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# We Deserve It: An Augustinian Response to Divine Hiddenness Arguments

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## Abstract

Significant attention has been devoted to the problem of ‘divine hiddenness’ proposed by JL Schellenberg. I propose a novel response that involves denying part of the empirical premise in divine hiddenness arguments, which holds that nonresistant nonbelievers are capable of relationship with God. While Plantinga and others in ‘reformed’ epistemology have at times appealed to original sin as an explanation for divine hiddenness, such responses might seem outlandish to many, given the way that many find nonbelievers to be no more or less epistemically or morally blameworthy than believers. Further, such appeals to original sin seem to give a ‘just-so’ story that at least leaves the situation dialectically balanced. I show that a classically Augustinian notion of original sin can provide a sufficient response to those objections, and that appeal to original sin can form an empirically grounded response to the divine hiddenness problem, beyond a simple defense. If the possibility of original sin-type scenarios is compatible with God’s perfect love, then the phenomenon of apparently nonresistant nonbelievers would push us toward considering the possibility that humans have lost those capacities for relationship with God by a Fall-like event in the past.

**Keywords:** Aquinas; Augustine; divine hiddenness; moral desert; original sin

Since JL Schellenberg’s 1993 *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, much ink has been spilled questioning various parts of Schellenberg’s famous argument against the existence of God based on facts about ‘divine hiddenness’. The problem of divine hiddenness, in short, is a dilemma which results from the joint affirmation that there is an all-powerful, all-loving God who desires personal relationship with each human being and that there are some human beings who, despite no fault of their own or with no obvious on-going resistance to God, nevertheless reasonably fail to believe in God. ‘Divine hiddenness’ arguments allege that ‘if a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* [DHHR] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 83.

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Divine hiddenness arguments broadly constitute an ‘evidential’ case against the existence of God, alleging that the naturalistic scenario, on which God does not exist, *more readily* explains the evidence of nonresistant nonbelievers than would the existence of God. Insofar as such reasonable nonresistant nonbelief does occur, Schellenberg infers that such nonbelief counts as strong (if not conclusive) evidence against the existence of the theistic God.<sup>2</sup> Much discussion regarding divine hiddenness therefore hinges on the way in which we weigh evidence regarding whether there is widespread nonresistant nonbelief, other evidence we might have concerning God’s existence, and the possibility of God having good reasons to allow nonresistant nonbelief.<sup>3</sup> Two popular strategies by which theists have responded to divine hiddenness therefore rely on arguments either that God has good reasons for allowing hiddenness or that we cannot be sure that God does *not* have good reasons (‘skeptical theism’).<sup>4</sup> A substantial minority have also proposed to deny the empirical premise that nonresistant nonbelievers exist.<sup>5</sup> My strategy differs from these species of response, although having some commonalities with both.

What I will argue is that the *situation in which there can be* nonresistant nonbelievers can be merited or deserved by human resistance to God, and that this situation results in an *incapacity* to form relationship with God on the basis of intuitive awareness of His openness to relationship with them. Such a view should be familiar from Augustine of Hippo’s account of ‘original sin’. On this account, we live in a tragic situation where God’s openness to relationship is not *intuitively* obvious or apparent, and this was due to episodes of human resistance to God in the past. I propose, in short, that if God can have good reasons to make relationship with Himself available to individuals in different ways as responses to individual resistance, then He can have good reasons for changing the way in which He makes the possibility of relationship corporately available to human beings as responses to corporate resistance. Much of this

<sup>2</sup>Cf. DHHR, 208–210; J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Charity Anderson, ‘Divine Hiddenness: An Evidential Argument’, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 35 (2021), 5–22; ‘Divine Hiddenness: Defeated Evidence’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 81 (2017), 119–32; Charity Anderson and Jeffrey Sanford Russell, ‘Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence’, in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by J. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Andrew Loke, *Evil, Sin, and Christian Theism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), esp. ch. 7; Daniel Howard-Snyder, ‘The Argument from Divine Hiddenness’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26 (1996), 433–53; Daniel Howard-Snyder, ‘Divine Openness and Creaturely Nonresistant Nonbelief’, in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*, ed. by A. Green and E. Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 126–38; John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); Michael Murray, ‘Deus Absconditus’, in *Divine Hiddenness*, ed. by D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 62–82; Tyler Paytas, ‘God’s Awful Majesty Before Our Eyes: Kant’s Moral Justification for Hiddenness’, *Kantian Review*, 22 (2017), 133–57; Tyler Paytas, ‘Of Providence and Puppet Shows: Divine Hiddenness as Kantian Theodicy’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 36 (2019), 56–80; Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Travis Dumsday, ‘Divine Hiddenness and the Opiate of the People’, *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 76 (2014), 193–207; Travis Dumsday, ‘Divine Hiddenness and the One Sheep’, *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 79 (2016), 69–86; Paul Moser, ‘Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding’, in *Divine Hiddenness*, ed. by D. Howard-Snyder and P. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 120–48; Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>For an overview: Max Baker-Hyatt, ‘On Sin-Based Responses to Divine Hiddenness’, *Religious Studies* (2023), 1–15. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252300094X>>.

paper will be devoted to considering the objections that can be raised against this position. I will show that this position is better placed to respond to these objections than might be initially apparent, and that the appeal to original sin is a powerful defense against divine hiddenness. Indeed, the facts of divine hiddenness are central to the Christian theological story, such that the situation of divine hiddenness can *raise* the prior probability of Christianity, rather than constitute evidence against it.

