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THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT*

The form I shall give to the hiddenness argument in a moment reflects what I regard as the importance of starting “far enough back” or reasoning “from above,” using necessary truths as premises wherever possible. The strongest hiddenness reasoning will be thus grounded, instead of reasoning “from below,” perhaps with the absence of signs and wonders for religious seekers too swiftly read into hiddenness language by the one who wishes to use it in defense of atheism. The sort of approach most likely to yield durable results involves working out what hiddenness-related facts would be absent from the world if an unsurpassably great person were present in it, allowing the problematic phenomenon to *emerge* and receive its shape from reflection on the idea of God.... This is what I mean by starting “from above.” Furthermore, by seeking to have as premises only necessary truths about persons and about love (or else evident empirical facts), the argument can hope to find a hearing even in a climate of evolutionary skepticism....

The hiddenness argument is focused on a requirement of openness to personal relationship. A doxastic consequence of this requirement is exposed by the following general principle about openness and non-openness. I call it “Not Open” because it identifies a condition in which, at a certain time, a person B clearly is not open to personal relationship with a second person A:

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Not Open

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

After all, a personal relationship is a conscious, reciprocal relationship, and a conscious relationship is a relationship one recognizes oneself to be in. Given these facts, one clearly cannot even get started in a personal relationship without *believing that the other party exists*. Now belief, as most contemporary philosophers would agree, is involuntary in the sense that one cannot choose to believe something at a time just by trying to. So by not revealing his existence B is doing something that makes it impossible for A to participate in personal relationship with B at the relevant time even should she try to do so, and this, according to our definition of openness, is precisely what is involved in B's not being open to having such a relationship with A then.

Perhaps someone will still be inclined to resist at this point by saying that *hope* or even a certain kind of beliefless *faith* could take the place of belief, at least at the start of a meaningful conscious relationship, and so B can be open to such relationship with A even while not enabling the belief in question for A.¹ Applying this to the religious case, if at some later stage belief arose, and at the end of her life the person in question were to be asked when she thinks her personal relationship with God began, would she be *mistaken* if she were to pick the time when her religious hope or faith began, rather than the time when she came to believe?

Well, if she uses the phrase "personal relationship" in the same way we are using it she would be—a conscious relationship is one you recognize yourself to be in as opposed to hoping you are in. (One cannot solve the hiddenness problem just by noting that the terms it employs and to which it gives certain senses can be used in different senses). But to get at the deeper issue here: when belief comes to the person in our thought experiment, who had been under the impression that there might be no God, the change of her perceived relation to God will be a change not just in degree but in *kind*. It is much different than, say, a move from hoping with intensity x that God exists to hoping this with intensity $x + 1$ or even $x + 20$. Indeed, in a very real sense now *everything* has changed for her, for what she hoped has (as she sees it) come true! And it is in part because of this difference for the one she loves

¹ I am grateful to Daniel Howard-Snyder for pressing me on this.

that the one who loves him will naturally want this to be where things *start* in the story of their interaction, as mentioned before. So from both perspectives, the perspective of the lover and that of the one loved, the relationship made possible by belief is a different relationship than any left to subsist on hope or nonbelieving faith.²

Against this background, together with the more general background provided by the previous three sections of this paper, the force of the hiddenness argument for philosophers looking to assess a personal elaboration of ultimism may be apparent:

- (1) If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be. [Premise]
- (2) If God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be, then for any capable finite 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. [Premise]
- (3) If God exists, then for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t. [1, 2 by Hypothetical Syllogism]
- (4) If for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t, then for any capable finite 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. [Premise]
- (5) If God exists, then for any capable finite 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. [3, 4 by Hypothetical Syllogism]
- (6) There is at least one capable finite 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. [Premise]
- (7) It is not the case that God exists. [5, 6 by Modus Tollens]

² For those who disagree, I note that, without losing force, the argument about to be stated could be slightly revised to meet their objection. Just revise (4) in such a way that, instead of referring to nonresistant nonbelief, it refers to *nonresistantly being in a cognitive condition, in relation to the proposition that God exists, that is incompatible with then being able to participate in a personal relationship with God just by trying should one seek to do so*, with this cognitive condition conjunctively construed, cashed out in terms of being nonbelieving *and* without nonbelieving faith *and* without nonbelieving hope. And then also make the appropriate corresponding revisions elsewhere in the argument. I myself think this cognitive condition need not be thus construed, since it clearly is as stated in the text. But even if you disagree, by introducing a conjunctive alternative you will not prevent the hiddenness argument from succeeding, since there are or have been plenty of finite persons, capable of personal relationship with God and nonresistant, who instantiate all of its conjuncts.

The argument is evidently deductively valid, so any assessment will restrict itself to considering whether the premises are true or properly accepted as true. The first premise of the argument records an impression as to what it would take for a personal being to be axiologically ultimate that it will be hard for any philosopher today to reject, whatever may have been the case at earlier stages of cultural evolution. The second premise encapsulates the openness requirement that we have seen to represent the very minimum of what might be associated with unsurpassable love. The third premise (4 in the argument) learns from the principle that I have called “Not Open” and our discussion thereof above. But it may be worth underlining its evident truth by simply asking ourselves: 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 and support or know God’s encouraging presence 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*? It’s impossible. To be grateful to someone in the manner of conscious relationship, you have to believe they exist. The same holds for trying to figure out what they favor or recognizing that they have forgiven you, or are offering you moral support and their encouraging presence. So the third premise of the argument, like the others mentioned so far, seems clearly to be a necessary truth. And the last premise of the argument (6 above), though not a necessary truth, states an evident empirical fact: there are and often have been *nonresistant nonbelievers*.... If the argument is approached in a true philosophical spirit..., then I think it will be seen to constitute a formidable philosophical challenge to the belief that ultimism is personally exemplified.