of S_2 ’s origin would be different, and so S_2 would not exist. S_2 is thus a Type B person in regard to S_1 being in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time *t*. This is a situation where if God chooses to actualize *both* S_1 and S_2 , he must wait to provide the belief-producing conditions to S_1 until *after* S_1 plays his role in S_2 ’s origin. If God reveals himself too soon to S_1 in order to enable S_1 to form a personal relationship with him “just by trying,” then S_2 cannot come into existence. Yet out of love for them, actualizing them both is something he is motivated to do. Now he might not actualize them for *other* reasons, but his love for them is not one of those reasons. Thus, if God is perfectly loving toward such created persons as there may be, then it is possible that for some capable created person S and time *t*, God is closed to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with S at *t*.

The upshot of this is that actualizing the set of created persons (S_1, S_2) is *very much the sort of thing an unsurpassably loving God would do* even though it means S_1 will at time *t* be unable to begin a personal relationship with God just by trying. This is at odds with Schellenberg’s second premise.

Thus, in the conditional premise that is (2), the consequent (B) doesn’t follow from the antecedent (A). To say that

- (2) If God is perfectly loving toward such created persons as there may be, then for any capable created person S and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with S at *t*. (Schellenberg 2018, 24–25)

is like saying “If George loves his kids, then George will always feed and clothe them.” Now George might very well feed and clothe his children because he loves them, but simply because George loves his children doesn’t mean that he will *always*

feed and clothe them.¹⁴ Just because someone will *generally* take some action X doesn't mean that they will *always* take that action X. Yet Schellenberg's argument depends on the idea that God would *always* be open since he is unsurpassably loving.

Schellenberg Versus an Adams-Inspired Counterargument

To understand how Schellenberg might respond to this argument, we need to examine how Schellenberg argued in his 1993 book against a response he developed from Robert Adams's "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil." I will show that some of Schellenberg's criticisms of the Adams-inspired response are unfounded as well as how my own non-identity response is distinct from, and avoids the pitfalls of, the Adams-inspired response.

For Adams, and by Schellenberg's own interpretation of him, persons who exist could not have come into existence without God allowing evils, and so assuming these persons live an overall worthwhile life, then God did not wrong them by bringing them into existence (Schellenberg 2006, 184–85). Schellenberg suggested critics of the hiddenness argument might similarly argue that since hiddenness "is in fact a necessary condition of our existence, God cannot be said to have wronged us" in allowing nonresistant nonbelief (*Ibid.*, 186).¹⁵

Schellenberg rejected this argument, but his reasons for doing so were of mixed quality and with one glaring omission. Crucially, he did *not* attack the idea that some possible persons (including human persons) could not come into existence without God following a policy of nonresistant nonbelief allowance. This indicates Schellenberg's own strategy against my non-identity response would *not* include rejecting the underpinning non-identity reasoning. In this, much of the preceding discussion may be irrelevant to Schellenberg himself since, at least in his earlier work, he had no issue with that part of the Adams-inspired response. However, he did have other criticisms of the Adams-inspired response that must be addressed.

First, he said that "what a perfectly loving God would do cannot in all cases be

¹⁴ George might be in prison and lack funds, or his children might be kidnapped, or he might be an invalid who wholly depends on the care of others, or his children might be grown and so perfectly capable of feeding and clothing themselves.

¹⁵ Schellenberg's 1993 work focused on concepts related to, but distinct from, nonresistant nonbelief. For example, in this passage he spoke of God not providing "a strong epistemic position in relation to theism" (2006, 186). His later formulation of the hiddenness argument in terms of nonresistant nonbelief is stronger than the original. I will update the language of his arguments to be in line with his more recent work while retaining the original spirit of his arguments and lifting them to the new era of the hiddenness argument.

determined by considering what are his obligations" (*Ibid.*). This is reasonable: Determining that God is under no obligation to bring about (or refrain from bringing about) a given state of affairs does *not* mean that we know whether he *would* bring about that state of affairs. Showing that God is under no obligation to create *us*, for example, does nothing to show that he *wouldn't* create us. Schellenberg's point is that his argument goes beyond God's obligations and focuses on his love. Indeed, his most recent formulations of the hiddenness argument do not suggest that God would wrong anyone at all by being hidden or actualizing nonresistant nonbelief.

