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# Divine Hiddenness and Originating Initiative

*An Analytic Account*

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## Abstract

This thesis is an exercise in analytical philosophy of religion, ranging across the philosophy of mind, epistemology and metaphysics. I am concerned with the atheist argument from Divine Hiddenness, which doubts the *existence* of God due to lack of belief by non-resistant people being inconsistent with a perfectly-loving and all-powerful God who would establish relationship with everyone. The most prominent and forceful of such arguments in current mainstream philosophy is from J.L. Schellenberg.

The dissertation seeks to evaluate Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, with special attention to his concepts of perfect love, openness, and non-resistant non-belief. I examine the structure of the argument and its key components, before assessing a specific type of Theist response in the literature and then advancing my own novel thesis of a freewill justification for hiddenness which I call 'Originating Initiative'. Less distinctively novel than the free will justification, is the application of an attitude of hopeful-acceptance for conveying Originating Initiative. While the idea of hopeful-acceptance draws on the wisdom of Willam James and Howard-Snyder, the way I propose it in conjunction with Originating Initiative is novel, not least by not begging prior sympathy for Theism as Schellenberg alleges against other responses.

My thesis involves a limited theist response and will technically leave Schellenberg's argument standing. I target the 'Western secular', as a most generally relatable problem for the theist while people all around fit the bill, and for circumscribing a significant and original free will response.

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## Chapter 1

### Background and Framing the Problem of Divine Hiddenness

#### Introduction

This opening chapter lays the groundwork for the thesis by situating the argument from Divine Hiddenness within the wider philosophy of religion and by clarifying key concepts and assumptions. The aim is to prepare for the detailed analysis of J.L. Schellenberg's formulation of the argument in Chapters Two and Three.

I begin by situating the argument from Divine Hiddenness within the broader landscape of the philosophy of religion. In section One- "Philosophical Preliminaries and Terms of Reference," I first address a set of preliminaries—clarifying terms and assumptions, particularly how I will use the term "God" throughout. I briefly state my own theistic position and commit to a posture of critical neutrality.

I then proceed to outline several adjacent and foundational topics. This includes, in section Two- "Adjacent topics in the Philosophy of Religion", a survey of the four main classical arguments for the existence of God (the ontological, cosmological, teleological, and experiential arguments) offering concise descriptions of each, along with their main objections. This sets the stage for understanding the theological and metaphysical terrain within which Divine Hiddenness is debated.

Following this, in Section Three I introduce the argument from Divine Hiddenness, explaining its appeal and clarifying the key notion of *non-resistant non-belief*—those who would believe in God if only given sufficient reason, yet do not. Before turning to J.L. Schellenberg's central formulation of the argument in later chapters, I provide a theological and historical backdrop. I distinguish Divine Hiddenness from the concept of Divine Silence, offering scriptural and historical examples of the latter. I explore how such experiences may overlap with the philosophical problem, particularly when expectations of divine love and responsiveness are unmet. Next, I trace the historical development of the Divine Hiddenness problem prior to Schellenberg. Thinkers such as Aquinas, Berkeley, Butler, Nietzsche, and Hepburn are considered for their implicit or explicit contributions to the debate. These thinkers frame the ambiguity of God's presence, or absence, as potentially incompatible with divine perfection, and in some cases, as evidence against God's existence.

I conclude the chapter by outlining the major shift in Schellenberg's argument between 1993 and 2007, in which he develops a key concept from "reasonable non-belief" to "non-resistant non-belief." I introduce the central concepts of divine love and openness, along with the controversial assumption

that propositional belief is necessary for personal relationship with God. All these topics are more thoroughly assessed in subsequent chapters.

Overall, this chapter lays the conceptual and historical groundwork for the detailed analysis of Schellenberg's argument that follows in Chapters Two and Three.

## Section 1. Philosophical Preliminaries and Terms of Reference.

I conduct this research as an open-minded neutral. However, I am a theist. There is notional instability in any thinker's claim to be neutral in matters of religion because we all arrive somewhat preconditioned. The distinguished American philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga remarks that a "Christian philosopher quite properly starts from the existence of God and presupposes it in philosophical work." (184, p261). My aim is not to research and write as a Christian philosopher in Plantinga's sense, but instead will take my lead from Swinburne, "for those of us for whom it is neither overwhelmingly obvious that there is a God nor overwhelmingly obvious that there is no God, it is normally obligatory to investigate the issue." (2005, p141).

Western philosophy of language since Wittgenstein has broached a purported problem about referring to God. The referent of the term 'God' might be thought as peculiarly exotic because it is not used in a standard way of referring, such as originating in a perceptual event and passed on through testimony.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that talk of God may be vacuous or vague. Sullivan (2016) addresses this issue in a recent anthology of new divine hiddenness essays and concedes that standard theories of reference in the philosophy of language cannot explain successful reference to God. I will take the standard approach from analytic philosophy of religion in applying the term "God" not as a name, but as a *definite description*. We can stipulate that the term "God" refers to the greatest possible being and creator of everything who is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient (respectively all-powerful, perfectly good, and all-knowing). Atheist and theist can proceed on this basis to debate the nature and expected behaviour of such a being, while the theist can refer to God hypothetically without claiming the deity exists. There is logical controversy in this vicinity with which I will not engage, but simply nod that readers may instead take my reference to "God" as an honorific title to satisfy semantic challenges to God as definite description in relation to hiddenness (see Moser 2016), or indeed they may take "God"

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<sup>1</sup> The philosopher Saul Kripke is primarily responsible for this theory of reference which I have called 'standard', on the basis that it receives wider assent among philosophers these days than Bertrand Russell's theory which is a contender. I brush over this controversy because little hangs on it while I use Sullivan's contention just to table my approach.

as a name in the sense that God exists only if the term succeeds in referring to an actual existent (Rea, 2019).

I will use the classic traditional pronoun 'Him' interchangeably with 'God', while assigning no gender, although occasionally the lower-case 'him' with 'god' are used in contexts of non-personal or non-theistic deity.

With those preliminaries complete, I will now profile adjacent topics from the philosophy of religion to clearly set up our target of Divine Hiddenness.

## Section 2. Adjacent Arguments in the Philosophy of Religion.

It is useful to cover these adjacent topics because they will overlap and inform our discussion of Hiddenness and help with clarity for narrowed focus later.

The Argument from Evil and the Argument from Divine Hiddenness are the two most prominent arguments *against* the existence of God in contemporary philosophy of religion. I will outline the argument from evil before we get to Hiddenness, after profiling the four main sorts of philosophical argument *for* the existence of God.<sup>2</sup> Whole PhD's have been written on each of these and indeed on single premises of each. I will restrict myself to the bare bones for a basic typology of the field.

### The Ontological Argument.

First conceived by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century who was also largely responsible for a paradigm way of thinking about God's attributes called 'perfect being theology' that still carries sway across much modern philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup> Perfect being theology frames attributes of God as maximal; roughly that is to say something like the absolute best in every way that an attribute might be. For example, God's knowledge includes every fact about everywhere and always, or God's power can move absolutely everything that is movable. Innumerable writings across the centuries discuss and

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<sup>2</sup> Another indirect but quite prominent argument for God that I will only mention here is the 'moral argument', claiming there cannot be objective justification for any moral truths if God does not exist because natural or scientific facts alone cannot justify moral facts, and that there are moral truths and therefore God exists. (Swinburne (2008) offers a theist position of there being some moral truths without the existence of God).

<sup>3</sup> Nagasawa, 2017, gives a history of Anselmian perfect being theology. The Notion of God's Perfect Love will come into play in later chapters.

contend the attributes of God, so this two-sentence characterisation of perfect being theology is intended just to ease us in.

The Ontological argument I take to be the most peculiar of the four. It trades in the modal concepts of necessity and possibility along with the definition that God is maximally excellent or perfect. God's existence is not the sort of thing that can just happen to be or not to be; if He exists then His existence is *necessary*, so God's existence is not *contingent* on anything else, which is argued to follow from the idea of God's maximal perfection.

1. By *definition* God is the most perfect being that can exist.
2. A God who exists in reality is greater than a God who exists only in the mind or imagination in the way a defined thing that exists.
3. A being which actually exists is more perfect than just the *idea* of that being which exists only in the mind.
4. Therefore, God actually exists.

