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God as victim of human sin: a sin-based response to J. L. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument

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Abstract

In this paper, I develop an extended sin-based response to J. L. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument against the existence of God which claims that the existence of God is disproven by the existence of persons whom Schellenberg calls non-resistant non-believers. I aim to problematize Schellenberg's claim that there are such persons by arguing that his understanding of resistance is too narrow and that there is a broader kind of resistance he has not adequately considered. My argument has two stages. In Stage One, I argue that by culpably gravely injuring other humans, humans injure God indirectly and this is a kind of resistance towards him. In Stage Two, I point out that, if Christianity is true, human sin led to the suffering and death of God incarnate; I then try to show that, if Christianity is true, humans who have committed gravely immoral acts bear some non-negligible moral responsibility for the death of Christ, and that this too is a kind of resistance towards God. Since virtually all humans have gravely injured another human and committed at least one gravely immoral act, virtually all humans are resistant to God in this broader sense. Finally, I try to account for the variation in belief and non-belief by arguing that temporary divine hiding is an acceptable but not necessary divine response to this kind of resistance.

1. Introduction

J. L. Schellenberg's divine hiddenness argument is one of the most important atheological arguments since the problem of evil. It is especially significant for Christian theologians

because it draws on assumptions about the nature of divine love that a considerable number of Christian thinkers would be amenable to. The argument can be summarized as follows:

(a) If God exists, there are no non-resistant non-believers.
(b) There are non-resistant non-believers.
(c) God does not exist.[1]

What does Schellenberg mean by non-resistant non-believer? Through personal email correspondence with Schellenberg, I was able to arrive at the following definition.

> *Non-resistant non-believer*: A person S is a non-resistant non-believer iff (i) S does not believe in God, and (ii) S's non-belief in God is not due to a self-deceptive action in support of a desire on S's part to not be in a relationship with God or to be in a condition incompatible with relationship with God.

It is worth stressing that the above definition was approved by Schellenberg in our correspondence as a faithful interpretation of his work.[2]

Why does Schellenberg think that the existence of God entails the non-existence of non-resistant non-believers? His reasoning can be laid out as follows. He follows Anselm in saying that God is, by definition, an unsurpassably great being—in his words, 'the *greatest possible person*'.[3] Schellenberg infers from God's maximal greatness that God must be loving—not only that, but his love must be the *best possible kind of love*. This implies that God must *always* love *all* persons. So far, this is an inference that is not particularly unusual in the theological literature—indeed, it coheres well with the Christian insistence that God is love (1 John 4:8). But love, Schellenberg argues, is more than benevolence. Rather, Schellenberg argues, love implies a desire for a personal relationship with the beloved as an end in itself. This is because love is 'the desire of a loving person to come close, allowing us explicitly to share in her life'.[4] A personal relationship in this context refers to 'the general and familiar idea of a positively meaningful interaction between persons that they are aware of experiencing'.[5] In other words, if God existed, he would desire to be in a personal relationship with every person.

Now, not every person is capable of being in a conscious, mutually interactive relationship with God. This is because not all persons are endowed with the cognitive and affective capacities needed to be in such a relationship. The cognitive and affective capacities needed for a conscious, mutually interactive relationship with God include things such as 'a capacity to feel the presence of God … [and] exhibit attitudes of trust, gratitude, and obedience to God and so on',[6] and not all persons possess these capacities. Schellenberg calls persons who do have these capacities and who are therefore able to enter into such a personal

[1] For a more extensive formulation, see J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 103.

[2] In my email correspondence with Schellenberg, I submitted a proposal for a definition of non-resistant non-believer based on a passage in Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, pp. 55–6. He accepted my proposal while suggesting some edits. The definition laid out here is my original proposal with his suggested edits incorporated.

[3] Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, p. 95.

[4] Ibid., p. 40.

[5] Ibid., pp. 39–41.

[6] Ibid., p. 40.

relationship with God *finite persons*. Although God cannot enter into a conscious, mutually interactive relationship with persons who lack the capacities for such a relationship, he would certainly give every finite person an opportunity to be in such a relationship with him. This implies that he would at least make his existence known to them to make them aware of the possibility of such a relationship.

Given this, the only reason a finite person failed to believe in God would be due to a desire on their part (either implicit or explicit) to not be in personal relationship with God. But there are finite persons who lack belief in God and in some such persons, this lack of belief in God does not seem to be rooted in an explicit or even an implicit desire to not be in a personal relationship with God. But if God existed, this would not occur. In other words, if God existed, there would be no person who (i) is capable of being in a conscious, mutually interactive relationship with God, (ii) has not (explicitly or implicitly) desired to not be in a personal relationship with him, and (iii) fails to believe in God's existence and thereby misses out on the opportunity to be in a conscious, mutually interactive relationship with God if they so choose. But such persons do exist—Schellenberg calls them non-resistant non-believers. Hence, God does not exist.[7]

Most critics of the argument focus on critiquing premiss (a), trying to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of such non-resistant non-believers. But some critics of the argument have offered sin-based critiques of premiss (b). A standard sin-based rebuttal is the *de re* approach. This is an approach which involves 'counting people who don't have mental states that they would represent to themselves as being about God as nevertheless having mental states that are *de re* about God; that is, they have mental states that they would represent to themselves as being about X, and in actual fact X = God'.[8] Such mental states, says Max Baker-Hytch, may include cognitive attitudes such as beliefs and affective attitudes such as longings or loathings. The proposal here is that 'people who lack a monotheistic God-concept can nevertheless be viewed as having rejected God, in virtue of their having mental states that are *de re* about God'.[9] As an example, Baker-Hytch quotes William Wood[10] who argues that to turn away from truth is to turn away from God. Similarly, it could be argued that God is the Good, and to turn away from the Good is to turn away from God. This might be called a simple sin-based strategy. But most philosophers and theologians interacting with Schellenberg's work take the view that challenging premiss (b) is difficult because even most critics of Schellenberg's argument take the existence of non-resistant non-believers to be obvious. For example, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green echo a commonly held opinion when they write that the probability of premiss (b) being false is '[v]anishingly small'.[11] Baker-Hytch agrees with this statement, saying that an attack on this premiss 'looks like an uphill battle, to put it mildly'.[12]

[7] For a book-length treatment, see Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*.

[8] Max Baker-Hytch 'On Sin-based Responses to Divine Hiddenness', *Religious Studies* 61 (2025), pp. 650–64, p. 7; page references are to the version published online on 20 November 2023 (https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/religious-studies/article/on-sinbased-responses-to-divine-hiddenness/E4AADE2039D2D6E101BE8375C6498DC0).

[9] Ibid.

[10] W. Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[11] D. Howard-Snyder and A. Green, 'Hiddenness of God', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016) (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-hiddenness/).

[12] Baker-Hytch, 'On Sin-based Responses to Divine Hiddenness', p. 2.

In what follows, I will offer a couple of arguments to problematize premiss (b). I will argue that Schellenberg's understanding of non-resistance is far too narrow, that there is a broader kind of resistance to God that is relevant to the discussion, and, once this resistance is acknowledged, it becomes hard to argue that any human person is truly non-resistant to God. My approach transcends the *de re* approach because it does not require a person to have mental states about God (*de re* or otherwise) to be resistant towards God. In contrast to the *de re* approach, mine might be called a complex sin-based strategy.

The Christian tradition has historically seen sin itself as a kind of resistance towards God. If this is correct, then sinners are, by definition, resistant to God at least to some extent. And if, as the Apostle Paul implies, all ordinary humans are sinners (Rom. 3:23), this implies that all ordinary humans are resistant to God to some extent.[13] My main purpose in this article is to flesh out this venerable theological intuition in an analytic manner. My strategy has two stages. The first stage presents an argument which might be called the argument from divine solidarity. The core claims of this argument are as follows: (i) virtually all humans have injured God in at least an indirect way by committing a grave injury against other humans; (ii) humans are culpable for this injury they have committed against God even if they are non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense, that is even if their non-belief in God's existence is not due to a desire on their part to not be in relationship with God; and (iii) this is a real/genuine kind of resistance towards God, even if it is not what Schellenberg is talking about when he speaks of resistance towards God. The second stage presents a stronger Christian version of the argument of the first—this latter argument might be called the Deicide argument. In this section, I will argue that, if Christianity is true, immoral human acts led to the crucifixion of God incarnate and all humans who are guilty of grave moral wrongdoing (at least the vast majority of humanity) bear some moral responsibility for the death of God. This shows that they are resistant to God in a relevant sense of the word, even if they are non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense of the word. There are two differences between the first and second stages: (i) the first stage tries to show that God is an indirect victim of certain human acts whereas the second stage attempts to make the stronger case that God is also a direct victim of certain human acts;[14] and (ii) the second stage lays out a more explicitly Christian argument than the first stage. After laying out these two kinds of resistance, I argue that temporary divine hiding is an acceptable but not necessary divine response to this kind of resistance.

Certain theologians—particularly those who are classically minded—might find my philosophical-theological methodology problematic. For example, the charge could be levelled against me that my methods end up anthropomorphizing God by arguing that he is wronged by certain human acts. It is important to make some remarks to pre-emptively respond to this worry. Firstly, I do not argue for or against divine impassibility or simplicity in

[13] By 'ordinary humans', I mean humans of the sort we encounter in everyday life who possess the kind of moral failings that are ubiquitous of the human condition. The standard Christian view is that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of God the Son and therefore sinless. Furthermore, some Christians take the view that Mary of Nazareth was also free of all sin, both original and personal. The category of 'ordinary humans' would not extend to hypothetical divine incarnations or allegedly sinless saints, but it would include the vast majority of humans. (It is worth noting that, in more recent works, Schellenberg also uses the terminology of 'ordinary humans' and he seems to use it in a very similar way to the way I use it. See J. L. Schellenberg, *What God Would Have Known: How Human Intellectual and Moral Development Undermines Christian Doctrine* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2024], ch. 2, pp. 36–61.)

[14] I will clarify the distinction between direct and indirect later in this paper.

my paper and I hope my argument will prove persuasive to theologians on both sides of that debate. When it comes to Stage One, those who affirm divine impassibility may interpret my claim—that certain human acts wrong God—in an Anselmian way: that God is denied what is rightfully his. This would be a more 'legal' reading of my argument. When it comes to Stage Two, my claims concerning the suffering and death of God incarnate need not be seen as a negation of divine impassibility because the classical Chalcedonian tradition has accepted that God incarnate suffers and dies in his human nature and has tried to harmonize this with divine impassibility. Secondly, my arguments need not be read as a negation of an apophatic approach to theology because my claim that God is 'wronged' by human acts may be read in an analogical manner. Even apophatic theologians use this sort of language when they speak of God being displeased or offended, or of God rejoicing and so on. Finally, it should be noted that my argument is intended to have maximum dialectical force in that it aims to engage Schellenberg on his own turf by utilizing a philosophical-theological methodology like his and conceding (for the sake of argument) as many of his core assumptions as possible. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that his method can be used to undermine his own argument. Thus, although I hope my argument can stand on its own merits, I suggest it can also be read as an *ad hominem* against Schellenberg, showing that Schellenberg's methodology is a double-edged sword.