Second, Schellenberg said that to say *we* would not exist without nonresistant nonbelief is insufficient (*Ibid.*, 188–89). This is correct. It is consistent to say both *nonresistant nonbelief is inconsistent with the existence of God* and *if there were no nonresistant nonbelief, I would not have existed* (*Ibid.*, 189). But whether nonresistant nonbelief is inconsistent with God is the question.

Third, he said that while it could be argued that our existences are a good, and so that the necessary conditions for our existences obtain is also a good,¹⁶ the existence of persons who would have come into existence had nonresistant nonbelief *not* occurred "might also have been a great good" (*Ibid.*). In fact, Schellenberg said that in terms of nonresistant nonbelief, persons who never experienced it would be much better off than actual persons who do (if in fact God exists) (*Ibid.*). He asked, "Would not God then have preferred their existence to ours?" (*Ibid.*). However, this notion of preference is highly doubtful. Schellenberg himself said this point "might be weakened" (*Ibid.*, 189) by the following claim from Adams: "God could be perfectly good and . . . cause or permit *evils* that are necessary for good ends that he loves, even if those goods are not the best states of affairs obtainable by him" (Adams 1979, 65). Put simply, if God loves goods that obtain in a less-than-ideal state of affairs, he may still actualize that state of affairs.

Moreover, not only might God love and prefer some Type A and Type B persons equally, some Type B persons may actually be preferable to some Type A persons. It is not difficult to imagine a possible world in which every person always believes in the existence of God and always rejects God contrasted with a possible world in which many capable people (in a metaphysical predicament like S_1 and S_2) experience nonresistant nonbelief at various times but ultimately come to have loving personal relationships with God. Indeed, Type B persons could include

¹⁶ To be clear, I would personally *not* argue that the necessary conditions for a good must themselves be good. A great number of goods in the actual world seem to have non-goods as necessary conditions. A highly successful homicide detective may be a good but that doesn't make homicide a good even though if there were no homicides, there would be no highly successful homicide detectives.

persons who never experience nonresistant nonbelief themselves and are in a constant state of relationship with God as soon as they are capable whereas Type A persons could include capable persons who never experience nonresistant nonbelief but are in a constant state of willful rejection of God. If God has a preference, would he not prefer relationship-seeking Type B persons over relationship-rejecting Type A persons? Certainly, other factors would play a significant role in God choosing which persons to actualize rather than God being a kind of “single-issue” creator who woodenly prefers Type A persons (who themselves never experience nonresistant nonbelief at time t) over *all* sets of persons that include Type B persons.

However, Schellenberg offered a final salvo that goes beyond the current hiddenness argument yet further develops a question raised in the last objection: *Why us?* For Schellenberg, God not only values created persons but also personal relationships with them *and* their well-being (Schellenberg 2006, 190). According to Schellenberg, since personal relationships and a created person’s *best* well-being can only be obtained if God enables them to believe in his existence, if all else is equal, he will ensure any creatures he creates will not be in a state of nonresistant nonbelief (*Ibid.*).¹⁷ Is all else really equal given the Adams-inspired response? Schellenberg thought so, offering a condition he believed the Adams-inspired response fails to meet: “It provides a good to compete with the good of personal relationship with God only if our existence would have some special value that the existence of individuals in a better position, epistemically, to relate to God would not have” (*Ibid.*) Schellenberg said the Adams-inspired argument doesn’t provide such a special value: “there seems to be no reason for God, in advance of our existing, to steer things our way” (*Ibid.*).