### 1. Setting up

Two notions play a critical role in divine hiddenness arguments: divine perfect love and nonresistant nonbelief. As to the first of these notions, unlike universalist understanding of divine perfect love, Schellenberg explicitly sets up the hiddenness argument in such a way that his notion of divine perfect love is compatible with God lovingly allowing created persons to resist His offer of relationship. Human resistance can be a good reason for God not to engage in relationship with a person, even not to achieve relationship with that person forever, despite being motivated by divine perfect love to do so with that person.

For a loving God, out of respect for our freedom, might well allow us to shut him out altogether—not only to fail to respond to his overtures, but also to put ourselves in a position where these were *no longer noticed*. Such resistance of God would, of course, be culpable, for it would involve shutting out one whom we had seen to be our creator, and perfectly good, as well as the culpable activity of self-deception: in exercising our freedom in this way, we would be bringing it about through our own actions and/or omissions that what was once seen was seen no longer. But if God is perfectly loving, and treats us as persons, he will, we may suppose, permit even this extent of freedom over against himself.<sup>6</sup>

What is supposed to be incompatible with God's desire for relationship (His perfect love) is for God Himself to impose obstacles to that relationship or for God to fail to engage in a relationship with a person who is *non-resistant* and has done nothing to reject that relationship with God. In the 1993 book, the premise that plays the critical role in divine hiddenness arguments was formally presented in this way: 'If God exists and is perfectly loving, then for any human *S* subject and time *t*, if *S* is at *t* capable of relating personally to God, *S* at *t* is in a position to do so (i.e., can at *t* do so just by choosing to), except insofar as is culpably in a contrary position at *t*'.<sup>7</sup>

Later, Schellenberg came to think that 'culpability' was misleading in characterizing the nonresistant nonbeliever.

Nonbelief might conceivably be culpable in many ways, and by making these moves at the beginning of the argument I was forcing it ultimately to support the view that there is, in the actual world, nonbelief that in *none* of these ways is owed to culpable behavior. ...[Instead,] a sort of free resistance sufficient to make it the case that we ourselves have such the door to any relationship with

<sup>6</sup>DHHR, 27.

<sup>7</sup>DHHR, 28.

God that might be on offer would be required...[so that] if God is open to personal relationship then the divine light will remain on unless we close our eyes.<sup>8</sup>

Schellenberg's point is thus to expand the scope of 'resistance' to include both actions and omissions in support of what the nonbeliever might do to resist God's openness to relationship, rather than unduly restrict what counts as resistance to that relationship, as long as that person is in the state of unbelief *because* of their resistance (rather than this resistance being causally unrelated to their unbelief).<sup>9</sup> In the most recent statement of the argument, then, Schellenberg omits reference to culpability and presents the argument from divine hiddenness formally thus:

- (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].<sup>10</sup>

Premise 4 plays the central role in the argument, relying on the notion of a nonresistant nonbeliever. Such a person is 'nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists' despite being capable of being 'in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious' with God. There is much that could be questioned about these claims, such as the assumption that divine perfect love will necessarily entail that each finite person accepts the proposition that God exists, that relationship with God is not possible short of acceptance of that proposition, and the like. My response, however, will not involve questioning those assumptions. Rather, what I will call into question is solely the empirical premise: that there is at least one such nonresistant nonbeliever who is capable of relationship with God. It is premise 6 that I will argue we can and should reject.

<sup>8</sup>*The Hiddenness Argument*, 54–55.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup>J. L. Schellenberg, 'Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy', in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. by A. Green and E. Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 24–25.

## 2. Rejecting premise 6: Original sin

Schellenberg suggests as examples of the nonresistant nonbeliever that there are those who, before modernity, never seem to have thought about whether God exists – and this would not have been because of any resistance to the idea. He also lists believers in other divinities who were not consciously rejecting the existence of God. Similarly, there are doubters who never believed, as well as doubters who once believed, whose doubt was due to what they understood as insufficient evidence for God's existence or presence to them – and this has become pervasive in secular culture where many are raised as 'natural' nonbelievers who never as much have a moment of reflective resistance to the idea of God's existence.<sup>11</sup> I do not need to reject any of these examples in order to reject premise 6. So, in contrast with the path taken by some others who argue that we have reason to believe that these examples of nonbelievers have committed actual sins of omission or commission at some time in their lives, in virtue of which their intellects became darkened to God's openness to relationship (the 'noetic effects of sin'),<sup>12</sup> I will not explain the facts that every nonbeliever is unaware of God's openness to relationship with them *because* of actual sins committed by which they resisted God. Indeed, on my theological perspective, this gets the order of explanation the wrong way around: moral evil (sin) occurs with high frequency in human history *because* people are unaware of God's overtures to be in relationship with Him.