Note that the ontological argument does not conclude for the existence of the God of religion, but only for a theistic or supernatural picture versus a naturalistic one. Innumerable objections and replies have been offered over the centuries. A classic response involves challenging the notion that ideas can relate to reality by seemingly defining something into existence. A classic objection purports to show absurd consequences from parallel thought exercises, such as defining the perfect island into existence with the claim that a perfect island actually existing is greater than the idea of a perfect island.<sup>4</sup> At first impression the ontological argument might appear quite unpersuasive, but it is still defended by professional philosophers<sup>5</sup> and general discussion of necessity and possibility in relation to God's existence is still a regular labour in philosophy departments.<sup>6</sup>

### The Cosmological Argument.

Broadly there are two versions, and like the ontological argument neither concludes for the existence of the God of a religion, but for a theistic or supernatural picture as against a naturalistic one.

The first sort is more commonly known and intuitive.

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<sup>4</sup> Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm and Benedictine monk in France.

<sup>5</sup> Dombrowski, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen, 2018. For an encyclopaedia article about Ontological arguments, see Oppy, Graham, Joshua Rasmussen, and Joseph Schmid, 2024.

1. Every event has a cause, including the event during the first moment in time in the universe.
2. An infinite regress in time or the universe coming about from nothing is incoherent (physical stuff cannot come from nothing).
3. Therefore, the only coherent possibility for whatever caused the first moment must be uncaused and outside of time.
4. Only a God could be uncaused and outside of time, therefore God exists.<sup>7</sup>

The other version of cosmological argument contends there must be something *sustaining* the universe in existence, because *explanations* that do not include a contemporaneous sustaining cause are inadequate because they *bottom out* at contingent states of affairs which cannot explain the existence of the universe. Unlike God who exists necessarily and ‘contains’ the reason for his own existence as the ultimate ground of *being*.<sup>8</sup> The universe as a physical thing is not the sort of thing (unlike God) which could contain the reason for its own existence and must have an external reason.<sup>9</sup>

Objections most commonly concern the nature of explanation. One objection perhaps first raised by Hume<sup>10</sup> claims that an infinite regress of causes leaves nothing to explain, which in turn invites objections about the incoherence of actual infinities. Objections regarding contingency contend that the universe requires no explanation for its existence – it just *is*. This is argued in response to be profoundly arbitrary, in that we expect a reason for the existence of anything one cares to mention and surely that intuition should extend to the universe itself standing starkly in need of a reason. If everything in the universe is contingent, it seems natural that we hold the existence of the whole also contingent. The often-heard retort to the theist is ‘well then, what explains God?’. This points to the idea that positing of a God as a necessary ground of explanation appears to reintroduce the argument at another level.

The theist faces the problem of making sense of either a self-caused thing or a being containing its own reason. If God’s creating the universe was contingent on his choice, then the first cause is not necessary.

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<sup>7</sup> William Lane Craig is a leading contemporary proponent of this argument, which still prompts lively debate and publications from scientists and philosophers. My statement of the argument is condensed.

<sup>8</sup> This conceptual framing of God predominated philosophy for centuries since being made famous by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth.

<sup>9</sup> This second sort is less defensible because it involves a more dubious principle than does the previous argument: ‘The Principle of Sufficient Reason’ first devised by Leibniz, which contends that everything must have a reason why it is so and not otherwise.

<sup>10</sup> In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

If on the other hand the creation event was necessary, then why can we not take the universe itself to be necessary? A plenitude of technical issues is debated in the literature.<sup>11</sup>

### The Teleological Argument.

Debate of teleological arguments these days is more common than cosmological or ontological debates, perhaps because they are more generally approachable by falling under a more scientific purview rather than metaphysical. The arguments are prompted by features of the universe that might indicate purposeful or intentional creation which naturalistic theories exclude and for that reason are less satisfactory. They essentially propose that the existence of life or the cosmos is more likely to include a creative component rather than only result from natural laws with no intelligence driving them. Scientific explanations are normally accused of lacking overarching explanatory virtues such as completeness or grounding, which are argued to be enjoyed by design or theistic explanations. The debate mostly involves naturalists arguing that there is no need to go beyond the science for good explanation, and theists arguing that pure scientific explanations are less reasonable or satisfactory than teleological accounts.

Two of the main sorts of teleological argument are the argument from design and the argument from fine tuning. The former contends that the theory of evolution by natural selection that is universally accepted in biology cannot explain the evolution of life without presuming a designer. The main approach here has been to identify components of animal life which it is argued could not have arisen by natural selection alone because the stages of development logically could not achieve the resulting complexity. Scientists typically respond with ideas about natural mechanisms that could produce those components. In academia generally these arguments about evolution are not taken seriously as arguments for a creator, although there is lively philosophical debate about the lack of explanatory virtue exhibited by the theory of natural selection, often concerning circularity and ambiguity. We might note that mainstream standard biology has not managed to eliminate the semantics of purpose, or teleological connotations from its concepts, and biology is still completely in the dark about how life started.<sup>12</sup>

A second sort of teleological argument is that from fine tuning which is perhaps accorded greater scientific legitimacy than the biology related arguments. Fine tuning arguments are at the level of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Reichenbach (2024) for encyclopaedia article on the Cosmological Argument.

<sup>12</sup> See Agren (2021).

physical sciences and draw on the broadly accepted fact that the sorts and configuration of material and laws which constitute the universe and support life involves fantastically sensitive parameters, with infinitesimal margin of error for supporting life. Life would not exist if the universe were constituted otherwise than within these parameters. The idea is that an intelligent creator must be involved, because the probabilities of this constitution arising by chance alone from the Big Bang is persuasively argued to be fantastically low.<sup>13</sup> The most common objection to this argument counters the infinitesimal chance by proposing an unfathomable *quantity* of universes that exist ('the multiverse'). The idea is that we just happen to be in one of those extremely rare universes in the multiverse which can develop conscious beings like us. The literature on this question involves arguments about probability and different gambler fallacies. The contrast of intuitions here is independently fascinating, with one side quite happy with the idea of a reality teeming with a quantity of universes approaching infinity, while others find the notion *prima facie* absurd.<sup>14</sup>

Fine tuning arguments might draw auxiliary support to undermine confidence in the multiverse by pointing to the quality of scientific ignorance: There is no account of the big bang event or the moments following it, and it is remarkable that the standard model comprises ignorance about well over ninety percent of the matter and energy purportedly making up the universe called 'dark matter'. Another pressing mystery is the immense low entropy at the Big Bang (Carroll 2016), which we can basically understand as the level of order or organisation packed into that event to be so utterly great as to hold the potential for the immense organised complexity we find at all levels throughout the universe from cells and molecules to complex life and consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

### The Argument from Experience.

One of the main differences to the previous three is the greater import or relevance for a theistic conception of the cosmos in comparison to the more purely metaphysical conceptions of a creator implied by those. The argument from experience isn't exactly an argument ; it rather presents an experiential component as a justification for belief in God, which may be used in an argument for God's existence. The main question in connection with God's existence is epistemological: how can belief

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<sup>13</sup> See Barnes (2012). Most scientists are agreed that this is true.

<sup>14</sup> There appears to be the beginnings of a shift to leading scientists facing up to the utter implausibility of infinite universes in order to explain fine tuning: Sean Carroll is a famous leading physicist who held an analogue position to explain quantum physics called the 'Many Worlds Hypothesis', who said recently in regard to the multiverse that, "physicists don't really know what they are talking about." (December 2022).

<sup>15</sup> For an encyclopaedia article on teleological arguments for God's existence, see Ratzsch & Koperski (2023).

formed from experience function in an argument for God's existence? The topic of religious experience is diffuse and varied, but I will allude to the core concerns that most relate to this thesis, before summing up the epistemological import concerning God's existence.

There is potentially wide scope for the *sorts* of experience that might qualify as religious, to the extent that the concept of religious experience is vague. To give a flavour of that scope: Seeing and hearing might be modes of religious experience, but may be elaborated with phrases such as, 'but not seeing in the normal way' or 'I heard the sound but not like a sound coming through my ears.' Other reports might involve hallucinations accompanied by an assurance of real presence. Yet another type of experience is one that piggy backs on the normal senses when for example a sublime landscape is 'infused with God' either in some apparent or describable way or in an indescribable way that are categorised as *ineffable*.