In response, first, critics need not offer reasons why God would steer things *our* way specifically. It’s not clear that Adams even attempted to do this in his paper. Adams noted that “God’s reasons for creating us individually are presumably bound up with His other plans for the world,” and Adams did not attempt to detail those plans (Adams 1979, 55). Adams also said he was making contributions to theodicy, not that he had given one, and he cautioned theists against claiming they know in detail “the point of everything God does or allows” (*Ibid.*, 63). Since Schellenberg’s hiddenness argument attempts to show the *incompatibility* of God and nonresistant nonbelief, it is the defender of the hiddenness argument who must show that God would not actualize us because God would not actualize nonresistant nonbelief. In response, critics only need to show that God would in fact actualize

¹⁷ This is again updating Schellenberg’s language to his more contemporary formulation.

persons in a state of nonresistant nonbelief, whether those persons are *us* or not.¹⁸

Second, recall Schellenberg's observation that God (if he exists) loves *specific persons* and not just generic instances of humanity that can be swapped out (Schellenberg 2018, 19). So our "special value" is that we are *us* as distinct from other persons. Indeed, any distinct set of persons has such a special value, whether that set includes *us* or not. This special value may not make a given set that includes Type B persons *more* valuable than any other set of possible persons, but it does give that set of persons an irreplaceable special value that cannot be had by simply actualizing other persons.

In sum, Schellenberg's arguments regarding God's preference for persons who are never in a state of nonresistant nonbelief are unsatisfactory and fail to show that God would *only* actualize such persons.

Would God Never Wait?

Might God love a set of persons that includes nonresistant nonbelief at time t but simply count the cost of leaving (or putting) persons in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t too high? The idea is that out of love for S_1 , God would not actualize S_2 . This would support the following additional premise:

(12) God would not actualize a person whom he loves yet whose existence is only possible if another capable person is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t.

Here, again, we must remember Schellenberg is not arguing that being in such a state is *bad*. If it were, it would be part of the problem of evil, which is conceptually different. So God doesn't *wrong* anyone by actualizing nonresistant nonbelief. But perhaps we could argue that God would be so impatiently in love as to be unable to wait even a moment to form a relationship with S_1 and so would rather have no relationship at all with S_2 . Unfortunately, that too is a hard pill to swallow. God is not hurting for time, and such an image of God again runs counter to a loving God

¹⁸ Now Schellenberg further claimed Adams moved from *us* to "creatures such as we are" in his final analysis, thus collapsing Adams' argument (see Schellenberg 2006, 190). For according to Schellenberg, "no reasons have been given or could be provided for supposing that exactly those evils that have occurred are necessary for creatures such as we are" (*Ibid.*). In terms of my own response, I am not arguing that the *exact* nonresistant nonbelief in the actual world is necessary for the existence of *all* possible Type B persons.

who is willing to spend massive amounts of divine resources—including patience—for the relationships he desires.

Nonresistant Nonbelief in Our Lifetimes?

Some readers might wonder about how this non-identity response might explain nonresistant nonbelief in our lifetimes. For even if my non-identity response explains the nonresistant nonbelief of our forebears, there remains the issue of persons today in a state of nonresistant nonbelief. To steelman this concern, let's assume that no persons who come to exist at time t_1 can *only* come into existence in possible worlds in which nonresistant nonbelief exists at time t_2 . For example, let's assume that the nonresistant nonbelief of someone in 2002 is *not* a necessary condition for the existence of someone born in 1502.¹⁹ So wouldn't God, out of love, always pursue his relationships with presently living persons without factoring in future persons?

No. Focusing on contemporary nonresistant nonbelief in the actual world would require a heavily altered form of his argument. And there is reason to think that such a heavily modified argument would still fail.

A theme in Schellenberg's work is that humanity is early in its career; that given how long our planet and our species will likely endure into deep time, we are only at the beginning of our journey (see Schellenberg 2018, 13). My own suspicion is that he is right about our current earth—even given the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. For God has a great deal of motivation to tarry if he is in fact in pursuit of relationships with particular created persons. Not only might our planet be habitable for another billion years, even another 5,000 years of the human experiment would greatly increase the total number of persons who come into existence on this planet. Thus, we ought to remember that we too are one link in a

¹⁹ However, if we think each particular person exists in only one possible world, then we have an ultra-strong version of non-identity reasoning and must reject transworld identity. In terms of non-identity reasoning, this means a necessary condition for *all* of our existences is that *everything* in the actual world be *exactly as it is*—past, present, and future. In that, every possible person is a Type B person in relation to every circumstance that obtains in their possible world. That means the nonresistant nonbelief of someone in 2002 would be a necessary condition for the existence of someone who was born in 1502. Personally, I think this is *far* too strong. Minimally, mere relational properties (e.g., Benjamin Franklin's relation to the exact content of this footnote) do not seem to me to be necessary conditions for the identity of something. However, if it *is* the case that each particular person exists in only one possible world (e.g., Lewisian Modal Realism), it would help rather than hurt my non-identity response.

complex chain of events leading to the origins of other human persons unless we are the *last* generation.