Premise 6 can instead be rejected – in a way compatible with premise 4 – if it were possible for humanity, *corporately*, 'to put ourselves in a position where [God's overtures] were no longer noticed'. Such a situation is one in which human beings lack *intuitive awareness* of God's openness to relationship; humans are unaware of and incapable of forming relationship with God simply by thinking about it. This situation would obviously be tragic and thwart God's desires for forming a relationship with human beings, but this situation would also be *prima facie* compatible with Schellenberg's construal of divine perfect love, on which 'resistance' to constitute a sufficient reason God can allow this intuitive openness to relationship to fail to obtain. After outlining the scenario of original sin and what assumptions it requires or does not require, I will show that this possible theological scenario can be turned into an empirical explanation of divine hiddenness. Then, I deal with potential objections. Finally, I will propose that original sin constitutes a superior *empirical* explanation of the problem of divine hiddenness than naturalism, raising the prior probability of those forms of theism, such as Christianity, which teach about original sin.

Original sin is a familiar Christian doctrine in its broad strokes. The doctrine teaches that humanity, at its origins, was faced with a moral choice. Genesis 3: 1–21 depicts Adam and Eve, the forebears of the human race, committing an act by which they rejected God's grace and incurred death for all their descendants.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, there are significant theological differences among Christians as to the nature of original sin and its effects. Calvinism and other forms of Reformed Christianity have tended to be associated (rightly or wrongly) with two theses regarding original sin that I will

<sup>11</sup> *The Hiddenness Argument*, 74–86.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Mark R. Talbot, 'Is It Natural to Believe in God?' *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), 155–71.

<sup>13</sup> See Stéphane Harent, 'Original Sin', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Charles G. Herbermann (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), pp. 312–15.

reject. The first is that everyone born after Adam is personally culpable or responsible for original sin, and therefore rightly punished for original sin as if it were their personal sin. Sometimes, notions of corporate guilt are invoked. The second is that the effects of original sin constitute a standing 'state of sin', where every act or failure to act after being born in original sin (and prior to justification by grace) is sinful.<sup>14</sup> I do not claim that these are anything more than overly broad characterization of these Reformed positions, even caricatures. But rejecting these formulations of the doctrine helps define my scenario more clearly. Neither of these claims are essential to the scenario I present. My scenario allows that some individuals might *never* have committed any *personal* sin by which they resisted God but affirms that they nevertheless find themselves in a situation of divine hiddenness on account of resistance.

Instead, what is essential to my scenario is that by the personal or individual sin of the humans at the beginning of human history, subsequent human beings have *lost* something that was given to them by God at their origins. 'Original justice' is a name for that supernatural gift by which humans were supposedly in intuitive connection with God from birth, were not dominated by their passions or other forms of irrationality, were able reliably to follow reason in willing the good and were also preserved from bodily infirmities like disease and death. This gift is what was supposedly lost by original sin, resulting in all the effects of original sin on their descendants.<sup>15</sup> The *lack* of original justice then constitutes a source of corporate guilt or shame as we have become tragically and involuntarily victims of this sin in its varied effects. A child conceived by an alcoholic or drug abuser ends up tragically harmed by the abusive behavior of their parents, such as being born addicted to drugs, and this tragic situation involves guilt or shame in as much as it results from the sin of the parents. But, in the same way as the innocent victim of their parents' addiction, human beings (other than Adam and Eve) are not personally culpable for the situation in which they find themselves. Further, the current tragic scenario on which humans are affected by the effects of original sin is not due to anything God did or failed to do, since God provided all that was necessary to avoid sin, so that the occurrence of original sin was solely attributed to Adam and Eve.<sup>16</sup>

The resulting picture is thus that humanity finds itself amid a tragic and regrettable scenario which results from resistance to God at a given point in the past and which could have been avoided if Adam and Eve had chosen to preserve their relationship with God. Relationship with God was *intuitively* available to Adam and Eve, such that they were never nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. In the actual world, we therefore find there to be nonresistant nonbelievers who, through no fault of their own, are unaware of God's openness to relationship with them – this 'divine hiddenness' is one of the effects of original sin. Human beings lack from birth that intuitive awareness of God which would be given by original justice, and so can be in a state of nonbelief which does not result from any act of resistance *of their own* to relationship with God. Nevertheless, their lack of intuitive awareness of God results from resistance. If this scenario of original sin were to obtain,

<sup>14</sup>Such assumptions play a role in some sin-based responses, e.g., Ebrahaim Azadegan, 'Divine Hiddenness and Human Sin', *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 7 (2013), 69–90.