There is a scope for vagueness around the understanding or definition of 'religious experience' stemming from the variety of extant religious traditions. Further controversy arises from purported essential differences between the meaning and or use of ordinary language as compared to religious language. A helpful general distinction is separating religious *feelings* from *experience*, such that experience is of an external object (or event, or person or fact or even an absence) and not only a subjective feeling. Then a basic issue for contention is how or if religious experience can function in an argument for God. Arguments from experience usually offer a parallel about the way our senses give evidence for the physical world to the way religious experience provides evidence for the divine.<sup>16</sup> Critics basically present ways in which religious experience is different enough from sensory experience to undermine the purported evidence it is said to provide.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to mention in conclusion of this section, before I move to arguments *against* the existence of God, that a cumulative case could draw on all four sorts of argument together.<sup>18</sup>

### The Argument from Evil.

The argument from evil and the argument from divine hiddenness are the two most prominent arguments *against* the existence of God in contemporary philosophy of religion (Dummsday 2014). The argument from evil is much better known and I expect most folk are aware of it in some form. It may

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<sup>16</sup> The most cited examples are Alston (1991), Swinburne (1979), and Plantinga (1981, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> See Webb (2022) for excellent encyclopedia article on Religious Experience.

<sup>18</sup> I make special reference because such a case was most famously made by the preeminent contemporary English philosopher Richard Swinburne in 1979.

be the most common justification for reflective atheists and agnostics, and perhaps the most pressing cause of doubt for people of faith. Again here, I am just presenting the bare bones of the argument just to help later situate our topic of divine hiddenness. Philosophical issues related to the problem of evil cover a wide scope and the number of publications on the subject is vast. The interested reader could start with a good encyclopaedia article such as Tooley (2021).

The traditional God of theism, of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, has at least three essential attributes stated in premise one of the argument from evil:

1. God is all knowing, all powerful, and all benevolent (morally perfect).
2. These attributes are incompatible with the existence of evil.
3. Evil exists in the world.
4. Therefore, God does not.

There are various ways to argue for the incompatibility but perhaps the most straightforward is that because God must know about evil and have the power to stop it, yet he does not, so he is not morally perfect and therefore the God of theism does not exist.

Theist responses revolve around possible reasons God might have for allowing evil or greater goods God might want to achieve for which evil is a necessary part of the process. The importance of free will has classically been held up as a reason for God to allow evil behaviour along with the idea that infinite compensation will be enjoyed in heaven. A bigger problem for theists is accounting for why God would allow natural evil which is not a consequence of free will such as illness or disaster, whereby apparently gratuitous suffering occurs. Commonly cited obvious examples include children in prolonged agony or natural disasters causing the untold suffering of thousands and millions of people. 'Sceptical theism' is the umbrella name for various theses in the literature ; which are argued to ground the claim that we cannot be certain that God does not have sufficient moral reason for allowing such events. Typically, atheists suspect radical implausibility in advance of *any* reason and often summarily dismiss these ideas for why an all-powerful and perfectly moral God might allow such suffering to the extent that it seems to happen.

### Section 3.                   Introducing Divine Hiddenness.

Now I move to the subject of this thesis. The argument against the existence of God from divine hiddenness shares the form of the argument from evil by inferring from evidence that appears incompatible with the existence of God. The argument from divine hiddenness broadly concerns the

ambiguity of religion by deducing that the God of theism would not permit the level of fair-minded disbelief about Him that there is. An intuitive question as a forerunner to the argument was famously summed up by Bertrand Russell's reply to the question of how he would respond at the gates of heaven if God asked why he didn't believe in Him: "Sir, why did you not give me better evidence?" (Roston 1974).

Many writers have offered differing formulations of the argument, but the philosopher J.L. Schellenberg has invigorated modern discussion since 1993 through to his current mature position with a most lucid and powerful version of the argument. Interest around Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness is "perhaps even transformative of the contemporary scene in philosophy of religion." (Hanson, 2016). As such, in this thesis the focus is Schellenberg's formulation of the argument taken as canonical.

A key component of the argument and the notion doing a lot of the work is *non-resistant non-belief* in God. Simply put, this notion describes the cognitive state of a non-believer who *would* believe if only they encountered cause or reason for belief which they do not make any effort to avoid or resist. This is a somewhat loose definition in sympathy with Schellenberg to get us started. The central contention is that such non-belief is incompatible with the existence of the perfectly loving (and all-powerful) God of classical theism who would ensure that anyone able to believe in Him will do, in order they may achieve their highest good in personal relation with Him. The basic claim is that non-resistant non-believers are epistemically justified in their disbelief while fair-mindedly not cutting themselves off from potential belief-forming experience. This is only a tentative characterisation to get us out of the blocks.<sup>19</sup>

In the rest of this chapter, I will first provide a broad introduction to the topic of divine hiddenness including a brief survey of a somewhat related theological concept sometimes termed as 'Divine Silence'. A fuller introduction to Schellenberg's thesis will then follow, laying the ground for more thorough exposition and analysis in Chapters Two and Three.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The reader may wonder at this point why non-belief of all kinds might not be more pressing than non-resistant non-belief. Schellenberg's argument focuses specifically on non-resistant non-belief because the existence of non-belief as such is compatible with theism if that non-belief results from culpable resistance or wilful rejection. The evidential force of the argument therefore depends on the existence of sincere, open, and non-resistant non-believers for whom divine hiddenness may not more readily explained by resistance or negligence on the agent's part.

<sup>20</sup> A significant portion of literature engages the question of whether the existence of non-resistant non-belief may be classified as evil and subsumed under the problem of evil. This question is of meta-philosophical importance regarding whether there are two independent arguments against the existence of God, but I will not specifically address that problem in this thesis.

The name of the argument from *'hiddenness'* is perhaps unfortunate because the phrase 'divine hiddenness' suggests that there is something hidden rather than non-existent. I suppose this moniker developed because the argument amounts to a cognitive challenge for theists who believe in God: why is He hidden? The phrase *'Divine silence'* is sometimes used in the literature to denote hiddenness in a theological context when God is believed to be non-responsive to a believer. There are many examples of divine silence throughout scripture and tradition (see Ballantyne 1983), from which I will provide a sampling of those most significant or well-known. A stream of Jewish thought since the holocaust laments God's silence during that modern catastrophe, which bore tragic similarity to ancient episodes when Hebrew ancestors were enslaved or murdered en mass. From the Bible:

"Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Isaiah 45:15).

"To You, O Lord, I call; My rock, do not be deaf to me, For if You are silent to me, I will become like those who go down to the pit." (Psalm 28:1).

"O God, do not remain quiet; Do not be silent and, O God, do not be still." (Psalm 83:1).

A most significant milestone instance of God's silence within Christianity is an event called *'The Cry of Dereliction.'* This event was Jesus on the cross, experiencing abandonment through God's silence, "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).<sup>21</sup>

Saint Anselm during the early medieval period (whose ontological argument for God's existence I cited earlier), is here thinking:

I have never seen thee, O Lord my God; I do not know thy form. What, O most high Lord, shall this man do, an exile far from thee? What shall thy servant do, anxious in his love of thee, and cast out afar from thy face? He pants to see thee, and thy face is too far from him. He longs to come to thee, and thy dwelling place is inaccessible. He is eager to find thee, and knows not thy place. He desires to seek thee, and does not know thy face. Lord, thou art my God, and thou art my Lord, yet never have I seen thee. It is thou that hast made me, and hast made me anew, and hast bestowed upon me all the blessings I enjoy; and not yet do I know thee." (Proslogion, sect. 1)

A few hundred years later the great Saint John of the Cross wrote of his experience in prison in poetic form which has come to be called "The dark night of the soul" (1591), and which is seen as a paradigm

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<sup>21</sup> Interesting to note that explaining the Christian significance of this event would involve considering perfect love because Jesus is the manifestation of God's perfect love in full solidarity with humanity, by taking on the human experience of despair in isolation from God as death approached.

instance of mystic holiness to which numerous Christian and Jewish mystics have empathised. St. John experienced divine silence during a time of persecution in prison when he needed God most, which he came to understand as a necessary advanced stage in a life of communing with God. It is worth quoting a couple of the eight stanzas translated from the Spanish by Foreman (1989):

And in the luck of night  
In secret places where no other spied  
I went without my sight  
Without a light to guide  
Except the heart that lit me from inside.

The fundamental idea is that the ego must experience isolation to transcend forms of awareness that inhibit higher union with God, such as a selfish element of loneliness.

I abandoned and forgot myself  
Laying my face on the Beloved:  
All things ceased  
I went out from myself  
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

Christians acknowledge a certain tension between this experience and fundamental teaching from Christ, “Seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matthew 7:7). The tension prompts responses ranging from despair and hopelessness or loss of faith, to determined patience or resolve to change one’s life. Sometimes even the most devout theists will experience a crisis of faith leading them to give up belief in God and lose their purpose and meaning in life. Mother Teresa is a contemporary example of saintly person who lost belief in God for long and repeated stretches during her lifelong ministry serving the destitute of Calcutta. Those times apparently included depression and times of despair, and she never lost her faith. She is sometimes held up as an exemplar candidate for a ‘dark night of the soul.’