Drawing from Adams, Vitale also offers two points I will adapt to my non-identity response to the hiddenness argument.

First, human beings can take actions that benefit their progeny while decreasing their own quality of life (Vitale 2020, 162; Adams 1979, 58). For example, a generation might pay costs so that their generation will not be the *last* generation (Vitale 2020, 162). While Vitale and Adams discussed this from the perspective of what is morally permissible, I will discuss it from the perspective of love. Love for the future people of the world is a reasonable motivation to pay costs in one's own life. Such costs might be anything from lowering one's rate of energy consumption to giving up any hope of a normal, happy life in order to prevent the total annihilation of a future generation—such as by nuclear war or by an asteroid set to strike earth in a few dozen years. One might also be motivated by love to impose such costs on others, such as by passing a law to lower energy consumption as a society or by ordering the soldiers under one's command to give up *their* chances at a normal, happy life in order to prevent the total annihilation of a future generation. Moreover, out of love a parent can take steps to prepare for and bring about the existence of her children. These actions often have costs to presently existing people, such as financial costs and a lowered quality of life in the immediate timeframe. So one can take on, and cause others to bear, costs out of love for future persons. In this case, the cost is that God delays revealing himself sufficiently to certain persons, even though this leaves them in a state of nonresistant nonbelief and thus delays their ability to form a personal relationship with him just by trying.

Second, current people have no particular rights to special treatment over previous people, nor should they expect a markedly different expression of God's loving nature. This might be termed the "what's good for the goose is good for the gander" response. Adams writes in a passage also quoted by Vitale that it does not

seem to be a demand of fairness that God should end the policy that has benefited us, and cease pursuing whatever goals He has been pursuing in the way He has been pursuing them, once it becomes convenient for our generation that He should change. (Adams 1979, 59)

The point we can take away from this for the hiddenness argument is that if current people have benefited from *other* persons being in such a state of nonresistant nonbelief, then it's not as though God is any less loving to current people who are *also* in a state of nonresistant nonbelief.

Indeed, if God were to have a policy of prioritizing his relationships with present persons to the exclusion of any future persons, then the logical place to begin that policy would be with the first persons and thus prevent nonresistant nonbelief from ever coming into existence. To argue that he would begin it with currently existing persons in the actual world would be highly arbitrary. If he is willing to wait this long to institute that policy, why not institute it 10,000 years from now? But the idea that God would begin such a policy with the first persons to come into existence only takes us back to Schellenberg's original argument, and so no new ground has been broken. So a version focusing on currently existing persons is dead in the water.

The Type N Hiddenness Argument

I will discuss another modification of Schellenberg's argument that appears available to the defender of the hiddenness argument. This strategy is to admit that Schellenberg's second premise is false but rework his argument to limit it to only this sort of person:

Type N person: A person S who exists in possible world W in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t without that circumstance being a necessary condition for the existence of any other person in possible world W .

In other words, suppose there is a person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t in some possible world W . If in that possible world W , there is no other person whose existence depends on S being in that state at time t , then S is a Type N person. Keep in mind that even if a given person is a Type N person in some possible world W , that doesn't mean that person is a Type N person in every possible world in which that person exists.

Yet if S is capable of a relationship with God at time t , and if S is a Type N person, this is essentially an instance of nonresistant nonbelief that isn't explained by non-identity concerns. In that possible world W , God allows S to be in a state of nonresistant nonbelief but no other person comes into existence as a result of it who could have *only* come into existence as a result of it. Assuming that's a cost, it's like paying a restaurant bill without receiving any food. So with that in mind, we can rework Schellenberg's argument to limit it to involve only Type N persons.