<sup>15</sup>See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 95.

<sup>16</sup>See, e.g., *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 81, a. 2; q. 83, a. 1, ad 4.

it would be false that ‘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’, since all humans would be either in a state of nonbelief due to their own fault or that of others whose resistance created the circumstances under which their nonbelief resulted, putting them in a situation where they were unaware of God’s openness to relationship. Thus, nonbelief would in all cases be a product of resistance; there are no nonbelievers whose lack of belief results from no fault whatsoever.

The possibility of original sin initially constitutes only the basis for a ‘*defense*’ against the argument from divine hiddenness, as I have merely outlined a possible scenario on which the empirical premise of those arguments was false, which could hold ‘for all we know’.<sup>17</sup> But we can make the response stronger. Reinhold Niebuhr once referred to original sin as ‘the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith’.<sup>18</sup> My response now turns to make a similar point. Instead of arguing for the empirical verifiability of original sin in terms of its effects in widespread moral evil, existential anxiety, or sinful social structures (as these empirical facts seem potentially explicable for naturalists), what I mean to highlight is that an intuitive awareness of God being close to us, supremely good and loving, and open to relationship with all would seem to be a great good. There are individuals who seem to have had such an experiential awareness of God’s closeness: saints such as Catherine of Siena, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Terese of Lisieux come to mind. It would seem possible in principle to provide *empirical* evidence that these experiences contributed to the flourishing of individuals such as these and to their communities that would be at least epistemically on a par with the evidence for nonresistant nonbelievers.<sup>19</sup>

In an epistemic situation such as that which Schellenberg appeals to in setting up the divine hiddenness argument, I suggest that the empirical facts concerning those holy people experiencing God’s presence – and the way that this experience of God benefits them and others – would give us good reasons to believe something like original sin has occurred. Schellenberg suggests divine hiddenness arguments target primarily those common evidential situations where we are equipoised between theism and naturalism, where ‘the relevant (independent) evidence does not clearly favor either theism or its denial...’.<sup>20</sup> In such a situation, we are aware of the divine hiddenness problem but also of at least some reasons to believe there is a God, even if we have no conclusive evidence that tips the scales in His favor. However, we also have (I suggest) evidence that intuitive relationship with God is potentially available to some persons and would apparently constitute a great good for them. The situation in which we can recognize this intuitive awareness of God is good for us, but that many do not possess it, seems as if many are lacking in important and great goods. Since we have reason to believe that a God of perfect divine love would want to be in relationship with us, and we know that resistance would be a plausibly sufficient reason for God not to be in relationship with us, then evidence that there exists a tragic situation of estrangement of humankind from intuitive awareness God – divine hiddenness – would also

<sup>17</sup> See Baker-Hytch, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities* (Reprint, London: Bles, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> See Rad Miksa, ‘Nonresistant Nonbelief’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 98 (2024), pp. 1–23.

<https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq2024515286>.

<sup>20</sup> DHHR, 210.

be evidence that resistance to relationship with God has possibly occurred in the past.<sup>21</sup> Thus, if the possibility of original sin would constitute an act of resistance sufficient to account for the facts of divine hiddenness, and would be compatible with perfect divine love, then I conclude that facts of divine hiddenness give us reason to embrace a *disjunctive*: either there are genuinely nonresistant nonbelievers who are not part of a history in which corporate resistance to God occurred at any point in their past, or those apparently nonresistant nonbelievers who have committed no obvious personal act of resistance to relationship with God suffer from a situation like that original sin.

The mere existence of apparently nonresistant nonbelievers does not show us that any past act like original sin has not occurred. However, *if* awareness of God's closeness is actual for at least some persons, we have evidence in favor of the hypothesis that resistance has occurred in human history. Each such saintly person raises the probability that such a scenario obtains, especially as these occur across times, places, cultures, etc. Naturalism would account for widespread divine hiddenness but would not seem to predict saintliness, let alone widespread occurrence of saintliness across times and cultures, or the ways in which awareness of God's closeness would be a great good for individuals or their communities wherever it occurs. Theism which affirms claims about an event like original sin, such as Christianity, would then have greater prior probability, given that their doctrine seems to predict the situation on which divine hiddenness is widespread, but also on which saintliness occurs. If we have reason to evaluate evidence in favor of the hypothesis that a tragic estrangement from God has occurred at a point in the past, there seems to be good indirect evidence in favor of original sin. And similarly, if original sin is possibly in keeping with God's love, we have reason to evaluate more seriously that independent evidence of God's existence, since all such evidence would count in favor of original sin – if a God of perfect love exists and is hidden, and the only possibility compatible with His love for us is a scenario like original sin, then the evidence in favor of His existence points strongly at the occurrence of original sin. The possibility of original sin would then open the possibility for a strong evidential response to divine hiddenness, appealing not only directly to evidence that awareness of God is a good we are tragically lacking, but also to all possible evidence that God exists.