These examples of divine silence represent some elements from an array of attitudes, emotions and behaviours which might feature in such experience of divine silence. These experiences may call for a sensitive priest or spiritual director, whereas our problem of divine hiddenness requires philosophically or otherwise attending to a cognitive problem. Whilst the problems of theological silence and philosophical divine hiddenness are different, they may overlap for an individual to the extent that a believer’s experience manifests within a context of their expectations of God and implications therefrom,<sup>22</sup> and it is those sort of expectations which also prompt the premises of the argument from

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<sup>22</sup> Though St. John’s reflections on complete emptying of ego for higher states of being with God would point to letting go of all expectations (which we might classify as a limiting case).

divine hiddenness, in terms of God's love and the implications for belief states He is therefore expected to stimulate or instil. The philosopher explicitly assesses the implications of those expectations, as the religious seeker might do implicitly, so an individual's experience of divine silence appears to be structurally rooted in similar concerns that prompt the philosophical argument.

Moving on from divine silence to complete our look at hiddenness from a theological perspective, there is a strand of theist thought outright rejecting the notion of non-resistant non-belief, due to a purported availability of evidence for God. This line of thought is mirrored in a parallel type of response to Schellenberg that we will encounter later. Aristotle provides respectable precedent by judging atheism to be irrational.<sup>23</sup> And here is an early church father and intellectual, John Chrysostom writing in the late Fourth Century: "The providence of God is clearer than the sun and its rays. On every occasion and in every place you will see clear and abundant evidence of this providence".<sup>24</sup> Jumping a good millennium, Calvin remarks, "if there is any quarter where it may be supposed that God is unknown, the most likely for such an instance to exist is among the dullest tribes farthest removed from civilization." (1683, p43). And commenting on the psalms he writes, "there is nothing so obscure or despised, even in the most confined corners of the earth, wherein there is not some mark of God's might and wisdom to be seen." (1686, p286). I quote finally the Catechism of the Catholic Church from the present day, which is influenced by Aquinas on this aspect: "The Church, holds and teaches that God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason." (Catechism, 36).

It would be a complicated dialectical exercise to interpret the Catechism for any connection to Schellenberg's concept of non-resistant non-belief. On the face of it Schellenberg seems on quite firm ground:

The category of non-resistant nonbelievers the argument can work with is so broad, including not just reflective doubters but also those who never have had a real chance to *think* about God; and not just people living today but all finite persons capable of believing in God and responding positively to such belief *who have ever lived* – which of course takes us back very far indeed into evolutionary history. (2016, p27).

Schellenberg identifies four types or modes of non-resistant non-believer (2007, p227-242):

- Lifelong agnostic seekers who never achieve belief.

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk XII, Ch. 9, in *Aristotle: Selections*, 1995, ed. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, p343.

<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Providence* 5.2.

- Converts from theism to non-theism.
- Those isolated from the idea of a personal God, either geographically isolated like people in southern India before the apostle Thomas arrived (my example) or primitive humans historically isolated.
- Ex-believers who desire a return to belief. (Mother Teresa mentioned earlier would be an example if she became atheist).

Distinct hiddenness arguments could be offered for each sort. For later developing my position I will have in view a more general and diffuse set closer to home and more apparent around here and now that Howard-Snyder and Green (2021) phrase as, “Schellenberg’s appeal to increased secularity, especially in western cultures: what is the probability that *all* of the hundreds of millions of nonbelievers in the secular West are, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally with God, resistant? Vanishingly small.” (2015: 76ff; 2007a: 205, 228ff). My constrained focus therefore is not intended to refute the argument from divine hiddenness, per se, but to use it to explore this one category of non-resistant non-believer, and to offer a response in that case.

My constrained position in relation to the four specified categories may be to some extent applicable to them, but I will not take up that issue in detail. Using the ‘secular Westerner’ category as a model of non-resistant non-believer encourages a more interesting and widely relevant scope, for sympathising or imagining different sorts of cognition and analysing their epistemology. The refined focus also will prepare ground for the free will aspect of my thesis in Chapter Five.

I will now review historical hiddenness arguments prior to Schellenberg’s innovation in 1993, offering summary critique in advance of rigorously analysing Schellenberg’s formulation of the argument in the next chapter.

#### Section 4. Historical Hiddenness Arguments before Schellenberg.

Aquinas in the thirteenth century implicitly identifies elements that we find in the premises or motivation for hiddenness arguments. Here is a modern paraphrasing of Aquinas (Marcar 2015, p5):

Since the workings of the universe can be explained through natural principles, it would appear that God’s effects are nowhere to be seen...[and] belief in a providential God appears unfounded and redundant. God’s effects are not manifest within the world, as the state of things within it (...fully explainable in terms of natural principles) bears witness.

We should note that Aquinas also thinks that disbelief arising from ‘preferred’ natural explanations, arises from ignorance and sinful disposition rather than a fair assessment of evidence.

In the early modern period we see thinking closer to the modern hiddenness problem from the philosopher Bishop George Berkeley in 1710. (Divine hiddenness is sometimes called the hiddenness ‘problem’, as far as it purports a philosophical problem for theists). Berkeley dismissively observes that, “It seems to be a general pretence of the unthinking herd that they cannot see God. Could we but see him, they say, as we see a man, we should believe that he is and, believing, obey his commands.” (2008). Berkeley judges that perception of lacking evidence is caused by ignorance and not from a fair assessment of evidence. He continues, “It is a sad instance of the stupidity and inattention of men, who, though they are surrounded with such clear manifestations of the Deity, are yet so little affected by them that they seem, as it were, blinded with excess of light”. (ibid).

Joseph Butler in 1736 derives what may be the first explicit divine hiddenness argument:

It has been thought by some persons, that if the evidence of [the Christian] revelation appears doubtful, this itself turns into a positive argument against it: because it cannot be supposed, that if it were true, it would be left to subsist upon doubtful evidence.<sup>25</sup>

Butler attempts to explain why God might intend or permit doubtful evidence, because it opens the opportunity for what Butler judges to be the intellectual virtue of seeking after truth and investigating God’s existence, “The evidence of religion not appearing obvious... gives scope for a virtuous exercise, ..., in examining or not examining into that evidence.” (ibid). The intricacies of Butler’s view are esoteric and not relevant for us, but a remarkable anachronism is that he views examining evidence as an important virtue only for those naturally constituted as morally virtuous, for providing them a worthwhile intellectual project, rather than being tempted into sinfully wasting time! This is an absurdly weak response in our secular context; imagine a God blocking relationship from billions of people only for theists to enjoy worthwhile intellectual distraction! Significant for us to note is that Butler’s response to the phenomenon of hiddenness or doubtful evidence falls under a sort of response in the current literature called ‘greater-goods’. That is, ‘greater-goods’ arising from God’s temporary hiddenness, in order that a person may acquire a greater good compared to a premature relationship with God who was not hidden. For example, a plausible position might hold that authentic moral action might not be possible while heaven is in view as a reward. Chapter Four is devoted to greater-good arguments.

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted from, *The Analogy of Religion, in The Works of Bishop Butler*, ed. David White, 2006, p 263.

The next thinker in contrast to these last three who only raise the idea for discussion, is a *proponent* of a hiddenness argument. Nietzsche (1881) writing with panache is worth quoting not least for the argument:

A god who is all-knowing and all-powerful and who does not even make sure his creatures understand his intention—could that be a god of goodness? Who allows countless doubts and uncertainties to persist, for thousands of years, as though the salvation of mankind were unaffected by them, or who, on the other hand, holds out the prospect of frightful consequences if any mistake is made as to the nature of truth? Would he not be a cruel god if he possessed the truth and could behold mankind miserably tormenting itself over that truth?

Nietzsche is alluding to those thousands of years before Christ when people supposedly could not understand God's intentions because they were not yet presented by Christ. I take him to be purporting a conundrum for Christianity who see Jesus to be essential for understanding God. This evokes Schellenberg's category of people unreached or remote from monotheism due to history or location. Like Schellenberg, Nietzsche is challenging the idea that a good God would leave his subjects in such doubt about his intentions, implying that such a God does not exist.