(13) If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such created persons as there may be.

- (14) If God is perfectly loving toward such created persons as there may be, then for any capable Type N created person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with S at t.
- (15) If God exists, then for any capable Type N created person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t.
- (16) If for any capable created Type N person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t, then for any capable Type N created person S and time t, it is not the case that S is at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (17) If God exists, then for any capable Type N created person S and time t, it is not the case that S is at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (18) There is at least one capable Type N created person S and time t such that S is or was at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- (19) It is not the case that God exists. (see Schellenberg 2018, 24)

Note that the only substantial change to Schellenberg's argument is limiting it to Type N persons in every relevant premise. Given this revised hiddenness argument, I would agree that (14) unlike (2) is *not* shown to be untrue by my non-identity response. So, whereas I have demonstrated that Schellenberg's hiddenness argument is unsound as it stands given non-identity reasoning, I have *not* shown that this revised hiddenness argument is unsound given non-identity reasoning. For this revised argument is limited to persons in possible worlds who *aren't* in the sort of metaphysical predicament S₁ and S₂ are in.

But where this revised argument runs into trouble is (18). For in the actual world—and now we *can* talk freely about the actual world and facts about actually existent human beings in addressing (18)—one would have to identify a capable person who is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief *and* show that their nonresistant nonbelief is not a necessary condition for the existence of any subsequent persons. This is highly doubtful given non-identity reasoning and how we ought not think of our current generation as the capstone of human persons.

To illustrate the severity of the challenge of locating a capable Type N person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t in the actual world, let's consider how we might manufacture one artificially. We could do something like launch a person far enough into space that he will have *no* causal impact on the origin of anyone else on earth—ever. But how would we ever know of that person's epistemic relation to the

God proposition? Once he is far enough out, God might very well reveal himself, but if God did, we wouldn't ever know—and if we found out, then we would once again be dealing with non-identity problems back on earth! There is also another option: Everyone stops having children for all time, and we see what happens. Then, *perhaps*, we could get a Type N person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t. (Or God might reveal himself to ask us why we stopped multiplying.)

These options may seem rather silly. But they drive home the point: Given non-identity reasoning, Type N persons in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t are either not included among the people who actually exist or are impossible to locate. I believe the former is far more plausible so long as new persons keep coming into existence.

What it really comes down to is simply denying non-identity reasoning at a theory of identity level. This, I believe, is the only genuine option for the atheist to defend (18), and that too has costs. Otherwise, one must abandon even this version of Schellenberg's argument.

Nearest Type A Counterparts?

An anonymous reviewer brought up another line of reasoning an advocate for the hiddenness argument might take. Put in the terms of this paper, it trades on the following basic idea: God could just skip over a world with Type B persons (and nonresistant nonbelief) and instead actualize the nearest world containing their Type A counterparts²⁰ who are substantively the same without worrying about how they technically have different origins and different identities.

Now so far this paper has taken the view that *God cares about the metaphysical differences in identity between even closely similar counterparts*. After all, since even closely similar counterparts are different persons, that certainly makes each one distinct—and thus individually loved—on Schellenberg's account of divine love. But this new line of reasoning reflects an opposing idea:

²⁰ Note that in this context, “counterpart” is not being used in the exact sense Lewisian Modal Realism uses it but rather just refers to a person who is extremely similar to another person who has a distinct identity. The core reason is there is no picking and choosing between which possible worlds are concrete on Lewisian Modal Realism; all possible worlds are equally “real” on that view. See Brian Weatherson (2021).

(20) In terms of his desire to form relationships with persons, God does not care about the metaphysical differences in identity between sufficiently close counterparts.

On this position, God loses nothing he cares about if he forgoes a relationship with a particular counterpart *S* *so long* as he achieves a relationship with *a* counterpart who is sufficiently close to that counterpart *S*. What this means is that God desires (and his loving nature is satisfied by) relationship not with a particular person *S* but with *a member of a set of sufficiently close persons with metaphysically distinct identities*. Going forward, I will refer to the members of such sets as “doppelgangers” of one another. Now if (20) is correct, then God’s love is not a motivation for him to actualize Type B persons since God’s love would be satisfied by their Type A counterparts without the baggage of nonresistant nonbelief.