### 3. First objection: Divine perfect love

The most obvious objection is that original sin would seem incompatible with divine perfect love. On scenarios like that of original sin, God seems to fail to make Himself present to those who have *themselves* done nothing to resist God. He seems to hold individuals accountable for what others have done, where the behavior of others is counted as decisive reason for Him to leave others bereft of relationship, despite having done nothing themselves to merit that treatment. And that seems in conflict with His desire to have a relationship with each person, if not more generally in conflict with divine perfect love (or even simply fairness).

This objection relies on misunderstandings of the scenario I have offered. There are three clarifications that help defuse this objection. After offering the clarifications,

<sup>21</sup>Aquinas gives an argument resembling mine in *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.52.1-4.



I will examine Schellenberg's construal of divine love and show that the scenario is compatible with that specific concept of perfect divine love.

First, while my scenario undermines premise 6, one might more clearly understand the scenario not as denying the part of premise 6 that there are nonresistant nonbelievers but that human beings remain capable of relationship with God – the resistance of Adam has radically incapacitated human beings from being aware of God's openness to relationship and has thereby made them incapable of forming that relationship.<sup>22</sup> The scenario thus introduces a distinction between two kinds of capacity: proximate and remote. The remote capacity for relationship with God remains intact, as there are human beings who can and have formed relationship with God. Nevertheless, there are causal requisites for forming relationship, such as being aware of God's openness to relationship and His existence, as Schellenberg indicates. In this sense, the *proximate* capacity in virtue of which human beings can form a relationship with God is lacking in Adam's descendants. In fact, this incapacity is presupposed by Christian soteriology.

As Schellenberg notes, it is possible that some persons are incapable of relationship with God, given various possible reasons such as environmental or genetic factors, but '...we cannot rule out the possibility that God, if he exists and is perfectly loving, will at some future point in that individual's life, or in the hereafter, provide [those who are incapable] with the capacities required for [relationship with God] and other forms of well-being'.<sup>23</sup> Christian soteriology claims that the Atonement of Christ was necessary to restore those proximate capacities for relationship with God, which restoration occurred through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.<sup>24</sup> That act makes possible for human beings a cognitive state, faith, through which we have positive cognitive attitudes toward those propositions regarding the deity and His openness to relationship with us. Consequently, in our current epistemic situation of divine hiddenness, a situation into which we have been placed by original sin, relationship with God is impossible without faith.<sup>25</sup>

Second, the scenario preserves God's pro-relationship attitude toward those born under original sin. Given that these persons have not necessarily performed any act which would constitute a personal act of resistance toward God's openness to them, original sin only constitutes a sufficient reason for God to cease engaging with humanity *according to the mode of* providing all persons an intuitive awareness of God's closeness, where relationship with God could be achieved simply by thinking of it. But corporate resistance can constitute then a reason to *shift* engagement to another mode. Indeed, for Christians, this scenario is actual: the sin of those who were specially placed in human history as its progenitors, i.e., Adam and Eve, would constitute a sufficient reason only for God to change the mode by which He enters into relationship with their children, not to cease to be open to relationship with them.

Note that God closing one way of achieving relationship is not being justified in terms of *greater goods than that of relationship* in a future moment, or even the achieving

<sup>22</sup>Schellenberg similarly notes that hiddenness incapacitates human beings from forming relationship with God: DHHR, 41–43; *The Hiddenness Argument*, 56–59.

<sup>23</sup>DHHR, 25.

<sup>24</sup>E.g., Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), esp. pp. 143–75.

<sup>25</sup>James Dominic Rooney, 'What is the Value of Faith for Salvation? A Thomistic Response to Kvanvig', *Faith and Philosophy*, 36 (2019), 463–90, esp. 474–75.

of better relationship in the future through the delay of achieving relationship now. Rather, God (as it were) shifts the way He aims to achieve relationship in the present. He maintains openness to relationship with each person under a variant way or mode which is not that of intuitive openness to explicit, propositional, and conscious relationship – each person remains capable of forming a relationship with God at every time merely by willing it.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the scenario of original sin is compatible broadly speaking with the aforementioned alternative responses to divine hiddenness arguments, on which God allows hiddenness for the good of created persons: God would allow alternative modes of awareness of His presence in terms of the goods which created persons can enjoy via these other modes. For instance, becoming aware of God's desire for relationship by means of the preaching of Christian missionaries could enhance the quality of their relationship with God as well as those who do the preaching. So, God possibly has good reasons (reasons good *for us*) to shift the mode of His engagement with us in response to human sin.