Nietzsche continues that section in sarcastic manner, claiming it a duty of a so-called good God to clearly communicate the truth and not to leave people ignorant, and airing the idea about a natural lack of human intellectuality across the board affecting all religions, (evocative of Karl Marx writing forty years earlier, when he called religion 'the opium of the people'):

But perhaps he is a god of goodness notwithstanding and merely could not express himself more clearly! Did he perhaps lack the intelligence to do so? Or the eloquence? So much the worse! For then he was perhaps also in error as to that which he calls his "truth," and is himself not so very far from being the "poor deluded devil"! ...All religions exhibit traces of the fact that they owe their origin to an early, immature intellectuality in man – they all take astonishingly lightly the duty to tell the truth: they as yet know nothing of a duty of God to be truthful toward mankind and clear in the manner of his communications.

Jumping to near history, Ronald Hepburn (1963) devotes most of an article on the philosophy of language to issues about the cosmological argument, before a couple of pages at the tail end questioning whether religious experience refers only to the mind or really to the divine. He gives short shrift to purported numinous experience (presumably he focuses on numinous experience because it is the sort most reported by believers. 'Numinous' is quite a catch all phrase for any awesome experience of feeling or sensing the divine):

by exclaiming "How indisputably real, how intense and impressive are the thrills and shudders". These by themselves are brute psychological events, and they cannot help the apologist where he needs help most...need the indescribability of numinous experience compel us any more to posit a trans-cendent Source? (p9-10).

He appeals through musical parallels to argue that numinous experience lacks the structure necessary to support distinctions toward developing awareness of the one actual God, and so those experiences cannot qualify as unobjectionable testimony for theism. Hepburn claims that we should be ambivalent at best when judging numinous experience as evidence for the divine, from which he derives a hiddenness argument through a short eloquent paragraph:

One might be tempted to see in that ambivalence a vindication of atheism. For how could such an ambiguous universe be the work of perfect love and perfect power? Could this be a way to love and express love, to leave the loved one in bewildering uncertainty over the very existence of the allegedly loving God? Would we not have here a refined weapon of psychological torture? That is: if the situation is ambivalent, it is not ambivalent; since its ambivalence is a conclusive argument against the existence of the Christian God. (p12).

He claims it contrary to expectations that an omnipotent and perfect loving God would allow the psychological suffering caused by ambivalence about his existence. His mention of perfect love is pertinent for classical theism and is part of Schellenberg's argumentative thrust forty years later, who goes further than thwarted expectations to deriving a *contradiction* between perfect love and non-resistant non-belief.

In a successive paragraph Hepburn notes a greater-good defence:

The Christian will protest, however. Ambivalence, he will say, is simply a tantalizing matter of fact to the sceptic, but to the believer it is a religious necessity. If the situation were not ambiguous, if God were incontrovertibly revealed, then our belief would be constrained, our allegiance forced, and no place would be left for free and responsible decision whether to walk in God's ways and to entrust oneself to him in faith. Divine elusiveness is a necessary condition of our being able to enter upon properly personal relations with God.

Hepburn's dense comment might range over several distinct positions in the greater-goods literature which I research in Chapter Four and which consider effects on morally autonomous choice and faith, by elements that may fall under what Hepburn terms "constrained" belief. Relatedly, he takes it that an element of hiddenness is essential for good personal relations with God, pointing to work in Chapter Two on the concept of perfect love. Very significant is Hepburn's use of the phrase "constrained belief" which is vague, and perhaps intentionally so because of some uncertainty distinguishing the phenomena potentially described by concepts such as volunteered belief or compelled belief and

knowledge. I think uncertainty in this vicinity drives a significant change in Schellenberg's thesis when in 2007 he recruits the notion of 'non-resistant non-belief' to supersede 'reasonable non-belief'. I give an overview of that development below.

Some other historical reviews of pre-Schellenberg hiddenness arguments<sup>26</sup> include a contribution from Hanson (1971) who imagines how straightforward it could be for God to make his existence obvious, and because he has not done so He does not exist. A better articulation of Hanson's idea is posed by David Hume two hundred years earlier on miracles (1779):

We can envisage extraordinary or miraculous events, such as voices in the sky speaking great sense of a religious and spiritual sort to all men in a variety of languages, which would be highly improbable except as manifestations of a God... [I]f such a thing happened, or, even more if things of this sort happened with some frequency, it might well be highly irrational not to believe that they emanated from a transcendent intelligence. It is surely a burning question why, if there is a God, there are not such events, and why the miracles believers do claim either are buried in a murky and problematic past, or are cures which are not unequivocally miraculous exceptions to natural regularities. (§3).

That there is not universally obvious evidence for God only reinforces a central premise of the hiddenness argument that God is hidden, which is agreed by most all parties, and so Hanson's quite banal argument is only against the existence of an obviously apparent God. Hume's question is not so much burning as smouldering alongside other considerations which together ignite the cognitive problem for theists, which came to be pressed by Schellenberg.<sup>27</sup>

I will now complete this historical background with some remarks about a key development of Schellenberg's argument between 1993 and 2007 that I alluded to earlier.

The early version of his argument he called 'The argument from reasonable non-belief' which runs as follows:

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur.
- (3) Reasonable non-belief occurs.
- (4) No perfectly loving God exists.

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<sup>26</sup> Including Weidner (2018), and Perkins (2012).

<sup>27</sup> My attention to this point has been on hiddenness *arguments* prior to Schellenberg's innovation. Other prominent responses to the hiddenness problem before then include: Morris (1988, p5-21), McKim (1990, p141-161), Murray (1993, p27-38).

(5) There is no God.

The component most challenged in the literature was the concept or notion of reasonable non-belief. My project in this chapter is descriptive so I will not assess that early concept of non-reasonable non-belief, only to say in summary that the notion was too vague to plausibly carry his argument. For instance, an attempt to elaborate the notion was the idea of *non-culpability* for non-belief. His motivation was to frame the non-believer as epistemically non-negligent in the context of a perfectly loving God who he argued would prompt belief. Many writers challenged the concept of reasonable or non-culpable non-belief, prompting numerous responses from Schellenberg (2002, 2004, 2005a). Then in 2007, he conceives instead *non-resistant non-belief* that he defines a person who is, “(i) not resisting God and (ii) capable of meaningful conscious relationship with God is also (iii) in a position to participate in such relationship (able to do so just by trying).” (p205). This brings the argument into its current form.

## Section 5. Introducing the core aspects of Schellenberg’s argument.

Now I will prime for Chapters Two and Three by introducing the core aspects of Schellenberg’s argument.

It has been contended that non-resistant non-belief is somewhat artificial or vacuous by consisting simply in an absence of resistance. For example, Weidner (2018) assumes that “Schellenberg uses the rather artificial term of ‘nonresistance’ deliberately insofar as it points to the required negation, or rather absence, of any resistance.” (p116). I mention this example only in passing in case it occurs to the reader. Weidner contends that Schellenberg’s empirical notion of non-resistance is underdetermined and vague.<sup>28</sup> Judging this will be an element of Chapter Three where I present a fuller analysis of the concept, and where I am inclined to sympathy with Schellenberg that the notion is not too vague for the work he requires of it.

Here are a couple of Schellenberg’s attempts to characterise resistance:

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<sup>28</sup> Weidner says “...one might wonder why Schellenberg’s account of resistance itself seems to be rather underdetermined, and the question of what the object of resistance might be is also not clearly formulated...unambiguously differentiating...For example, a resistant finite person might likewise be someone who is “opposing belief in God” (*The Wisdom to Doubt*, 201), or “opposing the evidence that God provides” (*Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 38). (2018, p 116 fn 226).

A person may not want relationship or even to be reminded of her religious options, and so may through resistance of God, which would have to involve self-deception, herself produce a situation in which she is unable to relate personally to God. (2016, p21).

To trade in one metaphor for another, if God is open to personal relationship then the divine light will remain on unless we close our eyes,..., Here we might imagine careless investigation of one sort or another in relation to the existence of God, or someone deliberately consorting with people who carelessly fail to believe in God and avoiding those who believe, or just over time mentally drifting, with her own acquiescence, away from any place where she could convincingly be met by evidence of God. (2015, p55-56)

Another core notion or concept Schellenberg develops which is concomitant with perfect love is *divine openness*, whereby God will be open to a deep-sharing relationship *for its own sake*, “for God to always be open to personal relationship with a relevantly capable created [person] in a manner expressing unsurpassable love is for God to ensure that there is never something *God* does that prevents [that person] from being able, just by trying, to participate in personal relationship with God...” (2016 p21). There is interesting scope for questioning the meaning and implications of perfect love, and whether the notion may more plausibly support implications different than Schellenberg derives. That will be work for Chapter Two.