Moreover, according to this line of reasoning, saying that God loves particular Type B persons and so would still want to actualize them anyway is insufficient. For then one is faced with accepting one of the following two options, both of which are (allegedly) bitter pills to swallow:

(21) God loves possible persons he does not actualize, which means God’s love alone is not indicative of what God will actualize.
 (22) God loves all possible persons and thus actualizes all of them.

The idea here is that if one wants to avoid both (21) and (22), then one is stuck with some version of (20) since on (20) God *can* actualize all the relationships he desires without actualizing *all* possible persons.

This line of reasoning is far less problematic for the non-identity response than it might appear, however. First, let’s discuss how (21) and (22) are not actually issues for my non-identity response.

Regarding (21), nothing in the non-identity response requires that God’s love *by itself* be enough to predict what God will or won’t actualize. Showing that Schellenberg’s concept of divine love provides motivation *for* God to actualize nonresistant nonbelief is compatible with God *not* actualizing at least some possible persons he loves for reasons apart from his love. For example, some persons are likely mutually exclusive such that they do not *both* exist in any single possible world (e.g., persons who come from the same spermatozoon but different eggs). It may also be that for moral reasons God would not actualize some persons he loves. In fact, someone could consistently agree with my non-identity response in regard to

the hiddenness argument while rejecting a parallel argument regarding horrendous evil. So the non-identity responder need not balk at accepting (21).

Regarding (22), the non-identity responder need not go so far as saying that God would actualize all possible persons. As discussed above, God may have *other* reasons apart from his love for actualizing (or not actualizing) certain persons. Even so, if God values all persons for their own sakes and loves persons *before* they come into existence (as Schellenberg indicates), then it seems an implication of Schellenberg's concept of unsurpassable love is that God's creative activities would be plenitudinous. This isn't necessarily a cost; similar ideas are hardly new in natural theology.²¹ However, if this *is* considered an unacceptable cost, it is an issue not with my non-identity response but with Schellenberg's underlying concept of divine love. As discussed before, I am embracing that concept of divine love, but my non-identity response is compatible with independently rejecting that concept as flawed.

At this point, the non-identity responder might ask why we should accept (20) since its alternatives are not problematic. However, as we shall see, even accepting (20) does not salvage the hiddenness argument.

But first, note there must be a suitable Type A counterpart for each and every Type B person for (20) to have any impact on the non-identity response. Otherwise, God would desire a relationship with a Type B person without the option of just actualizing a Type A substitute.

Yet if an instance (or many instances) of nonresistant nonbelief affects the identities of persons across ten thousand generations, then wouldn't those "small" changes add up to large differences and thus be expected to eliminate the possibility of Type A doppelgangers for at least *some* persons? While it is unclear how close of a counterpart would be "close enough," I suggest this objection is not a good one because we are already discussing distinct persons who are not numerically identical to one another. In this, it seems the *qualities* of those counterparts (apart from their unique identities and origins) would be what God would primarily care about on (20). And given this, God (being all-powerful) *could* actualize doppelgangers—either *ex nihilo* with indistinguishable physical-spiritual-psychological configurations or via other methods such as creating whole galaxies designed to produce Type A doppelgangers. So it seems reasonable that a sufficiently close Type A counterpart would be available for every Type B person.

The bigger issue is that some possible worlds would include *multiple* doppelgangers from the same set. It is not as though the doppelgangers in every given set are all mutually exclusive such that at most only one doppelganger from a

²¹ For example, see Richard R. Yeo (1986, 264-65).

given set can exist in any possible world. Remember: these are distinct (even if closely similar) individuals. Indeed, if God exists in the actual world, he could over the next few centuries create doppelgangers of *me* without impacting my existence.