Third, the scenario does not require a notion of corporate culpability or guilt. God's shift to a different mode of engagement with the children of Adam and Eve results from the *casual connection* which exists between the personal sin of the forebears and that causal mechanism by which original justice would have been passed on to their children. So, rather than one person's resistance being like a *moral* reason for God to cease being open to relation with another or to cease manifesting Himself to them, the scenario envisions something akin to *damage* which affects the epistemic faculties of Adam's children. In this way, the scenario of original sin is compatible broadly speaking with appeal to 'reformed epistemology', on which the noetic effects of sin impede awareness of God.<sup>27</sup> However, on my scenario, it is not strictly speaking that human epistemic faculties would have given us intuitive awareness of God if they were properly functioning. That state of the first human beings which gave them intuitive awareness of God was a supernatural state (original justice), not the proper *natural* functioning of their epistemic faculties.

Nevertheless, God's perfect love is compatible with Adam and Eve putting themselves in a position to lack intuitive awareness of God's presence *because* of their resistance. It is also not God who prevents or impedes Adam's children from being aware of God. Rather, there is a separate causal mechanism involved. On my scenario, that supernatural state was passed on by propagation. Adam's resistance damaged the means by which that intuitive awareness would have been passed on to his children. As noted earlier, damage to our epistemic faculties is a well-known phenomenon. People lose memory, imagination, get drunk, lose sensation, etc. It is also known that one person can do this damage to another person's faculties, whether intentionally or unintentionally. So, when Adam and Eve lost original justice, this rendered it *ipso facto* impossible for any other human to have intuitive awareness of God from birth. The question would then *not* be whether God had moral reasons to fail to be in relationship with Adam's children, but whether divine perfect love is compatible with Adam being able to affect the epistemic situation of his children negatively.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. *The Hiddenness Argument*, 47–48.

<sup>27</sup>E.g., Tyler Taber and Tyler McNabb, 'Is the Problem of Divine Hiddenness a Problem for the Reformed Epistemologist?' *Heythrop Journal*, LIX (2018), 783–93; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 178–80, 257.

With these clarifications in hand, the scenario of original sin (as I have presented it) is straightforwardly compatible with Schellenberg's construal of divine perfect love. In short, divine perfect love implies that 'God, if loving, seeks explicit, reciprocal relationship with us...'.<sup>28</sup> On my scenario too 'the light is always shining', as God's openness to relationship does not change because of original sin; what is lost is only human intuitive awareness of that openness and our consequent capacity to form relationship with God simply by thinking about it. Although the mode of awareness of God has changed, God continues to seek explicit, conscious relationship of the sort appropriate to divine perfect love.<sup>29</sup> In the fallen situation, God's activity to promote faith provides individuals with the appropriate knowledge of those propositions regarding God's openness to relationship. 'God would always be open to such relationship, in the minimal sense of never being closed—never shutting off the possibility of participating in such a relationship just by trying...[although] such a possibility might still be shut off by what creatures do in resistance of the relationship'.<sup>30</sup> The scenario which obtains is a result of human resistance by Adam and Eve. Consequently, the scenario upholds the principle that God could only have sufficient reason to fail to engage personally with each person if those creatures put them in a position to be incapable of or unaware of His openness to relationship with Him.

Similarly, 'God seeks to bring about a personal relationship with himself for human beings capable of such relationship at all times at which they are so capable...'.<sup>31</sup> God can providentially ensure that, at some relevant times, each person is capable of this relationship with God, and that He provides them the means for awareness in those moments which makes faith possible for them. In this way, the scenario of original sin is compatible broadly speaking with appeal to God's Providential foreknowledge, whether Molinist or otherwise.<sup>32</sup> God permits divine hiddenness, and the incapacity of individuals to form relationship with Him, because He can providentially ensure that each such person is capable of union with Him alternatively by being capable (at least at some times) of making an act of faith; at all such times, God is seeking to bring such persons into relationship.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Second objection: Indirect resistance is not personal resistance

Schellenberg's response to Talbot and others who (appealing to a Calvinistic vision of original sin) propose the 'contrary-to-fact' condition that every nonbeliever is personally culpable of resistance to God would not apply to the scenario I have presented, as my scenario admits that nonresistant nonbelievers are not culpable of any personal act of resistance to God.<sup>34</sup> Yet Schellenberg briefly addresses a possibility closer to my

<sup>28</sup>DHHR, 18.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. DHHR, 30–31.

<sup>30</sup>J. L. Schellenberg, 'Divine Hiddenness: Part 1 (recent work on the hiddenness argument)', *Philosophy Compass*, 12 (2017), 2.

<sup>31</sup>DHHR, 25.

<sup>32</sup>E.g., Jacobus Erasmus and Timothy Stratton, 'A Molinist Response to Schellenberg's Divine Hiddenness Argument', *Perichoresis*, 21 (2023), 39–51; Michael Thune, 'A Molinist-Style Response to Schellenberg', *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 22 (2006), 33–41.