Continuing to nod at areas of discussion for later chapters. A crucial and controversial aspect of Schellenberg’s argument is that a person cannot engage God without first coming to believe that He exists. Various responses present other cognitive or affective attitudes to be sufficient for relating to God. Some argue for propositional attitudes that may be volunteered in the way belief cannot such as faith, hope, or acceptance.<sup>29</sup> That subject will be in view mainly in Chapter Six. Other philosophers<sup>30</sup> attend to the Quinean distinction between *de dicto* belief required by Schellenberg and *de re* belief, which they contend will underwrite a conscious relationship with God without the agent being fully or explicitly aware. We will attend to this issue mainly in Chapter Three, but it will deserve mention at several points.

Schellenberg’s case for propositional belief is that the *greatest benefit* for a person consistent with perfect love would arise from a conscious awareness of reciprocal relationship grounded in propositional belief. He suggests a person would optimally flourish with the certain moral surety that

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<sup>29</sup> Examples are Audi (2019), M<sup>c</sup> Kaughn (2013), Rea (2018), Weidner (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Howard-Snyder (2015), Cullison (2010), Poston (2007).

would most enable self-improvement. Assessing this will involve comparing potentially more autonomous moral responses related to other propositional attitudes, which will engage us in Chapter Four. These are intriguing issues, not least of which is that this intuition is apparently not universally shared; with some claiming to prefer the idea that God does not exist.

## Conclusion of Chapter One.

I began this introductory chapter with a profile of adjacent topics from the philosophy of religion so that our target topic is clear. After a brief introduction to the argument from hiddenness I distinguished a theological notion of hiddenness ('silence'), from our philosophical problem of divine hiddenness. The chapter continued by reviewing the history of the philosophical problem prior to Schellenberg's book in 1993, which is usually credited as stimulating the contemporary wave of academic attention to the topic. Then, after profiling a significant change in Schellenberg's thesis around 2001, I ended by outlining the core notions of the argument he defends since his book in 2007, affirmed and clarified with another book in 2015.

I have laid the ground for more thorough exposition and analysis of that mature position in Chapters Two and Three.

## Chapter 2

### Schellenberg's Argument. Part One — Divine Personhood, Perfect Love, and Openness

#### Introduction

This chapter begins a two-chapter analysis of Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness (ADH). It states the canonical argument, clarifies its premises, and examines two load-bearing concepts—perfect love and divine openness—leaving the notion of non-resistant non-belief for Chapter Three.

Section One, The Argument from Divine Hiddenness. The chapter sets out Schellenberg's most precise formulation (seven steps from perfect love to the denial of God's existence), explains how (1)–(3) link perfect love to openness, how (4)–(5) tie openness to the (im)possibility of non-resistant non-belief, and how (6) supplies the factual premise. It also flags the dissertation's focus on the "secular Westerner" as the salient case for premise (6), with other categories noted for brief discussion later, but not pursued here.

Section Two, Perfect Love. Here the discussion probes whether classical theism's maximally great personal God must value personal relationship for its own sake, and whether that claim outruns, or is constrained by, divine benevolence. The section tests Schellenberg's analogies (especially parental love), engages worries about deriving conceptual necessities, and canvasses critiques (e.g., that benevolence may sometimes override immediate reciprocity). The upshot is to balance what perfect love may do with what perfect love must do.

Section Three, Divine Openness. Openness is analysed as God's standing condition such that any capable person can, just by trying, enter a positively meaningful, conscious, reciprocal relationship—unless blocked by their own resistance. The section distinguishes passive from active readings of openness, introduces the "Not Open" doxastic principle, and shows why Schellenberg thinks openness requires propositional belief that God exists (setting the stage for closer scrutiny of belief and other cognitive and affective attitudes in Chapter Six).

Overall, Chapter Two fixes the argumentative architecture and tests the love-and-openness premises, preparing for Chapter Three's analysis of non-resistant non-belief and, later, the assessment of greater-goods responses in Chapter Four, before my own thesis in Chapters Five through Seven.

## Section 1. The Argument from Divine Hiddenness.

I will quote Schellenberg's most careful specification of the argument (2016, p24-25) and then elaborate on the premises.

(1) If God exists, then God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be. [Premise]

(2) If God is perfectly loving toward such finite persons as there may be, then for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship (a personal relationship) with S at t. [Premise]

(3) If God exists, then for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t. [1, 2 by Hypothetical Syllogism]

(4) If for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t, then for any capable finite person S and time t, it is not the case that S is at t nonresistantly in a state of non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [Premise]

(5) If God exists, then for any capable finite person S and time t, it is not the case that S is at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [3, 4 by Hypothetical Syllogism]

(6) There is at least one capable finite person S and time t such that S is or was at t nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [Premise]

(7) It is not the case that God exists. [5, 6 by Modus Tollens]

Premise 1 sets up the target of a perfectly loving God (outlined in the last chapter within the context of perfect being theology).

Schellenberg claims that classical theism's divine attribute of perfect love must be understood in an ultimate sense so that the maximally good personhood of God (2015, p90-98) entails Him having *unsurpassable* love which means loving every finite person as there may be, otherwise that love could be potentially greater and therefore not maximal. The argument will hang on the content or meaning of perfect love, and that entailing the *openness* of God stated in the following premise.

Premises 2 and 3 state that God is *open* to being in a "positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship". Schellenberg (2015) develops the view that the greatest possible or maximal personhood

of God will be open to a deep sharing relationship *for its own sake*, and that openness *self-evidently* falls under the concept of perfect love. Schellenberg elaborates on the meaning of 'openness':

...it will be possible for creatures who haven't made it impossible themselves through their own God-obscuring resistance of the divine, to participate in relationship with God; if they want to, they will be able to do so simply by trying to do so (notice that this doesn't mean that trying will be easy...). If thus open to relationship, God sees to it that nothing God does or fails to do puts relationship with God out of reach for finite persons at the time in question. (ibid, p41).

Premises 4 and 5 introduce 'non-resistant non-belief' involving his contention that a person cannot *begin* a relationship with God without believing that He exists. Schellenberg's argument that propositional belief be in place before relationship is possible, is largely motivated by the idea of the greatest benefit for the person *consistent with perfect love* must be generated from a conscious awareness of reciprocal relationship, which he thinks must involve believing that God exists. He likewise thinks that maximal personal benefit consistent with unsurpassable love to enable such moral surety and consequent self-improvement along with profound peace from surety in God's love is only feasible on propositional belief that God exists. Further, because belief is an *involuntary* cognitive state in the sense that one cannot believe something just by will, an open God must make it the case that non-resistant non-believers will believe God exists, otherwise by not sufficiently revealing himself or however enabling belief, a person could not begin to engage with God just by trying, which Schellenberg argues would mean God is not open, and therefore not perfectly loving. I will later interrogate other philosophers who argue that cognitive or affective attitudes other than belief can be *volunteered* and will suffice to begin and develop relationship, such as faith, hope, or acceptance. Chapter Six will be devoted to this topic, with my own position incorporating the idea of 'hopeful-acceptance'.

Another sort of proposal applies the Quinean distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* belief. Roughly, *de dicto* belief is that the *proposition* that God exists is true, which Schellenberg sees as necessary for relationship. *De re* belief about God is a belief that has God as its object without the believer necessarily being aware that God is the object. Some philosophers argue that *de re* belief can underwrite a conscious relationship with God without the agent's explicit awareness that it is God to whom they relate.

A congenial example will illustrate the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* belief. Suppose Professor Ben sees a man in a trench coat behaving a little dodgy and concludes, "That man is a spy," without realizing that the man is actually his student Dan. In this case, Ben holds a *de re* belief: he believes, of Dan himself, that he is a spy, even though he does not recognize him as such. The belief is directed toward the particular individual, not merely toward a description. In contrast, Ben also has a *de dicto*

belief insofar as he believes that "there exists a man in a trench coat who is a spy," focusing instead on a certain description without necessarily attaching it to a specific individual. The crucial difference lies in what the belief concerns: a *de re* belief is about a thing (the actual person, Dan), whereas a *de dicto* belief is about a proposition or description. This example captures the intuitive contrast between believing *of someone* that they have a property and believing *that there is someone* who has a certain property. This distinction will be pondered under our divine hiddenness context at various points in later chapters.

I take Schellenberg's novel concept of non-resistant non-belief to be the most intellectually fertile component of his argument because it concurrently implicates research from the philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion and epistemology. Chapter Three is devoted to non-resistant non-belief. To my mind the most intelligible sort of theist response will not *deny* the existence of non-resistant non-belief but instead explain how it may be compatible with God's love. These sorts of reply in the literature are called 'greater-goods' responses, in the sense that a greater overall good results from the occurrence of non-resistant non-belief, rendering it consistent with perfect love. That field of literature is the subject of Chapter Four. My thesis in Chapters Five through Seven will argue that non-resistant non-belief is compatible with God's love and may even be expected under theism for partly describing circumstances for the operation of freely choosing to initiate relationship with God.