2. Stage One: God as indirect victim of human injury

2.1. An outline of the argument

It is a fact that humans commit injury[15] against each other. Such injuries vary in degree. On one end of the spectrum, some injuries are relatively horrendous—for example, genocide. Other injuries are relatively light and might be called minimal injuries—for example, stealing a pound from a billionaire or making gentle mockery of someone behind their back. Horrendous injuries are marked out by their catastrophic and stark nature and in modern democratic egalitarian societies are often subject to legal sanction. Not every human has committed a horrendous injury. But there is a certain kind of injury that might be called a grave injury. The category of grave injury is broad: it includes horrendous injuries and at least some non-horrendous injuries. I understand an injury to be grave if *either* it justifiably causes an enduring sense of guilt in the wrongdoer's mind, *or* it would justifiably cause an enduring sense of guilt in the wrongdoer's mind if the wrongdoer had a properly functioning conscience and the wrongdoer remembered that he/she had done it. An example of an injury that is grave but not horrendous would be someone who cheats on their faithful long-suffering spouse and takes advantage of their gullibility simply for personal pleasure. Such a person is not subjected to legal sanction in many modern democratic egalitarian societies and, if the person is successful in their deceit, causes no pain—emotional or physical—to their spouse. However, it does count as a grave injury because it violates the dignity of the spouse and takes advantage of their gullibility and vulnerability. Although not all humans have committed a horrendous injury, almost all have committed a grave injury because almost all humans have culpably committed a moral fault against another which they continue to regret or feel sad about even years after committing it or would continue to regret or feel sad about

[15] I have chosen the word 'injury', but the reader should be aware that in earlier drafts, I used the word 'injustice'. Although I have ultimately chosen to use 'injury', the word 'injustice' also expresses well what I have in mind.

even years after committing it if they had a properly functioning conscience and remembered that they had done it.[16]

Grave injuries—which include horrendous injuries—can and often do affect persons beyond the intended victim.[17] For example, the parents of children who die in school shootings are also affected by the crime even if the shooter did not intend to hurt them. This example suggests that in the event of an intended act of injury, we may distinguish between intended and non-intended victims. If the school shooter was not consciously intending to hurt the parents but only wished to kill the children, the children alone are intended victims whereas the parents are non-intended victims.

Another distinction can be made between immediate and non-immediate victims. An immediate victim is one who suffers directly because of the unjust act whereas a non-immediate victim is one who suffers indirectly because of that act. This distinction is relevant because there can also be unintended acts of injury—for example, cases of reckless driving in which the driver unintentionally does serious injury to one or more persons. In such cases, since there is not a conscious intent to cause harm, there are no intended victims; but there are immediate victims. In this case, the immediate victims are those injured by the driver. There might also be non-immediate victims—viz., those who love the immediate victims and are close to them and suffer harm because of them being harmed. This harm may include such things as emotional pain but may also extend to things just as or perhaps even more serious. For example, if a poor man is disabled as the result of an accident, this can cause trouble for his dependants especially if he is the sole breadwinner.[18]

The above discussion helps us to see two things: (i) it is possible to commit an injury against another unintentionally; and (ii) it is possible to commit injury against a person *b* by committing an injury against a person *a* if *a* and *b* are related to each other in a relevant way. It is (ii) I am interested in right now, although (i) shall also prove useful as I make my case. Let us call this latter kind of injury a transitive injury.

What is the relevant kind of relation that makes a transitive injury possible? One way, alluded to already, is if a person *b*'s wellbeing is dependent on a person *a*'s wellbeing. Someone who relies on a carer, such as a toddler, may suffer greatly if the carer is herself debilitated. But this is not the only way a transitive injury might occur. Another way transitive injury might occur is if a person *b* has intense love for a person *a*. For example, as a human being, if I intensely love someone, I am negatively affected if I perceive them to be negatively affected.

Why is this so? Even if it is true that love involves a desire for personal relationship, I would like to argue that love is more than simply this. An investigation of love is worth undertaking at this stage.

Two prominent accounts of love are the union account and the robust concern account.[19] The former, as the name suggests, argues that love results in a union of sorts between the

[16] Some Christians—such as those who closely follow John Calvin—may wish to argue that all wrongdoing is grave in this sense, even the injuries which some take to be minimal. My paper does not take a position on this. That is, a Calvinist may take the view that what I call 'minimal injuries' are also grave, and my article does not explicitly reject this position.

[17] This may also be true of minimal injuries.

[18] I take the distinction between immediate and non-immediate victims to be more general than the distinction between intended and non-intended victims because, in cases of unintended injury, there are no intended victims but there are immediate victims.

[19] B. Helm, 'Love', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2021) (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/love/).

lover and the beloved.[20] Robust concern theorists often criticize these accounts on the grounds that they are too egocentric—the argument is made that, under the union theory of love, care for the beloved is reduced to care for oneself, with the apparent implication that love is, therefore, selfish. Alan Soble, for example, argues that the notion of love as entailing a shared identity is inappropriate because love essentially requires concern for *another*.[21] However, what seems indisputable is that love involves caring.[22] Caring does not seem enough for love—it seems possible to care for someone without loving them. But the converse is not true—it does not seem possible to love someone and not care for them.[23] This seems to imply that an identification of sorts takes place. When I care for someone, it really matters to me that they prosper. If I, as a human being, *really* love someone, then if they are hurt, the fact that they are hurt will cause me pain. This does not necessarily mean that we must take a union theory of love. Bennett Helm, for example, critiques the union theory of love but argues that intimate identification with the other is necessary for love. He writes:

> in loving someone I must 'take his identity to heart' so that I am concerned with it not merely in the sense that I might be concerned with things or projects or strangers; rather, the intimacy, the deeply personal nature of this concern ought to be understood in a way that is somehow analogous to my concern for my own identity—or, for that matter, to his concern for his own identity. This is to 'identify' with him in a distinctively intimate, deeply personal way, and it is such *intimate identification* that seems to distinguish love proper from other, less intimate forms of concern such as compassion.[24]

Closely linked to love is the notion of solidarity. Solidarity is understood by some to be a 'feature of relationships between persons'.[25] It is a social phenomenon that brings people together, sometimes in terms of a common cause. A distinction is sometimes made between solidarity *among* a group of people and solidarity *with* a group of people.[26] An example of the former would be Indians banding together in the struggle for independence; an example of the latter would be a member of an out-group (e.g. a British person) expressing solidarity for a group of people they do not belong to (e.g. the Indian people). Solidarity with does not require symmetry—Sangiovanni and Viehoff give the example of someone donating money to an NGO to support people affected by an earthquake; by doing so, they act in solidarity with the victims of that disaster even if the victims do not show solidarity in return and might

[20] See R. Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Continuum, 2006) and R. Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

[21] See A. Soble, 'Union, Autonomy, and Concern', in R. Lamb (ed.), *Love Analyzed* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 65–92.

[22] Of course, I am speaking here of love in an interpersonal context, as opposed to love for abstract ideas or art or beauty and so on.

[23] A. Jaworska and M. Wonderly, 'Love and Caring', in C. Grau and A. Smuts (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 251–69.

[24] B. Helm, 'Love, Identification, and the Emotions', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (2009), pp. 39–59, here p. 41.

[25] D. Miller, 'Solidarity and Its Sources', in K. Banting and W. Kymlicka (eds.), *The Strains of Commitment: The Political Sources of Solidarity in Diverse Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 61–79, here p. 61.

[26] O. O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 201.

be of such a character that they would not have shown solidarity if the places were switched.[27]

It seems that love entails solidarity, even if love is understood in terms of desire for relationship as Schellenberg seems to think. How could one truly love someone and not be in solidarity with them? As argued earlier, love involves caring. In fact, solidarity seems to be a weaker notion than love since love—on Schellenbergian terms—involves desire for personal relationship and it seems possible to show solidarity without desiring personal relationship with the person with whom solidarity is shown. Thus, I argue *a fortiori* that if *b* loves *a*, *b* is in solidarity with *a*.

The notion of solidarity is similar to the notion of love with an important distinctive: solidarity can be interpreted as emphasizing concern for the *plight* of a person. For example, suppose that James is an American of German descent living just prior to the American Civil War. He is a devout Baptist abolitionist and expresses solidarity with enslaved black people in the American South on account of their plight. If James is truly in solidarity with the enslaved black people, he is angered by their present condition and longs for them to see justice. Despite not suffering directly from slavery, his intense concern for the enslaved means that their plight deeply affects him and causes him distress, at least at an emotional level. Solidarity could also take on stronger forms than this. Let us modify the example a little bit: suppose that Fred is an American of African ancestry—a free man—living in the northern USA on the eve of the Civil War. If Fred is in strong solidarity with the plight of enslaved black people, he may even regard the wrongs perpetrated against them as wrongs against himself, even though he is not the direct object of the injury.

To sum up, I argue that if a person *b* intensely loves a person *a*, *b* intimately identifies with *a* which entails (i) *b* cares for *a* and wishes to see *a* prosper and not be wronged; and (ii) *b* is in solidarity with *a* and therefore regards any injury against *a* as injury against himself/herself. If *b* is capable of suffering, a third entailment can be added: (iii) *b* suffers as a consequence of *a*'s being wronged.

Let us now apply these insights theologically. What if God intensely loves a person *a*? Well, if so, God intimately identifies with *a*, which entails (i) God cares for *a* and wishes to see *a* prosper and not be wronged; (ii) God is in solidarity with *a* and regards any injury against *a* as an injury against Godself; and (iii) if God is capable of suffering, God suffers as a consequence of *a*'s suffering and/or *a*'s being wronged.

This has interesting consequences for the topic of resistance. Suppose that a person *x* commits a grave injury against a person *a* who is intensely loved by God. If so, this entails the following:

(a) *x* frustrates God's wish in a serious way by obstructing *a*'s prospering and/or wronging *a* in a morally significant manner.
(b) *x* commits an injury against God by committing a grave injury against *a*.
(c) If God is capable of suffering, God suffers as a result of *a*'s suffering and/or *a*'s being wronged.