Yet if God doesn't care about the fact that doppelgangers have distinct identities such that (as far as he is concerned) he loses nothing by forming a relationship with only one of them, then he could actualize extra doppelgangers in a state of nonresistant nonbelief while still fully expressing his unsurpassable love by pursuing relationship with just one doppelganger from the set. Moreover, since nonresistant nonbelief is not *bad* according to Schellenberg, God would not even be doing anything morally or ethically wrong by leaving the extras in the dark about his existence. In fact, he could benevolently ensure that the extra doppelgangers live wonderful, eternal lives.

One might object that these are actualized doppelgangers, not merely potential ones. And certainly, on Schellenberg's original version, God *would* be open to relationships with the extras. But recall that an implication of (20) is that God desires (and his loving nature is satisfied by) relationship with *a member of a set of sufficiently close persons with metaphysically distinct identities*. That means God loses nothing by not actualizing Type B persons so long as he actualizes their Type A counterparts, but it *also* means God loses nothing by actualizing extra doppelgangers and not pursuing relationships with them.

The Schellenberg-style defender might claim that there would be *no reason* for God to actualize those extra doppelgangers since just one would be enough to satisfy God's desire for relationship with a member of the set. However, once again God need not be motivated purely by love to actualize a particular possible world. Those extra doppelgangers could bring God more glory or add aesthetic beauty or make God happy in that he *enjoys* seeing them live wonderful lives. In fact, God might later opt to pursue relationships with the extras too, thus relegating the nonresistant nonbelief to a specific period of time. Indeed, to return to S_1 and S_2 , God could even actualize S_1 and S_2 *as well as* a doppelganger of S_1 to "tide him over" until S_1 's nonresistant nonbelief played its role in S_2 's origin.

The point is that if God is satisfied with relationships with "close enough" counterparts as on (20), then nothing about his unsurpassably loving nature would make him *always* prevent nonresistant nonbelief. For Schellenberg's argument to work, God can't just love swappable person tokens and nor can he just love swappable tokens from a particular set. If swappable tokens were sufficient, then he could forgo seeking relationships with certain duplicate tokens—and thus nonresistant nonbelief could coexist with his unsurpassable love. We thus cannot

easily jettison Schellenberg's original emphasis on God loving each individual person as the distinct person they are.

Weak Non-Identity Reasoning

Would weaker versions of origin essentialism be sufficient for my non-identity response to the hiddenness argument?²² To answer this, let's consider how weak would be *too* weak to sustain my response.

Vitale describes a version he calls *The Causal History View* in which the identity of a thing depends on the circumstances of the causal history of its origin *but* that the circumstances of that origin could have been a bit different without causing that particular thing to not be that particular thing (Vitale 2020, 178). For example, on *The Causal History View* you would very probably still be *you* even if you were conceived 12 seconds before you were conceived in the actual world. So suppose we accept a weaker version of *The Causal History View* such that it would enable God to actualize *any* possible particular person while still avoiding actualizing a capable person in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding the existence of God at time t. How weak would that version need to be?

Since we are not limited to the actual world in rejecting (2), we can conceive of a possible world W_0 that includes planet P_0 , which is very unlike our own earth. On P_0 , all persons (who are vaguely mantis-like) are in a state of nonresistant nonbelief despite being intelligent and capable. For millions of years, their civilization chugs along, and their nonresistant nonbelief has a deep (but to them imperceptible) effect on their history. At last, S_0 is born. Given that beliefs alter decisions, to remove nonresistant nonbelief for the persons of P_0 would be to alter the lives of quadrillions of persons who existed prior to S_0 , with each having a ripple effect through time. Only a very weak and permissive version of *The Causal History View* could allow that *all* persons in all possible worlds, including in W_0 , are Type A persons; that is, that there is not a single possible person whose personal identity is necessarily contingent on just one other capable person being in a state of nonresistant nonbelief for even the briefest period of time.

Thus, the minimum version of origin essentialism required for my non-identity response need not be particularly strong. This is not to say that *all* versions of origin essentialism would be strong enough. But certainly views where only *some* differences or *moderate* differences are permitted are compatible with my non-

²² Vitale also discussed *Actualism and Thisness* as another theory of identity compatible with non-identity reasoning. See Vitale (2020, 178-80).

identity response—especially when we factor in the long, complex chains of events that lead to particular persons across deep time.