Premise 6 stipulates that there has existed at least one non-resistant non-believer and concludes in line 7 that no perfectly loving God exists. Schellenberg backs that stipulation by identifying four categories of non-resistant non-believers (2007, p227-242). Firstly, lifelong agnostic seekers who never achieve belief. Secondly, converts from theism to non-theism. Thirdly, those isolated from the idea of a personal God, either geographically (for example like those in southern India before the apostle Thomas arrived), or historically isolated primitive humans. Fourthly, ex-believers who desire a return to the state of belief, but do not or seemingly cannot, like the saintly example of Mother Teresa mentioned in Chapter One. Distinct hiddenness arguments might be separately offered for each of these categories and theists offer specific responses.<sup>31</sup> I will further comment about these categories in Chapter Three.

My thesis in Chapter Five through Seven will concentrate on a more broadly relatable and familiar category of non-resistant non-belief occurring across the developed world, which Howard-Snyder (2022) describes as Schellenberg's appeal to, "increased secularity, especially in western cultures: what is the probability that *all* of the hundreds of millions of nonbelievers in the secular West are, at the dawn

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<sup>31</sup> Prominent examples: Maitzen (2006) offers hiddenness argument based on demographic differences not to be expected on Theism. Marsh (2008) offers a theist reply to Maitzen. Marsh (2013) offers a theist response regarding divine hiddenness for primitive humans.

of their capacity to relate personally with God, resistant? Vanishingly small.”<sup>32</sup> So my response to Schellenberg will not refute the argument from divine hiddenness, *per se*, but will mainly concern that more diffuse category of non-resistant non-believer that is common all around us, and offer a response in that case. In this way my thesis is a limited theist defense against the ADH. Using the ‘secular Westerner’ as a model of non-resistant non-believer in plain view as it were, will encourage a more interesting and widely relevant scope for sympathising and imagining cognitive situations and epistemology. The more general subject of the secular Westerner appealed to by Schellenberg helps us consider more general epistemological insights and sets the field for my novel position about free will that I present in Chapter Five.

Having now introduced the premises of the ADH, I will begin treatment of the core concepts in more detail beginning with perfect love, thinking about Schellenberg’s claims about God as a perfect person, *aside* from the notion of God’s *openness* to relationship, which will be the topic of the following section. A recurring question will concern whether God’s benevolence should modify how Schellenberg expects the attribute of perfect love to operate.

The introduction of the argument is now complete. The next two sections and Chapter Three will consider the concepts and notions contained in the premises. It is somewhat an editorial choice in aiming for clarity, that the concepts involved in the argument are treated under separate headings, while they also must be considered operating together.

## Section 2. Perfect Love.

Starting with the premises that contain the concept of perfect love.

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

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<sup>32</sup> Howard-Snyder, Daniel and Adam Green, "Hiddenness of God", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/divine-hiddenness/>>. (similar phrasing occurs in Vandergriff 2018).

One of Schellenberg's basic claims is that God must be an unsurpassably great person, from which flows that perfect love. While many of his remarks about God as a perfectly loving person and His openness to relation are often conjoined, with the former entailing the latter, I sense a gain in clarity at this stage by teasing them apart.

In this section I will concentrate on Schellenberg's claim that theism is committed to conceiving of God as the ultimate or perfect person, as distinct from his own religious Ultimist theory,<sup>33</sup> and other kinds of religion such as Buddhism, monist Hinduism, or Taoism (2019, p35). Schellenberg is concerned to show that the personhood of God will only be most great or unsurpassable by being perfectly loving, or else that personhood by definition will not be most great, because loving others is an essential attribute of a good person. He charges that theists not committed to this either have an insufficient understanding of what a maximally great person is, or their concept of God's person is overly mysterious or revisionist to qualify as being personal.

One of Schellenberg's approaches for developing this idea somewhat mirrors Anselm's ontological argument that I covered in Chapter One:

Bring before your mind the concept of the greatest possible person—a person so great that none could be greater—and suppose also that this person has created a world including finite persons. Think about this person's attributes. Now either your conception already embraces perfect love toward those other persons among its attributes or it doesn't. If it does, I've made my case. If it doesn't, then ask yourself what is the result of mentally adding perfect love to the collection of attributes you've conceived. I predict that the result is an improvement, a more impressive person. (After all, don't we admire in people an openness to deep sharing with others, for their sake and also for its own? Isn't this a virtue we cultivate?) But then you hadn't yet conceived the greatest possible person before. The greatest possible person, whatever else it may be, has to be perfectly loving. (2015, p 96-97)

On the face of it this argument is not as straightforward as Anselm's who asked us to compare the perfection of a thing imagined, to the perfection of an actually *existing* thing, whereas Schellenberg is comparing thoughts to thoughts, and so prediction of a more impressive person from our adding perfect love to a thought is vacuous without first knowing more about the content of perfect-love-thoughts. We may dissent from his move in the parenthesis about openness because we require some context before judging the appropriateness of a person's openness to deep sharing. There is an indication of

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<sup>33</sup> Schellenberg develops his own religious theory of 'Ultimism' throughout a substantial portion of his corpus (2005, 2007, 2009, 2019). We need not be concerned with the details of Ultimism, only to mention that it attempts to describe a transcendent divinity without any person-like characteristics.

that in his equating openness with *virtue*, which is normally judged in context. To be fair, Schellenberg only offers this thought exercise as a primer.

Schellenberg thinks the personal God of theism must provide the environment for persons to attain and enjoy their deepest possible good. He claims this is how love must flow from the fit between the soteriological maximal and the personal,

...it must be possible for the value of [God] to be in some way communicated to finite persons,  
 ... And it is natural, when thinking about the soteriological content of theism, to understand it in terms of personal relationship with [God]. Love seeks just such relationship. (2016, p22).

In this way Schellenberg underwrites the *connection* between the deepest possible value (axiology) and the deepest possible human flourishing (soteriology), by way of relation through God's love.

When considering these notions of maximal value or deepest possible good, I am reminded of the theist doctrine of heaven where a person is imagined to be maximally activated in eternal joy. Schellenberg charges the Christian tradition with ambivalence about love by evoking the idea of heaven for the enjoyment of explicit relationship with God. (2016, p22). He insists this is just another way to see the hiddenness problem by demonstrating the theist's ambivalence about love, with theism assuming the prerogative to accept that God's purposes are shown in the actual world because that is what we see, effectively interpreting God's love as being less than perfect before we get to heaven. He elsewhere calls this purported phenomenon of biased thinking by the theists as the "similarity constraint" (2019, p151-154). Roughly, this 'constraint' is a tendency toward limited imagination on the part of theists which configures God's attributes to the conditions we see in the world. Instead, he argues, as philosophers approaching the idea of maximal love without prejudice, we should affirm the importance of unsurpassable love in this life because (unresisted) perfect love would desire relationship not as a consequence of achievement or desert, but for its own sake, and so theists should come clean and face up to the absence of perfect love to realise that no such personal God exists.

Schellenberg's main method for developing a picture of perfect personhood and love is with analogy to different sorts of human relationships. He claims the relational love of shared human relationships is essential for flourishing and that parents are lacking in love if they do not cultivate sharing relationships with their children (2016, p18,22). A parental disposition to a sharing relationship is an *intrinsically good personal attribute* and so God necessarily will be a greater person with that disposition than without. He anticipates a possible objection that this attribution will not apply to God because He is perfectly good in himself, and so nothing external to him including His relation to others could possibly

make him greater, and so the truth about relational love being essential to human flourishing does not apply to Him who is already the greatest possible person.

An objection broadly along these lines is offered by Michael Rea (2018) in a book length thesis arguing that God's personality in its goodness may be such as to override always-being-open to sharing with everyone all the time. Perhaps at a first pass, classical theism aligns more with Schellenberg than with Rea on this; such that God has created finite persons who can only be completely fulfilled through relationship with Him, then the parental analogy is a good one if God is concerned with the ultimate well-being of people, and God's personhood would be intrinsically improved by loving all finite persons all the time, than not so loving them. Rea develops the idea that God being maximally devoted to human welfare "is inconsistent with the idea that God is genuinely and perfectly personal" (2018, p75), because God's personality will be expressive of Him which is prior to His regard for human welfare. Rea's idea is that there may well be occasion when God's being Himself is not compatible with maximal human well-being. Trakakis (2016) contends that Rea's approach of is out of kilter with "the classical conception of an absolutely simple God who infinitely transcends the kind of personhood we possess." (p207).