I suggest, based on this, that *x*'s action counts as an act of resistance against/towards God. Consider the following facts. If God is perfect (as Schellenberg accepts), then God's wishes are always reasonable. Not only that, God's wish for *a* to prosper is rooted in his benevolence,

[27] A. Sangiovanni and J. Viehoff, 'Solidarity in Social and Political Philosophy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023) (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/solidarity/).

which is a great-making property.[28] Furthermore, *x*'s action is clearly wrong from a moral standpoint. Finally, God is an unsurpassably great being and to commit an injury against him—worse still, to cause him suffering (if God is passible)—is a very serious matter. Hence, not only is *x*'s action an instance of resistance against God, but it is also a very grave instance of resistance.

Although this argument is perhaps an unusual one in the world of analytic theology, there is rich precedent for this kind of thinking in the Christian tradition. The Bible seems to affirm such a notion: for example, Jesus accuses Saul of Tarsus of persecuting him (Acts 9:3–9) even though Saul was not directly attacking Jesus himself but rather his disciples. This suggests that the solidarity between Jesus and the disciples is so strong than an attack on them is an attack on him.[29] Another famous example is from the life of King David: David, after killing Uriah and committing sexual immorality with Bathsheba, says in his prayer that it is against God alone that he has sinned (Ps. 51:4). Similar statements are made about reward: Jesus says that whoever feeds, clothes, visits, heals, or welcomes one of his disciples welcomes him (Matt. 25:31–46). This is a theme strongly emphasized by liberation theologians. James Cone, provocatively asserting that 'Jesus is black', writes:

> The resurrection means that God's identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world. And the Risen Lord's identification with the suffering poor today is just as real as was his presence with the outcasts in first-century Palestine. His presence with the poor today is not docetic; but like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them.[30]

If God is indeed in solidarity with all victims such that an injury against them counts as injury against Godself, this has important implications for whether there are persons who can be called non-resistant non-believers for the simple reason that virtually all adult humans seem to be guilty of at least one act of grave injury against another human being. If this is so, then virtually all adult humans are resistant to God in a relevant sense.

An objector might argue that this is not the kind of resistance Schellenberg is talking about. Schellenberg has in mind resistance to personal relationship with God not an act of wronging God by wronging someone dear to him. I accept that this is true, but that is exactly the point of this paper: I insist that this broader kind of resistance I am speaking of is relevant for the reasons outlined earlier. (Later on in this paper, I will also lay out how this kind of resistance can help explain the unequal distribution of belief and non-belief.) If my argument is sound, Schellenberg's argument fails because premiss (b) outlined at the start of this paper—that there are non-resistant non-believers—is problematized given the facts noted earlier about the apparent universality of human wrongdoing. The implications of this argument shall be explored more fully in Section 2.6.

[28] In this paper, I do not argue for or against divine simplicity. Proponents of divine simplicity may interpret 'great-making property' in a way that is harmonious with their theology.

[29] The unity of Christ and the Church is emphasized strongly in the Roman Catholic tradition. For example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in paragraph 795 argues that Christ and the Church make up the 'whole Christ', and quotes Pope St Gregory as saying that Christ is 'one person' with the Church.

[30] J. H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 148. It should be noted that I am not endorsing the specific nuances of Cone's interpretation or his theology: rather, I cite him simply to demonstrate that the idea that God is in strong solidarity with the oppressed has precedent in theological thinking.

2.2. Distinguishing my argument from *de re* approaches

The approach taken in this paper is distinct from *de re* approaches. Notice that I do not stress that the wrongdoer has a mental state that is *de re* about God (although I do not deny this either). Rather, the facts I emphasize are (i) virtually all adult humans have committed grave injury against another human; and (ii) because of God's solidarity with the oppressed, God is at least an indirect victim of such injury. The word indirect is worth stressing: *de re* theorists, by contrast, lay stress on mental states that are (directly) about God. My arguments are compatible with the wrongdoer not having any mental states about God at all.

2.3. Objection one: ignorance

At this point, a critic might raise the following objection. Responsibility for moral wrongdoing requires some sort of awareness. Suppose that a person Oswald commits an injury against his neighbour Veronica and does so (i) knowing that his act is injurious towards Veronica and unjust and (ii) freely carrying out the act in a way sufficient to ensure moral responsibility. If what I have argued so far is correct, by injuring Veronica, Oswald has also carried out an injury against God. Now suppose that Oswald is a non-believer in God and his non-belief is not due to any act of self-deception on his part (that is, suppose he is non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense of the word). An objector might distinguish between moral responsibility for injuring Veronica, and moral responsibility for injuring God. If what I have said in the prior sections is correct, Oswald has certainly injured God by injuring Veronica. But he is clearly not aware of this and does not intend this. He is only aware of and intends to injure Veronica. Given this fact, could it not be that Oswald is only morally responsible for injuring Veronica and not for injuring God? In other words, even if what I said in the previous section is correct about it being possible to commit an injury against someone unintentionally, is someone *morally responsible* for such an injury if there was no conscious intention?

My answer is yes: a person can be morally responsible even for unintentional injuries; but some philosophical work is needed to justify this answer.

According to Daniel Miller, most theorists accept the Blameless Ignorance Principle or BIP, which states that if an agent is blameless for their ignorance, then they are blameless for acting wrongly from that ignorance.[31] For example, suppose that Jonathan presses a button that causes an avalanche killing hundreds of people. However, Jonathan does not know that his act has this consequence, and he is blameless for his ignorance. In that case, as per the BIP, this ignorance excuses him from the act. As Miller notes, the BIP raises the question: when is someone blameless for their ignorance? There are two major theories formulated in response to this—the Reasonable Expectation or RE thesis and the Quality of Will or QW thesis.[32] It is worth exploring these views in some detail and then applying them to the Oswald and Veronica scenario.

The RE thesis states that an agent is blameworthy for something only if it was reasonable to expect the agent to avoid it and this is so only if they have the capacities to recognize and respond to moral reasons as well as the opportunity to exercise these capacities to avoid the thing in question.[33] Gideon Rosen gives an example that can help illustrate this thesis:[34]

[31] D. J. Miller, 'Ignorance and the Epistemic Condition', in M. Kiener (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Responsibility* (London: Routledge, 2023), p. 274.

[32] Ibid., p. 275.

[33] Ibid.

[34] G. Rosen, 'Culpability and Ignorance', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103 (2003), pp. 61–84, here pp. 66–9.

Smith is a middle-class father living in 1952 with sexist beliefs and attitudes—he provides for a college education for his sons, but not his daughters. His differential treatment is wrong, but not malicious. It is grounded in principles and beliefs which Smith finds obvious. The reason he finds it obvious is because he was raised to find it obvious and the people he takes seriously find it obvious. He is aware that there are persons who object to this kind of differential treatment, but their objections do not seem to Smith to be sound. Given his situation, Rosen argues that Smith is not to blame for his moral principles, even though these principles are wrong and lead to wrong behaviour. The reason Smith holds to these mistaken moral principles is not due to culpable negligence or recklessness on his part—rather, it might be a sign of ordinariness in that cultural context and it 'would have taken an extraordinary feat—extraordinary moral insight … —for the agent [in this case, Smith] to have done the right thing'.[35] It is, in other words, not reasonable for us to have expected Smith to avoid doing what he did, and therefore—under the RE principle—he is not blameworthy. Furthermore, many RE theorists argue that, to attribute blame to an agent for an action with negative consequences, the agent must have been able to reasonably foresee the negative consequences.[36]

The QW thesis states that an agent is blameworthy for something if and only if it manifests a negative quality of will.[37] 'Quality of will' is a termed coined by P. F. Strawson. According to Michael McKenna, will (in this context) does not refer to 'anything like a faculty or any other sort of action-theoretic entity, such as decision, choice, intention, motive or reason for action'[38]—it does not refer to the 'will' we speak of when we talk of 'free will'. Rather, will refers to 'the regard or concern one has toward others (or oneself), and toward the relevance of moral considerations, as manifested in one's conduct'.[39] Quality refers to value or worth, not property. Thus, if an action manifests a bad attitude towards oneself or another person, that agent is blameworthy for that action.

Regardless of which theory of moral responsibility one is inclined towards, one must—I suggest—avoid arguments that have the result of exculpating large numbers of wrongdoers that we would otherwise take to be responsible for their actions. Certain RE theorists go down this route. For example, Rosen argues that 'we are hardly ever culpable for the wrong we do'.[40] A Moorean-style argument can be made here: my intuition that wrongdoers are generally responsible for their wrongdoing is stronger than any intuition that could justify an argument exculpating them from all or most responsibility. Even defenders of such exculpating theses must accept that such theses run counter to our ordinary intuitions.

This is important for our present discussion. If the BIP is true, it has the following result: suppose that my thesis is correct, that God is a victim of human injury. Nonetheless, if Oswald is blameless for his ignorance that God is victimized by his action, he is free of blame in this regard—he might be morally responsible for the injury towards Veronica but not for the injury towards God. Thus, for my argument to succeed, I will have to show that Oswald is indeed blameworthy for his ignorance of the injury against/towards God. This is what I will presently seek to do. My theses are that humans who commit injury against fellow humans (i)

[35] Ibid., p. 69.

[36] Miller, 'Ignorance and the Epistemic Condition', p. 278.

[37] Ibid., p. 275.

[38] M. McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 59.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Rosen, 'Culpability and Ignorance', p. 62.

commit injury against God and (ii) are culpable for this injury to God even if they are non-believers in God and their non-belief in God is epistemically inculpable and/or not due to self-deception out of a desire to avoid relationship with God. I contend that these theses can be defended under both an RE and a QW paradigm of ignorance. To demonstrate this, in what follows I will formulate ways in which an RE theorist and a QW theorist might accommodate my intuition about culpability.

Let us start with the RE theory. Some RE theorists are capacitarians about moral responsibility. According to this view, 'ignorant wrongdoers often could have and should have been aware of some pertinent fact'.[41] Thus, even if they did not actually know about the fact, they should have known about it and (since ought implies can) had the capacity to do so. George Sher gives the example of a distracted person named Alessandra who forgets her dog Sheba in a hot car. Sher argues that what is relevant is that Alessandra could have and should have remembered Sheba.[42] In a similar line, I could frame the situation as follows. Suppose that Oswald's cognitive faculties are working and he has a conscience which serves as a generally reliable source of moral intuitions. Suppose that the possession of this conscience means that Oswald can, upon reflection, realize that (i) the action he plans to commit against Veronica is gravely wrong; and (ii) his action would be injurious not just to Veronica but also to those who ardently love her. Note that I make no reference to God being injured, but rather 'those who love Veronica' being injured. If we go by a capacitarian view of moral responsibility, Oswald is culpable for injuring God, because, even if he lacks conscious awareness of all the specific results of his action, he could have and should have known that this action would cause injury to all those who ardently love Veronica. He might be ignorant of the fact that his actions injure this group of people, but his ignorance is not blameless. (My argument here would apply also to the examples given earlier such as the school shooter.)