<sup>33</sup>See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace*, trans. by Dominican Nuns (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1952), pp. 187–201.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. DHHR, 76–79.

position when he notes that it would be possible to hold that ‘those who fail to believe are inhibited by sin *indirectly* in that they have inherited and now express involuntarily dispositions and values inimical to belief’. He responds that such a possibility would fall under his claims about such nonbelievers being inculpable for their resistance: ‘the latter view implies that those who fail to believe are not themselves culpable for it, and thus gives rise to no objection to my claim’.<sup>35</sup>

By contrast with the position Schellenberg notes, the scenario I have outlined involved the sin of Adam and Eve producing *incapacity* for relationship with God rather than an involuntary disposition to resist God. Thus, Schellenberg’s response does not affect the possibility that human beings could culpably render their descendants incapable of relationship with God, exactly like those environmental or genetic factors that Schellenberg explicitly admits might similarly render an individual incapable of having relationship with God.

### 5. Third objection: Original sin is question-begging and empirically unsound

Schellenberg addresses the possibility of original sin more extensively in his discussion of the ‘Responsibility Argument’, where he considers the possibility that ‘humans have been given responsibility for the spiritual well-being of *future generations*, and some or all present-day cases of inculpable nonbelief are due to past abuses this responsibility’.<sup>36</sup> He responds, first, that the empirical claims involved are both implausible and question-begging.

there seems to be no non-question-begging way to defend this view...[since] any such view depends on the prior assumption of (at least) the plausibility of supposing God to exist, an assumption the argument of this book...casts into question. For the empirical evidence seems to provide no reason to suppose that there have not always been individuals who have inculpably denied the existence of God or remained agnostic or unreflectively failed to believe, and so seems to provide no reason to suppose that evidence of the required sort has ever been generally available.<sup>37</sup>

The first part of this objection alleges that the scenario of original sin is question-begging, since nobody seems to have ever had evidence which would make God’s existence obvious, intuitive, and certain in the way that the scenario presumes held at the initial stage (in the Garden of Eden). It might be that this objector holds that we have no apparent reason to think that the evidence of God’s existence has changed, presuming that the evidence we have of God’s existence now (e.g., inferential evidence or properly basic belief) is just as it was in the Garden. This presumption would be false: on the assumption that intuitive awareness of God possible in the prelapsarian state was supernaturally provided, it is not the case that the current absence of this experience results from some positive harm empirically discoverable in our faculties or in a change in the quality of that evidence discoverable empirically or by inference.

<sup>35</sup>DHHR, 75.

<sup>36</sup>DHHR, 196–97.

<sup>37</sup>DHHR, 197.

Perhaps the objector simply thinks we have no evidence of the prelapsarian state. However, I have suggested that the *possible* scenario on which there was a prelapsarian state, if compatible with divine love, would then provide us with a disjunctive set of options through which to consider the available evidence: either there are true nonresistant nonbelievers, or their occurrence is the result of a tragic epistemic situation resulting from human resistance to God. In this situation, I have argued we have evidence that awareness of God is good for individuals, and that this evidence would support that hypothesis that the occurrence of hiddenness is a result of human resistance to God in the past. Such an evidential situation would give us indirect reason to believe in the prelapsarian state. Does such a scenario illegitimately presume the existence of God? Not as far as I can see. The scenario rests on the *possibility* that God exists, but that is clearly a consideration we need to consider before beginning to weigh whether divine hiddenness would count as evidence against the existence of a perfectly loving God. Similarly, the scenario rests on the possibility that God would respond to human resistance in certain ways, changing the mode of His engagement in response to human sin, but this is no more question-begging than those assumptions made by Schellenberg below in his characterization of how a perfectly loving God *ought* to form relationship through strong epistemic situations of intuitive awareness of His presence. And, when weighing the evidence of divine hiddenness, it seems reasonable to begin in a situation of epistemic equipoise, as Schellenberg suggests, taking neither evidence for or against God's existence as decisive. However, equipoise does not require positively doubting the existence of God or excluding potential independent grounds for God's existence *a priori*. Given the prior probabilities can only be evaluated within the disjunctive set of possibilities I outlined, it makes sense to explore whether we have independent evidence of God's existence in order to evaluate the possibility that a loving God exists, but that human resistance has deprived us of intuitive awareness of His openness to relationship with us. Considering that a perfectly loving God would only shift His mode of engagement with us from a strong epistemic situation to other modes of engagement on account of an event like original sin in our past, any independent evidence of God's existence would then strengthen the evidential case in favor of the disjunct that original sin occurred.