Moreover, though rejecting (2) does not require us (or even allow us) to restrict ourselves to the actual world, we can briefly consider our own history. In defending (6), Schellenberg has pointed to nonresistant nonbelief in at least some hunter-gatherer societies of prehistory (Schellenberg 2015, 77–78). The version of origin essentialism need not be overly strong to conclude that removing their nonresistant nonbelief wholesale would have caused non-identity problems for at least some of their descendants through the long and complex chain of history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if God loves a set of metaphysically interdependent persons (e.g., S_1 , S_2 , etc.) that includes a person who can only come into existence if another person is in a state of nonresistant nonbelief at time t , then God has a motivation to actualize those persons out of love. This is the very nature of love that Schellenberg describes and upon which his argument depends. Yet if God actualizes such a set of persons, at least one capable person whom God loves and with whom God desires relationship will be in a state of nonresistant nonbelief regarding God's existence at time t *because* God is unsurpassably loving. But that is the very thing Schellenberg's argument claims God would never allow *because* he is unsurpassably loving. Moreover, Schellenberg's hiddenness argument explicitly does not suggest that God's actualization of nonresistant nonbelief would be morally deficient on God's part. Thus, as far as Schellenberg's argument goes, God may bring about the end (the particular persons and his relationships with them) without having to justify the means (actualizing nonresistant nonbelief). Therefore, if non-identity reasoning—supported by a compatible theory of identity—is accepted, Schellenberg's hiddenness argument ought to be rejected as it currently stands.

Bibliography

Adams, Robert Merrihew. "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil." *Noûs* 13, no. 1 (1979): 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214795>.

Anderson, Sir Robert. Preface to the 7th edition of *The Silence of God*. 8th ed. 1907. Reprint. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1986.

Hill, Scott. "Why God Allows Undeserved Horrendous Evil." *Religious Studies* 58, no. 4 (2022): 772–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252100038X>.

Howard-Snyder, Daniel. "Divine openness and creaturely nonresistant nonbelief."

In *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Edited by Adam Green and Eleonore Stump. 2015. Reprint, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939621.008>.

Kripke, Saul A. *Naming and Necessity*. 1972. Reprint, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-2557-7_9.

McGinnis, Jon. "The Hiddenness of 'Divine Hiddenness': Divine Love in Medieval Islamic Lands." In *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Edited by Adam Green and Eleonore Stump. 2015. Reprint, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939621.010>.

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. 1984. Reprint with corrections, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Rea, Michael C. "Hiddenness and Transcendence." In *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Edited by Adam Green and Eleonore Stump. 2015. Reprint, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939621.013>.

Roberts, M. A. "The Nonidentity Problem." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/nonidentity-problem>.

Schellenberg, J. L., "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy." In *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Edited by Adam Green and Eleonore Stump. 2015. Reprint, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939621.002>.

Schellenberg, J. L., *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. 1993. Reprint with New Preface, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Schellenberg, J. L., *The Hiddenness Argument*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Kindle.

Schellenberg, J. L., "The Hiddenness Argument." In *Roczniki Filozoficzne / Annales de Philosophie / Annals of Philosophy* 69, no. 3 (2021): 63–66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27068955>.

Schellenberg, J. L., "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)." *Religious Studies* 41, no. 2 (2005): 201–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008586>.

Schellenberg, J. L., "The Hiddenness Problem and the Problem of Evil." *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* Vol. 27, Iss. 1 (2010): 45–60: <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20102713>.

Vitale, Vince R. *Non-Identity Theodicy: A Grace-Based Response to the Problem of Evil*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020. Google Books. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864226.001.0001>.

Weatherson, Brian. "David Lewis." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter

NON-IDENTITY REASONING AND THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

2021 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/david-lewis>.

Weidner, Veronika. *Divine Hiddenness. Elements in the Philosophy of Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108612647>.

Yeo, Richard R. "The Principle of Plenitude and Natural Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain." *The British Journal for the History of Science*. 19, no. 3 (1986): 263–282. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000708740002327X>.

Published Online First: November 06, 2025