Let us turn now to the QW theory. Under this theory, ignorance is blameworthy and does not exculpate if it is the result of negative qualities of will. Note that in my Oswald and Veronica story, Oswald is clearly animated by negative qualities of his will, such as malice. He has a disregard for Veronica's rights and dignity and prefers to exploit her for his own benefit. To put it in Kantian terms, he treats Veronica as a means to an end rather than an end in herself. Suppose that Oswald is ignorant of the fact that such an action injures those who ardently love Veronica. Nonetheless, given that his will has such negative qualities, it is not a stretch to suggest that his ignorance of such facts is due to these negative qualities. If he is willing to exploit another person for his own benefit, it is not a stretch to imagine that, even if he was aware of these moral facts, he would suppress that knowledge or engage in some kind of self-deception.

A further Christological argument can be made at this stage. Christians who affirm the Nicene Creed believe that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Christ was truly divine and truly human. Nonetheless, it is striking that people did not treat him differently on this account. Jesus himself points this out in the parable of the tenants (see Matt. 21:33–46). In this parable, there is a landowner who rents his vineyard to some farmers. When he sends his servants to collect fruit as rent, they mistreat and even kill them. This happens twice. He decides to send his son, thinking they will treat him differently because of his relationship to him. In fact, they do no such a thing: on the contrary, they kill him and

[41] Miller, 'Ignorance and the Epistemic Condition', p. 280.

[42] G. Sher, *Who Knew? Responsibility Without Awareness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

treat him worse than the others. In the narrative of the Gospel of Matthew, the parable comes true: Jesus is killed in a very cruel and barbaric way.[43]

A Christian could draw on this parable and argue that when a human will becomes malignant towards a neighbour, it becomes malignant towards God because if God became a human and was placed in a similar situation, he would be treated no differently. Thus, ill-will towards fellow humans is ill-will towards God. Although one can conceptually distinguish between 'ill-will and injury towards humans' and 'ill-will and injury towards God'—in that those phrases pick out different concepts—it could be argued that in reality the two cannot be separated—they are always co-instantiated. If this is so, then ignorance of the existence of God—even if such ignorance is epistemically inculpable and/or not due to self-deception of any sort—does not excuse one of injury towards him, because it remains the case that, had God been in that position of weakness and vulnerability, he would have been treated no differently.[44]

To illustrate this, consider the following scenario. Suppose that a robber enters a town and surveys the houses on a street. He is not sure which house to rob—they all look the same to him—so he rolls a dice and picks one randomly. Say that the house he picks is house number 6. An experienced burglar, he sneaks in late at night and makes off with most of the family's wealth, reducing them to a mere fraction of what they we were. Now imagine I am in house number 7. Thankfully, I have not been affected by the action in a direct way. Nonetheless, I do think I am entitled to be enraged and indignant at the robber, and I am entitled to seek justice against him and even punish him if I can. One of the reasons I am entitled to do so is because, although the robber did not injure me in a direct way, it remains a fact that I could easily have been the victim. The fact that I was not robbed is not due to any good will on the part of the robber, but rather due to a piece of sheer luck. Thus, even though his ill-will was not directed at me, it is intrinsically dangerous and could have hurt me badly.

The kind of reasoning I have sketched out is not, I think, particularly unreasonable or even uncommon. In fact, there are real-world examples in which such reasoning is utilized by people, suggesting that it has broad intuitive appeal. For example, there was a horrific case of rape in September 2023 in Ujjain, India. Famously, the father of the accused tearfully sought the death penalty for his own son. One of the reasons he gave is very similar to the reason sketched out above: he stated that although it was not his own daughter who was wronged, it could easily have been his own daughter and if it had been, he would have felt deep grief and sorrow and would have sought revenge.[45] If this kind of moral reasoning is sound, then God is entitled to be angered at human injury in a very personal way, for God could foresee that if he became incarnate and if he were placed in that person's life, he would have been treated no differently and would have been the target of the wrongdoer's ill-will.

So, these are some ways in which an RE or a QW theorist might accommodate my intuition.

At this point, a further objection might be made. I have argued that humans who injure or victimize God via injury towards fellow humans are culpable for this, even if they are ignorant of the injury they are committing against God, because such ignorance does not exculpate. How different is this, an objector might ask, from saying that human non-belief in

[43] I will consider the suffering of God incarnate at greater length in Section 3.

[44] Notice that, in this paragraph, I frame God becoming incarnate as a hypothetical: thus, my argument here could appeal even to those who hold that God did not become incarnate. I will make a stronger argument in Section 3.

[45] India Today, '"That Could Have Been My Daughter…": Ujjain Rape Accused's Father Seeks Death Penalty For His Son' (YouTube: India Today YouTube Channel, 2023).

God is due to self-deceptive resistance? Remember that my main argument in this paper is that, even if humans are non-resistant in the Schellenbergian sense, they might be resistant in a broader, relevant sense. But my argument in this section seems to imply that I am, in fact, questioning Schellenberg's claim that such persons are non-resistant non-believers in his sense of the word.

To this, I respond as follows. I would contend that my arguments in this section are compatible with the wrongdoers being non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense of the word. To see this, consider the following two propositions:

(A) Oswald does not believe in God, and his non-belief is not due to self-deception due to a desire on his part to not be in a personal relationship with God.
(B) Oswald is responsible for injuring those who love Veronica because he ought to have known that, by injuring Veronica, he would be injuring those who love her.

It does not strike me that these two propositions are contradictory or mutually exclusive. Although Oswald might not be accused of resisting belief in God through self-deception, he can be accused of neglecting to reflect on the fact that when he injures Veronica, he also injures those who love Veronica. And this is compatible with him being non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense. It of course happens to be the case—to Oswald's misfortune—that one of those whom he injures includes God. The key to understanding this distinction is to see that 'those who love Veronica' is a referentially opaque category. Oswald does not know who *specifically* belongs to this group and he cannot be blamed for this—this knowledge may be beyond him and is not necessarily due to self-deceptive Schellenbergian resistance on his part. Nonetheless, he is responsible for injuring them if we go by a Sher-style capacitarian approach to responsibility, because even if he does not know who specifically belongs to the group (or even that there *is* such a group), he ought to have known at least that there could be a group whose members would be injured by his actions.

Consider the following analogy to better understand this point. Suppose that a terrorist bombs a hospital with a desire to kill a specific person in it. One of the people killed in the hospital attack is a trainee doctor named Sadie. When tried, the terrorist cannot argue saying 'I cannot be held responsible for killing Sadie—I didn't even know Sadie existed, had no way of knowing about her or the fact that she was in the hospital, and had no intention to kill her'. This excuse does not work because although the terrorist did not necessarily intend to kill Sadie specifically, he ought to have known that his action would have seriously harmed and probably killed lots of people in the hospital, and one of those killed includes Sadie.

Similarly, consider the following two propositions.

(C) Oswald does not believe in God, and his non-belief is not due to self-deception due to a desire on his part to not be in a personal relationship with God.
(D) Oswald is responsible for injuring God, because his ignorance that he is injuring God is due to negative qualities in his will that prevent him from seeing that by injuring Veronica, he also injures all those who ardently love her.

Consider also the following two propositions.

(E) Oswald does not believe in God, and his non-belief is not due to self-deception due to a desire on his part to not be in a personal relationship with God.

(F) Oswald is responsible for injuring God, because his ignorance that he is injuring God is due to negative qualities in his will that prevent him from seeing that his ill-will towards Veronica is also ill-will towards all those placed in a similar position (which might include an incarnate God).

Like the previous example, 'all those who ardently love Veronica' and 'all those placed in a similar position' are referentially opaque categories. Oswald might not know who specifically belongs to these groups and this knowledge might be beyond him even if he has not deceived himself. Nonetheless, he ought to have known that such groups exist whose members would be entitled to be grieved at his actions, but he failed to attain awareness of these groups due to negative features of his will.

These distinctions are certainly subtle, but if correct, they vindicate my intuition that it is possible to be non-resistant to relationship with someone in Schellenberg's sense and yet indulge in actions that injure them for which one is responsible, even though one did not consciously intend to injure them. This reveals a broader kind of resistance.

A persistent objector, however, might press on with this line of reasoning in a slightly different way. Consider the following example. Suppose that a person James is driving a car. With murderous intent, he runs over Thomas and succeeds in killing him. However, unknown to him, he also ends up killing Rachel who—unknown to him—is with Thomas.

An appeal could be made to the difference between murder and manslaughter. James might be guilty of murdering Thomas, but with Rachel, perhaps he can only be accused of manslaughter since he did not have an intent to murder her. Similarly, since Oswald does not intend to injure God, he might be responsible for injuring Veronica, but not so for injuring God.

To this, I make the following reply. Firstly, the murder-manslaughter analogy does not help the objector because people are typically responsible for manslaughter. True, it is not the same crime as murder and may be of a considerably less gravity—but it still carries some weight, often serious weight. At best, the objection shows that Oswald is less culpable for injuring God than he is for injuring Veronica, not that he is absolved of culpability entirely. And nothing in my case requires that the injury to God be of the same degree of gravity as the injury to Veronica. All I am trying to show is that it could be argued that God is, in some sense, a victim of human injury and therefore even humans who are non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense might be resistant to God in a broader sense. And this point still stands.

Secondly, the literature on manslaughter is quite illuminating, especially when it comes to the question of the *mens rea*. For example, consider the category of constructive manslaughter. According to Graham Virgo, 'for constructive manslaughter, if the defendant commits a crime which is dangerous and death results then the defendant can be convicted of manslaughter'.[46] If this category is accepted, this one could argue as follows: committing a grave injury against another human is an intrinsically risky act, and one must therefore take on responsibility for all the consequences of that injury. This kind of thinking was reflected in a case in which two teenage boys pushed a paving stone off a railway bridge onto a train as it approached, resulting in the death of a guard. When the boys appealed on the grounds that they did not foresee the act would cause harm, the court dismissed this appeal.[47] This reflects what is sometimes called the objective Caldwell test, according to which 'the

[46] G. Virgo 'Back to Basics—Reconstructing Manslaughter', *The Cambridge Law Journal* 53 (1994), pp. 44–53, here p. 45.