Further, despite claims that there is evidence no prelapsarian state was possible, much of these claims rely on problematic assumptions about the nature of original sin that we can reject. For instance, there are scenarios on which the Biblical story of original sin is compatible with our current population genetics, and it seems possible that we can reconcile the biblical scenario with empirical evidence available to us.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, for purposes of rejecting the divine hiddenness argument, we do not need to prove that the *biblical account* of original sin is correct but only that it is possible some such culpable resistance to God occurred at a point in history, resulting in facts of divine hiddenness – it might be possible, for instance, to imagine a scenario in which angelic resistance led to the situation of divine hiddenness – as any such scenario being *possible* sets up the evidential situation under which we can begin to evaluate indirect evidence in favor of the Fall. So, if the evidence we do have does not rule out such

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<sup>38</sup>E.g., Daniel Houck, *Aquinas, Original Sin, and the Challenge of Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), esp. ch. 6; Loke, 121–64; Nicanor Austriaco, James Brent, and Thomas Davenport, *Thomistic Evolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Providence, RI: Cluny Media LLC, 2019).

scenarios entirely – which I do not see that it does – we can consider whether this scenario of original sin is compatible with divine perfect love and whether we have indirect evidence that it occurred.

Second, he argues that original sin would ‘not be permitted to obtain by a loving God’.<sup>39</sup> Since the argument is brief, I quote it in full:

Given the deep responsibilities we already have and our propensity to abuse them, a loving God, concerned to enter into personal relationship with human beings of all generations, recognizing the difficulties humans of all generations must face, would, we might expect, not give us the further responsibility in question. It is important to note that nothing in this argument implies that the human beings to whom God reveals himself in each generation should not be in a position to reject God and a personal relationship with him for themselves; by granting humans freedom, God makes it possible for them to reject him. But by the same token, it seems that a loving God would not give anyone the opportunity to put others in a position where neither explicit acceptance nor explicit rejection is possible. God, if he exists, is concerned to make it possible for each human being, at all times at which she or he exists and is capable, to be personally related to himself, and will, other things being equal, see to it that this is the case, unless that individual chooses otherwise.<sup>40</sup>

The second part of this objection misses a distinction proper to my scenario, on which original sin only incapacitates human beings from forming relationship with God based on an *intuitive awareness* of God – i.e., from a ‘strong epistemic situation’ – without thereby incapacitating them from forming that relationship in other ways. Therefore, it would be false that original sin puts anyone in ‘a position where neither explicit acceptance nor explicit rejection [of relationship with God] is possible’. Original sin undermines a proximate capacity for certain forms of relationship with God, but not for all forms of relationship with God. Schellenberg’s argument would need to show that God’s perfect love demands that He must not allow anyone culpably to impair those *specific* capacities for relating to Him by means of intuitive awareness, even if that would not rule out other alternative capacities by which people can relate to God. The current arguments provided by proponents of hiddenness do not show this.

Nevertheless, does that distinction between proximate and remote capacity pose a problem for my position? If people remain capable for relationship with God, then my appeal to the scenario of original sin does not show premise 6 to be false on grounds that they lack capacity for that relationship. However, an equivocation in senses of ‘capacity’ is what I allege makes the argument unsound. People remain remotely capable of union with God, but this capacity does not entail being in any strong epistemic situation regarding awareness of God’s openness to them – which is what is relevant for the inferential role played by premise 6. Conversely, God can shift the way in which each person enjoys proximate capacities for union in response to human sinfulness. These considerations about perfect divine love, by themselves, do not show us that God cannot have good reasons to shift engagement with individuals in response to the

<sup>39</sup>DHHR, 198.

<sup>40</sup>DHHR, 198–99.

behavior of past individuals, since Schellenberg only alleges that it would be incompatible with divine love to deprive others of *all* capacity for relationship on account of the sins of others. He does not argue that the behavior of others would not constitute sufficient grounds for God to shift away from maintaining a strong epistemic position with each person to providing opportunities for each to come to relationship through faith.

## 6. Concluding considerations

Given the case outlined here, the most reasonable response by the defender of divine hiddenness arguments is to double down and modify the account of divine perfect love given by Schellenberg, since that account is (as given) compatible with the scenario of original sin that I have outlined. However, to modify that account of divine perfect love to rule out my scenario would significantly weaken, if not destroy, what makes the evidential case from divine hiddenness uniquely powerful. To rule out this scenario of original sin, the objector would need to argue that divine perfect love requires that God cannot allow any given person's culpable activity to render another person proximately incapable of relationship with Him.

However, there are many obvious ways in which one person may culpably bring about, in the current and actual world, that another becomes (proximately) incapable of conscious, explicit relationship with God: e.g., I can get someone drunk or simply bonk them on the head hard enough that they become (proximately) incapable of conscious thought, and thereby (proximately) incapable of being aware of God's presence. An argument to the effect that God's perfect love cannot permit anyone to get someone else drunk or hit them on the head would not be a very impressive argument.

Even the distinction between incapacity at a time and incapacity from birth does not seem relevant, as people's bad decisions can negatively affect the mental development of their children tragically from the womb. Ruling out the possibility of original sin by appeal to divine love would require that God's love is incompatible with a whole series of well-known natural and moral evils. But then the argument from divine hiddenness would not be a distinct kind of argument alongside well-known, and highly discussed, versions of the problem of evil.