[47] *Director of Public Prosecutions v. Newbury* (www.e-lawresources.co.uk/dpp-v-newbury).

defendant *either* sees the risk and proceeds regardless, *or* does an act which creates an obvious risk, but gives no thought to the possibility of such risk and proceeds to act in a dangerous manner'.[48] It should be noted, however, that constructive manslaughter is a controversial category as is the Caldwell test, and in recent rulings the Caldwell objective test has been reversed in favour of a more lenient subjective test called the Cunningham reckless test which requires that the defendant must actually foresee the risk in order to be guilty of a reckless act.[49] However, the discussion is still instructive for philosophical purposes. Even if the decision to reverse the Caldwell test was correct, it still helps us to see that the intuitions underlying my arguments are by no means eccentric or unique to this present author.

Applying the Caldwell test to the case of Oswald and Veronica has the following result. Oswald might have had no intention to injure God when he injured Veronica. Nonetheless, his act was such that there was a real risk of injuring those who love Veronica (which includes God). Since his action resulted in injury, he is responsible for this injury. This is so even if the injury to God is not the same kind or as grave as the injury to Veronica.

That said, I do not think my arguments in this paper require one to hold to the Caldwell test—this is just an example.

2.4. Objection two: resistant towards versus have resisted

An objector might argue as follows: even if we concede that such a kind of transitive injury against/towards God counts as resistance against/towards him, this need not imply that humans guilty of such an injury are resistant towards God—all this proves is that, at some point in their lives, they have resisted God. The change in tense is crucial here. Suppose that a person carried out such an injury but repented of it. Such a repentant wrongdoer would no longer be resistant towards God. However, there are persons who (i) have committed grave injuries; (ii) have adequately repented of them; and (iii) nonetheless fail to believe in God through no action on their part such as self-deception. Hence, there are non-resistant non-believers. I offer two responses to this objection.

Firstly, one could rebut the objection by arguing that the tenseless perspective is what matters when one evaluates the wrongdoer. After all, if God is understood to be outside of time, then this is plausibly the perspective he takes while evaluating a particular human person. In other words, he looks at a particular human being *in toto*. But regardless of whether divine timelessness is true, one could argue that, repentance or not, the wrongdoer is someone who under certain circumstances freely chose to gravely injure his/her neighbour in a way sufficient to ensure moral responsibility. This fact is not going to change, even if repentance follows and pardon is granted. To put this point another way, it could be that a repentant wrongdoer necessarily has a lesser moral status than someone who would never freely engage in an act of wrongdoing no matter the circumstance. If so, in some sense it could be said that repentance does not entirely reverse the wrongdoing, even if complete pardon is granted.

Secondly, many Christians—including but not necessarily restricted to those in the Augustinian tradition—would argue that every act of repentance is made possible by God's grace. If so, there is real sense in which repentance does not originate from a person's autonomous free will and cannot be credited entirely to the person. Hence, one could take the view that a repentant person is by default a non-repentant and therefore resistant person whose resistance is being (or has been) overcome by the prevenient action of God.

[48] M. Tebbit, *Philosophy of Law: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 197.

[49] Ibid., p. 198.

2.5. Objection three: the distribution of theistic belief across space and time

This objection runs thus: although my argument—if successful—does show that virtually all humans are resistant to God in a relevant sense, how does this square with the uneven distribution of theistic belief across space and time? To put it another way, does not my argument seem to predict that that the prevalence of theistic belief would be strongly (negatively) correlated with the extent to which a person exhibits this broader sort of resistance, and if so, how empirically plausible is it that such a correlation exists? A similar argument is raised by Baker-Hytch, who puts it thus: 'Regarding the moral and epistemic traits of character that sin-based accounts claim are determinative of whether someone believes in God, it isn't plausible that the populations of spatio-temporal regions in which theistic belief is concentrated exhibit virtuous and vicious traits at substantially greater and lesser frequencies (respectively) than the populations of spatio-temporal regions in which theistic belief is sparse'.[50]

My comments in Section 7 of this paper will explore the demographic challenge. For now, I simply make an important clarification about my approach. I concede the truth of the statement of Baker-Hytch quoted above. However, it is worth noting that I have not claimed that believers in God are less resistant to God than non-believers. This is an important point. My sole purpose in this argument is to try to show that there are no ordinary persons who are non-resistant to God in a relevant sense, which is meant to problematize Schellenberg's claim that there are non-resistant non-believers. The apparent universality of the kind of resistance I have described implies that believers in God are just as resistant to God in this broader sense. In other words, on my account those who believe in God do not believe in him because of non-resistance on their part—rather, they believe in him *despite* their resistance. It is also worth reiterating the point I made in Section 2.4: one could take an Augustinian view on the matter and stress the primacy of grace. It is God's grace which results in some persons arriving at belief, not any greater amount of virtue or lesser degree of vice on their part.

This way of looking at the matter obviously raises some further questions. Why does God disclose his existence to some and not everyone? On what basis does God make his choice if not a lack or lesser degree of resistance on the part of some? Indeed, how can the sort of resistance I have described be used to do the explanatory work necessary to account for the apparently uneven and non-virtue-based distribution of theistic belief? I will return to this objection in Section 7.

2.6. Applying the insights

Schellenberg lays out a lot of empirical evidence to support his claim that there are non-resistant non-believers. He can be interpreted as providing three categories of such persons—pre-doubt, doubt, and post-doubt.

Pre-doubt refers to humans who lived prior to the rise of classical monotheism.[51] Such humans, he argues, lacked a concept of God entirely—although they worshipped deities, these were too different from the God of classical monotheism for them to count as theists in today's sense of the word. Since they lacked even the concept of God, their non-belief cannot be attributed to a desire on their part to not be in a relationship with God.

The doubt category refers to persons (i) who doubt the proposition 'God exists' and (ii) whose doubt is not due to a self-deceptive action on their part that is due to an implicit or

[50] Baker-Hytch, 'On Sin-based Responses to Divine Hiddenness', p. 11.

[51] Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, pp. 77–9.

explicit desire to either not be in relationship with God or be in a condition incompatible with such a relationship. Here is an example Schellenberg gives of a group he thinks belongs in this category: anguished doubters. An anguished doubter is someone who belongs to a religious tradition but experiences a crisis of faith which he/she initially pushes back against. And yet, eventually, belief involuntarily leaves. Moreover, in many cases, it is not a lack of information but rather 'an infusion of new information and reflection thereupon that has caused it [the loss of faith], not resistance to God'.[52] Such people could not help losing their faith: '[t]he best they could do was to research the God-question carefully and open their hearts, hoping that the path of evidence would in time turn the other way and religious equilibrium would be regained. But it didn't happen'.[53] An example he offers is people who learn in university about the historicity of the Gospels and how the Bible was formed and who consequently lose their Christian faith because of it.

Post-doubt is not a term Schellenberg uses, but he can be interpreted as providing this third category: this refers to people who are raised in post-religious secular societies and see no need to believe in God. He appeals to the naturalness of non-belief in such cultures. In such societies, as opposed to religious societies in mediaeval Europe, even if one personally chooses to be religious, 'an utterly nonreligious way of life is imaginable. Non-belief is not entirely unnatural'.[54] He writes that such modern people 'live after doubt, meaning not that they have doubted and moved on but … that their location in time is such that they can flourish without ever considering the question of God at all'. I read Schellenberg as making the following argument. Many people in secular societies (1) are aware of the God-concept and (2) are raised in a culture in which non-belief in ubiquitous. They do not become non-believers due to an implicit desire on their part to not be in a personal relationship with God: rather, non-belief is the default. In other words, their non-belief does not seem to be due to a choice or an action on their part, but rather due to the cultural context in which they happen to be born. People in general in these societies live their lives not believing in God and yet are still able to make sense of the world and not have a deep existential crisis over it. These people do not seem to be resisting God; rather, they simply happen to be non-believers and are, at worst, neutral towards him.

If my argument is sound, none of this evidence proves that such humans were non-resistant to God. All it proves is that their non-belief in God was not due to self-deception—that is, they were non-resistant only in Schellenberg's sense of the word. However, if, as I have argued, acts of injury against fellow humans are acts of resistance against God, such humans may have been resistant in this other sense because they may have carried out grave injuries against other humans. Indeed, given that virtually all the humans we know of are guilty of at least one grave injury, the probability lies in the direction that such humans were guilty of such acts.

For example, when it comes to pre-doubt, consider the historical evidence. The historical evidence indicates that ancient humans were sometimes severely morally depraved. For example, there is archaeological evidence of human—and possibly, child—sacrifice in ancient Peru.[55] Such actions are undoubtedly deeply offensive and injurious to God, especially if God is regarded as having love for and being in solidarity with those being sacrificed. And if God loves

[52] Ibid., p. 80.

[53] Ibid., p. 81.

[54] Ibid., p. 85.

[55] S. Bourget, 'Children and Ancestors: Ritual Practices at the Moche Site of Huaca de la Luna, North Coast of Peru', in E. P. Benson and A. G. Cook (eds.), *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), pp. 93–118.

everyone, this must be so. Even if not every ancient society engaged in such practices, modern humans (especially those who hold to the values of the liberal West) often accept that their ancient precursors held attitudes and engaged in practices they consider abhorrent and unjust.

Similar comments could be made about the other evidence Schellenberg presents for the existence of non-resistant non-believers. Although modern humans (doubters and post-doubters) are not usually guilty of human sacrifice as the ancient Peruvians were, virtually all are guilty of at least one grave injury as already noted. This is sufficient, given my argument, to establish them as resistant to God in a broader, relevant sense.

2.7. A possible animalist expansion of the argument

The argument so far has focused on grave injuries against other humans. But according to some theologians, animals are also beings worthy of respect and dignity somewhat analogous to the respect and dignity we give to human persons though perhaps to a lesser degree. Some theologians on this basis advocate for biblical vegetarianism.[56] If so, then my argument could be expanded to include grave injuries against animals: after all, virtually all humans have or will at some point treat an animal in a way that shows disregard for its interests. If God is in solidarity with animals as well as humans, this is an injury against God himself. Andrew Linzey seems to anticipate this line of thinking at least implicitly, for he stresses that animal rights are *Theos* rights. He writes, 'while rights are grounded in the existence of Spirit-filled lives, what constitutes their rights is the will of God who desires that they should so live'.[57] In the words of R. P. McLaughlin: 'Because creation is fundamentally an act of God for the sake of love, for Linzey God is the ultimate stakeholder in creation'.[58] In other words, for Linzey, God is for creatures and God wills that they exist. It is not a stretch to infer from this that to sin against an animal is to sin against God.[59]

It is worth noting though, that although Linzey focuses on animals in particular, his comments about God being for creation and God willing that creatures exist and flourish is applicable to humans as well. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the point I made earlier—that by gravely injuring another human, we frustrate God's desire for the wellbeing of the person in question. This means that if one finds his framework compelling, one has reason to find my argument from solidarity compelling even if one does not wish to extend it to animals.

3. Stage Two: God as direct victim of human injury

3.1. An outline of the argument

The following two propositions characterize standard Christian theology: (1) God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth; and (2) by suffering at the hands of sinners and dying the death of a criminal, Jesus atones for the sins of humanity. To these two propositions, some add the following: (3) the suffering and death of Jesus are necessary to atone for the sins of humanity. This is a little controversial—some Christian theologians held that God

[56] A. Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[57] A. Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 75.

[58] R. P. McLaughlin, 'Andrew Linzey (1952–): Animal Theology' in A. Linzey and C. Linzey (eds.), *Animal Theologians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 422–40, here p. 426.

[59] It should be noted that, in this article, I am not endorsing Linzey's understanding of animal rights or his vegetarianism but only pointing out that a person who endorses this analysis may wish to extend my argument even to the animal kingdom.

could have justly forgiven sins even without Jesus dying on the cross.[60] Under this view, the passion of Christ is not a necessary remedy for human wrongdoing. However, (3) has a respectable pedigree—a famous proponent is Anselm of Canterbury.

Regardless of whether (3) is affirmed, the following proposition would probably be accepted by most historic Christian thinkers: if human beings had not sinned, Christ would not have suffered and died to atone for human sins. Let us call this (3*). If (3*) is true, then the passion of Christ is contingent on the sin of humanity. If so, then it could be said that human sin plays a causal role in bringing about the atoning suffering and death of Christ. Hence, a prominent theme in Christian theology, liturgy, and devotion is that sin results in the death of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says the following:

> In her Magisterial teaching of the faith and in the witness of her saints, the Church has never forgotten that 'sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured.' Taking into account the fact that our sins affect Christ himself, the Church does not hesitate to impute to Christians the gravest responsibility for the torments inflicted upon Jesus, a responsibility with which they have all too often burdened the Jews alone.[61]

(3*) can be affirmed even if (3) is rejected, because one could hold that although the passion of Christ is not necessary for sins to be justly forgiven by God, nonetheless this is the way God has chosen to effect atonement and reconciliation and God would not have brought about the passion of Jesus if humans did not sin. Thus, (3*) is more modest than (3) and arguably has a greater acceptance than (3).

This allows me to frame a stronger argument against the existence of non-resistant non-believers. There are many possible ways the argument might be formulated. Here is one:

1. If (i) a person *S* freely[62] commits a gravely morally wrong action[63] *A* at a time *t*; (ii) *S* knows or ought to have known at *t* that *A* is gravely morally wrong; and (iii) *S* knows or ought to have known at *t* that *A* could result in suffering or pain for others, then *S* bears some non-negligible moral responsibility for the suffering or pain that comes about as a result of *A*, even if all the particular instances of suffering caused by *A* are unforeseen or unforeseeable at *t*.
2. If Christianity is true, the suffering and death of God incarnate in Christ are among the consequences of morally grave actions committed by human beings.
3. The vast majority of humans have committed and/or will commit morally grave actions.

[60] Thomas Aquinas is sometimes taken to be a proponent of this view—see *Summa Theologiae* 3, q. 46, a. 2.

[61] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops–Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), paragraph 598, p. 154.

[62] When I say 'free', I mean free enough to ensure culpability. I do not necessarily presuppose libertarian free will or libertarian accounts of moral culpability.

[63] I understand an action to be gravely morally wrong if it is an act that is so serious that *either* it justifiably causes an enduring sense of guilt in the wrongdoer's mind, *or* it would justifiably cause an enduring sense of guilt in the wrongdoer's mind if the wrongdoer had a properly functioning conscience and the wrongdoer remembered that he or she had done it. It is therefore a similar concept to that of grave injury introduced in Section 2.1, with one distinctive: whereas 'grave injury' implies that the action in question victimizes another person, 'gravely morally wrong action' does not carry this implication. The latter is therefore a broader category and includes the former.

4. The vast majority of humans who have committed and/or will commit morally grave actions have satisfied and/or will satisfy the three conditions in premiss (1) at least once in their lifetimes.
5. Hence, if Christianity is true, the vast majority of humans bear some non-negligible moral responsibility for the suffering and death of God incarnate in Christ.
6. If a person *S** bears some non-negligible moral responsibility for the suffering and death of God incarnate in Christ, *S** is not non-resistant to God in a relevant sense of the word.
7. Hence, if Christianity is true, the vast majority of humans are not non-resistant to God in a relevant sense of the word.

The reason *S** is resistant to God in a relevant sense of the word is simple: if we bear some non-negligible degree of moral responsibility for causing God incarnate to suffer and die, then we have injured him in a very real way and this type of injury is plausibly a kind of resistance towards God. Moreover, whereas the injury discussed in Stage One is indirect (i.e. we injure God by injuring God's beloved), the injury discussed in this stage is direct (i.e. we cause God incarnate to suffer and die). This is certainly a stronger argument than the one outlined in Section 2. Thus, it provides a new sin-based approach that is distinct and independent from the argument of section 2. Let us call it the Deicide argument.

3.2. Objection one: the Deicide argument begs the question

An objector might argue that the Deicide argument presupposes the truth of Christianity and so begs the question, whether there are non-resistant non-believers, against the non-Christian. Premiss 2 after all is a very explicitly Christian premiss. But I disagree that the Deicide argument begs the question.

Firstly, note that the conclusion is given as a conditional. This shows that the purpose of the argument is not to prove Christianity to a non-Christian, or even to prove to a non-Christian that all humans have resisted God. Instead, the point (or rather, one of the points) is to show that, if the Christian worldview is true, then the premiss that there are non-resistant non-believers is false. In fact, rather than begging the question, one of the goals of the Deicide argument is to show that it is Schellenberg who is begging the question, because his premiss—that there are non-resistant non-believers—seems to implicitly presuppose the falsehood of certain Christian axioms. To put it another way, the hiddenness argument only works if Christianity is false. Hence, if Schellenberg wishes to defend the hiddenness argument, he must also show that the core axioms of Christianity are false. This is a high bar for Schellenberg.[64]

The Deicide argument also helps the reader to see that a Christian who is epistemically justified in holding to the Christian worldview is also thereby epistemically justified in rejecting Schellenberg's argument out of hand, because his claim that there are non-resistant non-believers is an implicit denial of the very worldview the Christian takes himself or herself to be epistemically justified in believing. At this stage, the dialectic between Schellenberg and the Christian shifts to a discussion of whether Christianity is true. But this moves beyond the immediate ambit of the hiddenness argument.

[64] As of 2024, Schellenberg has written a book challenging Christianity more specifically (see Schellenberg, *What God Would Have Known*); however, this paper responds to the material contained in his 2015 book *The Hiddenness Argument*.

3.3. Objection two: the Christian story is false

This is a good objection in that, if true, it does defuse the Deicide argument. However, as noted above, the objection is also revealing in that it helps one to see that, for Schellenberg to successfully defend his hiddenness argument, he must show that Christianity is false. The reason for this is that one of the premisses of his argument—that there are humans who are truly non-resistant to God—seems to be an implicit rejection of the Christian story about human moral failing and its consequences. Going into a defence of Christianity is well beyond the scope of this paper, and so I leave it at that, while referring the reader to the considerable literature on that topic.[65]

3.4. Objection three: denying culpability by appealing to ignorance

A certain group of objections may seek to argue that, even if the Christian story is true, the Deicide argument fails, because epistemically non-resistant humans (that is, humans who are non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense of the word) are only causally responsible for the death of God incarnate and not morally responsible. One way to do this would be to use the RE thesis and appeal to ignorance: such persons could not have possibly known that their actions would have this effect (of causing the suffering and death of God incarnate) and so they are exculpated.

I have already responded to similar arguments against Stage One in Section 2.3 and I think many of those rebuttals work in this new context. For example, the wrongdoer might not be able to foresee that God will become incarnate and suffer as a consequence of his gravely immoral act; however, he could at least know (assuming he has a well-functioning conscience) that his act is seriously wrong, quite risky, and could lead to the suffering of others. This should be enough to ensure some non-negligible moral responsibility for the suffering of God incarnate. To give an analogy: someone who drives recklessly, breaking the rules and ignoring the speed limit, might not be able to foresee at the time precisely the kind or the extent of negative consequences that might result from his act. The possible consequences might include things such as causing damage to infrastructure, damaging other cars, causing fear and distress to others, injury, trauma, the loss of life, sorrow to relatives of injured or deceased victims, and so on. But given that his act is objectively immoral and given that he ought to have known the risks associated with it, it seems common sense to say that he bears some non-negligible responsibility for all the damage that results, even if he cannot foresee the particular details of the damage. There is no need to repeat the discussion of Section 2.3, and so I leave it at that.

3.5. Objection four: even in the Christian story, human wrongdoing does not make the death of God inevitable

A critic might argue as follows: in the Christian story, human wrongdoing (even grave wrongdoing) does not make the suffering and death of God incarnate inevitable, because the incarnation, passion, and death of Christ are still a voluntary act undergone by God. God could have chosen not to suffer, but he foresaw the suffering and chose it nonetheless.

Although I concede this is true, I dispute whether this exculpates humans of wrongdoing. Suppose that there is a serial killer John who derives pleasure from cannibalizing people. Suppose that there is a man named Ali who (i) knows about John and his habits; (ii) knows that if he visits John, John will kill him; and (iii) chooses to visit John nonetheless. Does this mean that John is absolved of blame for killing Ali? It does not seem to be so. Nor does this

[65] See e.g. J. P. Moreland et al. (eds.), *Debating Christian Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

entail that Ali is to be partly blamed or that he is reckless. On the contrary, Ali could have good, even noble reasons for visiting John—for example, it could be that John has held someone captive and that by visiting John, Ali is able to save that captive, even if it results in him losing his own life. This is analogous to what Christianity believes Jesus did by suffering and dying—it was a heroic act of martyrdom and self-sacrifice rather than reckless suicide.

3.6. Objection five: the Deicide argument seems to entail that a person who commits a minor fault—such as saying a white lie—is a murderer of God, which is a repugnant and highly implausible conclusion

This rebuttal misses the mark for several reasons. Firstly, I do not focus on minor faults in this paper but rather grave moral wrongs—that is, acts that are so serious that *either* they justifiably cause an enduring sense of guilt in the wrongdoer's mind, *or* they would justifiably cause an enduring sense of guilt in the wrongdoer's mind if the wrongdoer had a properly functioning conscience and the wrongdoer remembered that he/she had done them. Unless one takes an extremely serious view of sin as some Calvinists seem to do,[66] white lies do not fall into this category, but things such as cheating on your gullible spouse do.

Secondly, even with this qualification, my argument is not necessarily that grave wrongdoers are murderers of God *per se*—only that they bear some non-negligible moral responsibility for the death of God incarnate. A reader may treat the two as distinct. For example, suppose that a prison warden was culpably and seriously negligent in his duties, as a result of which a dangerous convict escaped and caused mayhem, resulting in the death and injury of innocents. The warden cannot be prosecuted for murder—after all, he did not commit the murder—but he can be condemned for serious negligence that resulted in great harm.

An analogous argument might be made by a vegan. An ethical vegan might take the view that (i) animals are persons, worthy of rights and protection; and (ii) purchasing and eating meat leads to countless animals suffering and dying in an unjust way. Even so, none of this entails that meat-eaters are murders *per se*. A vegan might not be able to reasonably accuse the average meat-eater of being guilty of murder based on these premisses alone, but he/she could make a strong case (assuming veganism is correct about animal rights) that adult human meat-eaters with properly functioning cognitive faculties and consciences are (often, if not always) guilty of some serious moral fault which leads to animal suffering and death, and that therefore they bear some non-negligible moral responsibility for the suffering and death of countless innocent animals. For example, perhaps adult human meat-eaters have not reflected adequately enough on the consequences of their actions, or perhaps their conscience did haunt them at some point, but they suppressed it. My argument for human grave wrongdoers being responsible for the suffering of God is along similar lines.

The above analogy also helps us to see that there can be degrees of moral responsibility. The extent to which one is morally responsible for the adverse consequences for one's gravely morally wrong actions could be dependent on several factors. If one takes an RE theory of moral responsibility, one could take the view that the extent to which one is morally responsible depends on the extent to which one can foresee the adverse consequences. For example, a person who knows that gravely morally wrong actions lead to the suffering and death of God incarnate and indulges in such acts anyway is more culpable for the suffering and death of God than a person who merely knows that his/her actions are very risky and could result in harm for others. My claim is not that all humans are equally morally responsible for the death

[66] This is a view my paper does not rule out but also does not require.

of God—only that all humans who satisfy the conditions stipulated in premiss 1 of the Deicide argument bear at least some non-negligible moral responsibility for the suffering and death of God.[67]

3.7. Stage Two and *de re* approaches

As with Stage One, the approach here is distinct from *de re* approaches because I do not argue that the grave moral wrongdoer has *de re* thoughts about God. My arguments are compatible with the person in question not having any thoughts at all about God, especially since I do not require the person to foresee the suffering and death of God incarnate as one of the consequences of his/her grave moral wrongdoing in order to be morally responsible for it.

3.8. Stage Two and the hypothetical incarnation of stage one

A reader may wonder how this argument is distinct from one I made in Section 2.3. When discussing the QW thesis, I argued that God is entitled to be indignant at human injury because he foresees that if he became incarnate and were placed in a similar position, he would have been treated no differently. I further made the case that ill-will towards other humans and ill-will towards God are always co-instantiated.

One may think that Stage Two is an expanded and more elaborate defence of this original argument. But this is mistaken. The argument in Stage One treats incarnation as a hypothetical and would work even if the Christian story is false. After all, even if God does not incarnate, he can still foresee that if he were to incarnate, he would be treated no differently but rather would be the target of human wrongdoing. If my theory of moral responsibility outlined in Section 2.3 is correct, God is entitled to be angered at this fact. By contrast, Stage Two relies more heavily on the truth of God becoming incarnate—it implies that God does not merely *foresee* that upon incarnating he would be treated cruelly and suffer, but actually *does* become incarnate and *does* suffer (in his human nature) as a consequence of human wrongdoing. Hence, Stage Two is a much stronger argument than any argument in Stage One. Furthermore, because of this difference, the arguments of Stage One should prove appealing to theists who hold that God did not become incarnate whereas the arguments of Stage Two are more explicitly Christian.

4. What about babies, very young children and those with severe mental disabilities?

An objector might raise the example of babies and children who die at a very early age. Such humans are not plausibly guilty either of a grave moral injury or a grave moral wrong. As such, they can be regarded as non-resistant towards God even if my arguments are sound. Moreover, many such persons lack belief in God (for example, very young children raised in atheist households). If this is so, then, it could be argued, surely there are non-resistant non-believers.

Another example that could be given would be of adult humans with severe mental disabilities. Even if such humans have carried out a grave injury or a grave moral wrong, they are arguably not culpable for this and can therefore be regarded as non-resistant to God in a real

[67] An objector might ask why I think the moral responsibility for the suffering and death of Christ is non-negligible. I take it to be non-negligible because the actions I am concerned with are gravely morally wrong and the wrongdoer is morally responsible for this gravely morally wrong action.

sense. And yet, many of them fail to believe in God. Such persons too, it could be argued, can be regarded as non-resistant non-believers.

This objection misses the mark for an important reason: even if we concede for the sake of argument that such persons are non-resistant (a concession I will dispute towards the end of the next section), Schellenberg, as I read him, does not claim that God would necessarily disclose his existence to such persons. As noted in the introduction, Schellenberg is concerned with finite persons, and he understands finite persons to be those who have 'the capacities of mind and heart needed to be able to be in a meaningful relationship with God'.[68] I take it that a baby, a very young child, or a severely mentally disabled person may not have the capacities needed for the kind of relationship Schellenberg has in mind. Furthermore, I take it that a person who is so young and/or impaired that he/she cannot bear moral responsibility is also someone who cannot be a meaningful participant in the kind of mutually reciprocal relationship that Schellenberg is interested in. Hence, I assume a finite person to be one who is also capable of bearing moral responsibility for severe wrongdoing. For these reasons, I do not take non-believing babies, very young children, or mentally disabled adults to be non-resistant non-believers.

5. What about those with physical but not mental disabilities?

A persistent objector might raise the example of those who have severe physical disabilities but not any mental disabilities. Such persons are mentally the same as everyone else but are physically unable to perform various functions. It is not always obvious that such persons have committed a gravely morally wrong action or a carried out a grave injury against another human being, especially if they had this disability from a very early age.

Even if we can find a handful of such persons—that is, persons who are mentally healthy but whose physical disabilities prevent them from committing seriously wrong actions and/or committing serious injuries against other persons—it is not clear to me that such persons are *morally* different from other humans. The reason is that, although such persons may indeed have never committed the sort of immoral actions I describe, this seems to be due to *inability* on their part rather than a special virtue they possess. On the contrary, it seems clear that such persons *would* culpably commit at least one gravely morally wrong action and/or at least one grave injury against another human being under a certain set of (or certain sets of) circumstances if (i) those circumstances obtained and (ii) they had the ability to do so. Hence, they can be said to be resistant to God at least implicitly.

Interestingly, these same remarks could be made about the humans described in Section 4—namely, babies, very young children, and those with severe mental disabilities. Consider the first two groups and suppose, for the sake of argument, that such humans are indeed not morally responsible for any wrong they do given their relative immaturity. Nonetheless, it seems clear that these humans *would* culpably commit at least one morally grave action and/or at least one grave injury against another human being under a certain set of (or certain sets of) circumstances if (i) those circumstances obtained and (ii) they grew up to be adult human beings with the ability to culpably do right and wrong. The same can be said for severely mentally disabled persons—if they did not have these disabilities, it seems that they would not be any different, morally speaking, from the rest of us. Hence, without prejudice to the comments made in Section 4, even these humans can be considered resistant at least implicitly.

[68] Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, p. 40.

6. Could there be exceptions?

An objector might argue that my arguments, if sound, do not disprove non-resistant non-believers *per se*—rather, my conclusion simply entails that the vast majority of humans with properly functioning cognitive faculties and consciences (certainly, virtually everyone who know of) are guilty of resistance. But this leaves the door open for singular exceptions. Could there not be saintly persons who are so exemplary and exceptional that, unlike the overwhelming majority of their fellow humans, they have never committed and perhaps will never commit a grave injury or a grave moral wrong and have, therefore, never resisted and will never resist God in the way I describe?

Certainly, there could be such persons—but remember, the burden of proof is not on me to show that there are no non-resistant non-believers. Rather, the burden of proof is on Schellenberg to show that there are in fact such persons, since he is the one making the argument. Schellenberg takes this premiss to be true and provides empirical evidence for it, as discussed earlier. However, his empirical evidence fails the test, since due to the apparent universality of human wrongdoing the humans he describes probably are resistant to God in the relevant sense I have elucidated.

Could there be exceptional persons we have never met or noticed who are non-resistant to God in this way? Yes—in fact, many religious traditions postulate the existence of such persons. But what such non-resistant persons believe is anybody's guess. We cannot assume they were non-believers. Nor can we make an informed guess about their beliefs by generalizing from what other humans believe because of the fact that—by having never committed a grave injury or a grave moral wrong—they are probably exceptional humans who are likely quite different from the overwhelming majority. In fact, a theist might postulate that, for all we know, such persons if they exist are believers in God; and barring evidence to the contrary, he seems entitled to postulate this.

7. The explanatory work

7.1. Elucidating the explanatory work

So far in this paper I have argued that there is a broader kind of resistance to God that Schellenberg does not seem to have recognized. But what explanatory work does this kind of resistance do? It is desirable for a response to Schellenberg's argument to able to account for the variation in belief and non-belief in God, something I touched on briefly in Section 2.5. In what way can the resistance I have described account for this variation?

To elucidate how my response can do the necessary explanatory work, I lay out and defend the following theses.

(i) It is possible for a person *P* to truly desire to be in a personal relationship with another person *A* and yet choose to not act on this desire for good reasons.
(ii) The kind of resistance I have described in this paper gives God good reason though not necessitating reason to not act on a desire he may have for personal relationship with a particular human person who exhibits this kind of resistance.
(iii) Given the apparent universality of this kind of resistance and the above two theses, it becomes unclear *a priori* what God would do vis-à-vis revealing himself or disclosing himself in the world we inhabit.

Let us start with (i). Consider that Daniel is in love with Rebecca. He has been seeing her around church for a while, has heard a lot about her, and has been impressed by the talks

she gives on theological topics. But Rebecca is not yet aware about him. Daniel could make himself known to her, and when the time is appropriate seek to initiate a romantic relationship with her. Indeed, Daniel wishes to do so. Let us also suppose that Daniel has a supernatural gift that enables him to know infallibly that if the offer of a relationship were made, Rebecca would freely take it up. But imagine that Daniel has a valid concern that if he initiates a romantic relationship at this stage, he will not be able to be close to his aging grandmother as much as he would like to. His grandmother would not be destitute and helpless, but Daniel would miss out on the opportunity to be close to her during her final years. In this case, Daniel might choose to not make himself known to Rebecca or seek to be close to her at least temporarily. But this choice does not imply a lack of desire on his part to be in such a relationship. Rather, he has chosen to not act on this desire for good reasons.

The purpose of the above story is not to imply that God has an ageing grandmother whom he wants to be close to. Rather, it is to illustrate (i)—that it is entirely possible for someone to truly and deeply desire to be in a personal relationship with another, and yet to not act on this desire for good reasons. Hence, God might still be loving in the Schellenbergian sense and yet choose to temporarily not reveal himself, that is hide, from some person(s) for good reasons. A critic might argue that the analogy cannot carry over because *ex hypothesi* God, unlike Daniel, is omnipotent. However, it is well-acknowledged in the literature that omnipotence does not mean the ability to do absolutely anything.[69]

It is also worth pointing out that in the story, Daniel has a good reason to not act on his desire, but this good reason is by no means a necessitating reason. Daniel is committing no moral infraction if he chooses to have a romantic relationship with Rebecca—after all, his grandmother is not helpless if he spends less time with her. However, Daniel is at a crossroads—he has two mutually exclusive options, and they seem to him to be more-or-less equally weighted in terms of goodness and desirability. In other words, there are goods to be actualized either way and neither option is obviously better than the other.

I suggest that just as Daniel has good though not necessitating reasons to temporarily not make himself known to Rebecca, the kind of resistance I have described in this paper gives God good reasons though not necessitating reasons to not disclose his existence to a particular sinful human being at least temporarily. In what follows, I offer a suggestion for what these reasons could be.

Let us say that a particular person *SP* exhibits the kind of resistance I have described. God, being absolutely free, could choose to reveal himself to *SP* and extend the offer of a conscious, mutually interactive relationship, or he could refrain from doing so at least temporarily. These two options seem to be mutually exclusive: God either reveals himself to *SP* at a point in time *t* or he does not. If both options are equally good—or, at least, one of these options is not obviously better than the other, then it is not the case that God would certainly favour one option over the other. How could it be that the two options are equally weighted in the sense I described? Here are some suggestions. (The following should be treated as working hypotheses.)

On the one hand, if God reveals himself to *SP* despite the serious wrongdoing he/she has committed, this might be a way of showing extravagant generosity and mercy. Indeed, theistic traditions typically hold that one of the divine attributes is God's mercy to those undeserving of it (Matt. 5:45). Christianity in particular emphasizes God's love and care for his enemies (Luke 23:34, Rom. 5:8). If God shows such mercy and generosity and reveals himself to *SP* despite his resistance, this would clearly be a manifestation of his good

[69] Alvin Plantinga's famous book *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) comes to mind as an example of a work that demonstrates the limits of omnipotence.

character, one might even say a manifestation of his glory. In the biblical tradition, the manifestation of divine glory is certainly a good thing (Exod. 33:18, Isa. 40:5, 2 Cor. 4:6).

On the other hand, I suggest that God has good reasons to respond to the kind of resistance I have described by at least a temporary period of divine hiding. There are several possible reasons God might have. I offer one example: God hiding himself at least temporarily from *SP* could be a way of showing solidarity and respect to the persons *SP* has wronged, which—I have argued—includes *par excellence* his Son Jesus Christ. It could also be a way of acknowledging the seriousness of the wrong that has been done. This is not unusual in the world of interpersonal relationships. For example, it could be that in some contexts if a person *M* has a friend *N* who has been deeply wronged by a person *X*, it is appropriate though not necessarily obligatory that *M* will not be friendly to *X* at least for a while. This does not entail *M* be hostile to *X* or take revenge on *X* or seek to 'punish' *X*. But this temporary aloofness is an appropriate though not obligatory way of showing respect to *N*, acknowledging that a wrong has been perpetrated by *X*, and affirming that *M* supports *N* in his just claim over *X*. Nor is this a feature peculiar to honour-shame cultures or to cultures significantly different from that of the modern West. For example, even today if I had a daughter who went through a difficult break-up, I would wish to be at least temporarily a little aloof from the person she broke up with. This, again, is not necessarily punishment.[70] Rather, being aloof from the other person at least temporarily could be a way of showing respect to my daughter and acknowledging the pain she has gone through.

If these two mutually exclusive options are equally weighted—and I think for all we know they may be—it really is up to God to choose whether to reveal himself to *SP*. Remember that *SP* stands for a particular human person who exhibits the broader kind of resistance I have described. Given the apparent universality of this sort of resistance, with even some religious traditions typically postulating only very few exceptions, it seems that if my argument in this section is sound it is up to God whether to reveal himself to everyone, no one, or some and not others. In this way my theory can account for the apparently uneven and sometimes baffling demographic distribution of theistic belief referred to in Section 2.5. After all, if it is ultimately up to God whether to reveal himself to everyone, no one, or some people, it is unclear *a priori* which option he would take, and therefore divine hiddenness or indeed the existence of non-believers who are non-resistant in Schellenberg's sense of the word is not good evidence for atheism.

7.2. An objection: must the divine response be even?

At this stage, an objector might argue that a perfect being would respond to same or similar amounts of injustice in a similar way. For example, if there are two persons *P1* and *P2* and they both commit similar amounts of injustice in sufficiently similar circumstances, then if God chooses to hide from *P1*, he ought to hide from *P2* as well; conversely, if he shows extravagant generosity and reveals himself to *P1*, he ought to do the same from *P2* as well. After all, this is how judges act in a court of law: similar crimes committed in similar circumstances with similar background conditions tend to get similar punishments.

This objection, however, relies on the metaphor of God being a just judge in a criminal court. I do not heavily use this imagery in this article. Indeed, I have not suggested that divine hiddenness is a kind of divine punishment for wrongdoing. On the contrary, rather than

[70] After all, not all break-ups are due to one person being more in the wrong morally than the other.

stressing that God is a divine judge,[71] I have introduced the idea that God is a *victim* (at least indirectly) of certain human actions. Now if God is a victim, it seems that he is entitled to a degree of freedom in responding to injuries against him or against those whom he loves. A judge is bound by a strict set of laws and protocols; a victim is relatively free. Hence if God is a victim of certain human actions, it seems that it is *not* the case that his response must always be even across similar circumstances and persons.

This is not to suggest that God can be arbitrary; on the contrary, in section 7.1 I have tried to make intelligible the idea that God could really act either way when it comes to revealing himself or not revealing himself to a particular person at a particular point in time. Indeed, if my argument in that section is sound, God's actions in this regard are no more arbitrary than any genuinely libertarian free decision is arbitrary.

8. Challenging Schellenberg's anthropology

The arguments so far help me to make a final challenge to Schellenberg's hiddenness argument—a challenge to the anthropology implicit in his argument. In a 2020 chapter co-authored with Paul Moser, Schellenberg offers an analogy argument for atheism. He lays out three analogies. In what follows, I quote the third one because it is the most compelling:

> Imagine yourself in the following situation. … You are … a small child, and an amnesiac … in the middle of a vast rainforest, dripping with dangers of various kinds. You have been stuck here for days, trying to figure out who you are and where you came from. You do not remember having a mother who accompanied you into this jungle, but in your moments of deepest pain and misery you call for her anyway: 'MOOOOOMMMMM!' Over and over again. For days and days … but with no response. What should you think in this situation? In your dying moments, what should cross your mind? Would the thought that you have a mother who cares about you and hears your cry and could come to you but chooses not to even make it onto the list?
>
> Now perhaps we could suppose, in each of these cases, that you do have a mother and that she is around, but that she simply does not care. We are inclined to think of mothers as almost by definition loving and caring, but just remember the mother of Hyde in That '70s Show, someone might say. Another possibility is that your mother has been prevented from doing what mothers tend naturally to do by factors external to her own desire and will: perhaps she fell into a deep well in the woods … or is fending off a crocodile even as you succumb to the jaguar. What we cannot say is that a loving mother would in circumstances like these be hidden from her child if she could help it.[72]

Part of what makes this analogy so powerful and emotionally moving is the imagery of a child crying out for its mother. Children are helpless and utterly dependant, and people tend to assume that they are innocent of any serious wrongdoing. Of course, the Christian doctrine of original sin challenges the idea of the absolute innocence of children, but even those who hold to this doctrine typically do not treat children the same way they treat adult

[71] It should be noted that I do not deny that God is a judge; I am only clarifying that this is not the chief emphasis or argument of my paper. Nor do I in this present article argue against the notion that divine hiddenness is a punishment: rather, this present article is silent on this question and takes no position on the matter.

[72] J. L. Schellenberg and P. K. Moser, 'Does Divine Hiddenness Justify Atheism?' in M. L. Peterson and R. J. VanArragon, *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (2nd edn., Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 165–92, here pp. 166–7.

sinners. Hence the idea of a child crying out for its mother evokes the deepest sympathy and compassion—and rightfully so.

However, my argument in this paper challenges this metaphor. I suggest that the vast majority of humans[73] are not innocent in the way many take children to be. Rather, a more appropriate metaphor would be an adult human being who has done culpably something seriously wrong. Furthermore, if humans possess libertarian free will and have used this faculty to hurt others, they are not as innocent, helpless, and utterly dependant and vulnerable to the elements as Schellenberg's story portrays it. Hence, once this amendment is made, the story becomes much less compelling. Is it really that obvious that a perfectly good and loving parent would necessarily immediately respond to such a person and not hide, even temporarily? Such a parent *might*, for sure. But *necessarily*? I think not.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I have problematized J. L. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument by developing a sin-based response to his premiss that there are non-resistant non-believers. I have argued that there is a broader kind of resistance that Schellenberg has not adequately considered but which is, in fact, quite relevant. My first argument was that by gravely injuring other humans, humans gravely injure God indirectly. My second argument was that, if Christianity is true, by committing grave moral acts, sinful humans play a causal role in bringing about the suffering and death of God incarnate and that they bear some non-negligible moral responsibility for this. Both these arguments highlight a kind of resistance towards God that is relevant to the discussion. Since the vast majority of humans with properly functioning cognitive faculties and consciences have committed or will at some point commit a grave injury or a grave moral wrong in a way that satisfies the conditions I stipulate, the vast majority of humans are not non-resistant towards God. Finally, I have argued that temporary divine hiding is an appropriate but not necessary response to such resistance.[74]

[73] For the sake of argument, I do not include the three categories laid out in Section 4, namely, babies, very young children, and mentally disabled adults. Of course, someone with a high view of sin may regard these persons as grave sinners also but my argument does not require this.

[74] This article is a modified and extended version of a section of a master's thesis written at the University of Oxford. I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Mark Wynn for his helpful comments and criticism during the drafting of the original thesis, as well as to my thesis examiners Dr Max Baker-Hytch and Professor Ryan Byerly for their post-examination feedback. I am also grateful to Professor John Pittard for raising the objection responded to by section 7 of this article.