Thinking about Rea's point about God's personality, Christian teaching broadly understands the creation of the universe to be a consequence of God's outpouring or 'over-flowing' love. Schellenberg views the best possible personhood of God as intrinsically valuing relationship *for its own sake*, and I take this to be a primitive in his analysis of God's love and not derived from any deeper explanation for *why* God might ultimately value relationship beyond it being essential to perfect personhood (2019, pp.99-100). Schellenberg seems to intuit the intelligibility of God valuing relationship *simply* for its own sake, on the model of spontaneous and instinctual love somewhat like between a mother and child (p 100). I will refer to that idea as Schellenberg's 'Thin Principle', which is a primary motivator for his ADH: "That [thin principle] insight generated the hiddenness argument." (2019, p56). Schellenberg means his coming to realise the thin principle of perfect love was a motivator for him to develop the ADH.

Schellenberg alerts us to another kind of theist retreat from the notion of unsurpassable love, by appealing to the ineffable mystery of what an unsurpassably great person and His perfect love would be like (2015, p101). This is hardly surprising given that the history of psychology and philosophy has not produced a comprehensive analysis even of *human* personhood, never mind the divine. Schellenberg claims the retreat to mystery about perfect personhood is untenable in the context of the ADH because the concept of a personal God is addressed to "thinking people" (2015, p102). Schellenberg means that thinking people must understand the concept of personhood clearly enough for the ADH apart from theological prejudice. After all,

theists are content to have applied to God and precisely defined...omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Why shrink just here, when in the same spirit that generated those attributes we want to add love? It would be arbitrary and quite unjustified to do so. (ibid)

I do not believe the theist retreat to mystery about personhood is arbitrary. Whereas we may (roughly) define the former two attributes respectively as being able to do anything that can be done, and know everything there is to be known, but omnibenevolence, of which love is a constituent, does not lend itself to such straightforward definition. Omnibenevolence will depend on what we mean by 'good' and clearly it could be the case that maximal goodness might manifest in innumerable contextual ways and is open ended so to render it quite vague within view of the ADH. Classical theology does not define good as such but holds God as the *archetype* of goodness,<sup>34</sup> so actually that spirit which 'generated those attributes' with which Schellenberg counsels we define love is grounded in theology from the start. To try and level with Schellenberg and the philosophical impulse aside from theology, we should be somewhat guided by our regular convictions and intuitions about benevolence. On this point Michael Rea counsels that we have no rationale to cleanly separate what I have called pure philosophy from theology when conceiving of God's attributes, "I do not, of course, mean to deny that the Christian God is a perfectly loving person. Rather, the point is that, as I see it, the Christian God does not conform to any concept that arises out of mere philosophical reflection (unaided by divine revelation) on the concept of a perfectly loving person." (2018, Ch2, fn20)<sup>35</sup>

As a brief aside, a similar sort of consideration appears under the problem of evil. I mentioned the 'sceptical-theism' response to the problem of evil in Chapter One, which counsels that we cannot ultimately judge what seem like gratuitous evil because it is possible God has justificatory reasons beyond our ken. McReary (2010) offers a 'sceptical theist' response to the ADH by incorporating theological commitments and appeals to inherent human ignorance which he thinks curtail our license to talk about God philosophically at all. However, I put this response aside as, in my view, this sort of position is too far from classical theism and McReary thus moves the goal posts too far.

Moving on, Schellenberg offers a formal argument that I will now condense and label the 'dispositions argument', for his thesis that a *necessary* great-making property of a personal God is that benevolence is expressed in love by valuing relationship just for its own sake: "...a sort of love that is necessarily tied to the valuing of personal relationship. Where relationship is valued only instrumentally it will only

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<sup>34</sup> For contemporary presentation, see Robert Adams, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> See further for both Schellenberg's discussion for his claim that theology should not be relevant for ADH (2007, pp. 197–8 and 2015, pp. 13–15), and Rea's counterpoint (2018, pp.57-62).

contingently be connected to one's aims." (2016, p18, fn10). The basic idea is that God valuing relationship intrinsically for itself, "..... can be seen as a function of God's valuing each relatum of the relationship for its own sake."(ibid) He acknowledges that this claim may be controversial, for which he argues (as I understand him), that God will value a person for her own sake by way of her uniqueness from other people, by her central dispositions which make her distinct; otherwise that love would be more generally directed at humanity rather than each person, which is not *personal* love. So far so good, more or less in line with traditional theism.<sup>36</sup> When those personal dispositions operate to meaningfully relate her to God, He will value for their own sake those dispositions that brought her around to relating.<sup>37</sup> So, God must value her side of the relation (that relatum) *in itself*, for relating her to Him. Then:

From the other side, and at the same time, if God values God's own being for its own sake then this will in a similar way lead to God valuing for its own sake the dispositions involved should God become personally related to the other individual, which must express God's intrinsically valuable nature, and thus to God valuing this side of the relationship for its own sake. But if God values both sides of the relationship for their own sakes, then God must value the relationship as a whole for its own sake. (2016, p19).

While this might be consistent with theism, to assess the ADH we must wonder how that relationship could play out on the ground as it were, which will involve thinking about the nature of love in terms of openness and non-resistance. It may be instructive to compare how traditional theism understands benevolence to be transmitted through love. Aquinas promoted the now-traditional Catholic view that is taken to define love as, *willing the good of the other*. Aquinas (developing ideas from Aristotle) defines love as a disposition of the will to desire the good of another, for their own sake. This means that love involves a commitment to act in a way that promotes the well-being and flourishing of the other person.<sup>38</sup>

This notion of love may indicate a tension between Schellenberg's proposal of that great making personal quality of God in primarily valuing reciprocal relationship, and theism's understanding of God's personhood, which will give us pause when trying to be 'unprejudicial' in our thinking, as indicated by Michael Rea (2016). Rea is alert that Schellenberg does not attribute to God the desire for union, "just under any conditions whatsoever" (p219). Schellenberg's claim is more subtle, that God is always *open* if the conditions are conducive to union. Schellenberg's notion of openness is the specific focus of the

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<sup>36</sup> I usually have Christianity in mind here and elsewhere when I 'check' Schellenberg's target for conformance with traditional theism.

<sup>37</sup> This is how I understand what Schellenberg less clearly calls simply "former dispositions".

<sup>38</sup> See Gallagher, 1999.

next section, for now we can take a related but more general point from Rea arguing that God's transcendence conditions the concept of divine love as being essentially *revealed* and not independently derivable from logic as Schellenberg does. Rea argues (*ibid*, p224-225) that while we may derive truths about perfected human love from pure conceptual analysis, God's transcendence means theology should always partly inform our thinking about the resemblance between human love and perfected divine love.

The renowned philosopher Eleanore Stump in her widely cited book (2010) includes significant discussion on divine love and draws on Aquinas by modelling God with two intercoupled desires for both personal relationship and the good of the person. Schellenberg claims of the latter that, "supreme benevolence may be expressible from a distance." (2016, p18) But the former desire will be constituted by sharing and open disposition which must draw close in, "conscious and reciprocal relationship that is positively meaningful" (*ibid*). But that 'meaningful' element of the relationship which God purportedly desires just for its own sake is left an unexplained bare logical concept without something said about the nature of divine love. Schellenberg asserts that we are familiar with this phenomenon in human life whereby we identify great value in people who are disposed to value relationship for its own sake such as parents, friends or siblings, who "have no trouble maintaining it always" (*ibid*). Vandergriff (2018) reads Stump and Aquinas as being consistent with Schellenberg's line on reciprocal relationship as regards greatest human flourishing, *but not* necessarily for its own sake:

Aquinas thought it was perspicuous that the greatest flourishing for any person only attains in a union of love. A union of love is a special personal relationship that requires the lover and the beloved to share significant personal presence, and thus, significant closeness (Stump 2010, Ch.6). Accordingly, union with God is the greatest possible flourishing any person can have because it would be the greatest possible union of love. (p199)

Schellenberg makes the curious claim that, "love does entail benevolence even if it also goes beyond it." (2016, p18). But it seems obvious that benevolence might sometimes override reciprocal relation for aiming at the greatest flourishing and well-being of a person. For example, when a mother walks away from her crying toddler at the nursery door judging in the child's best interest that he undergoes temporary upset. Another example implies that a desire for relationship is best served by (hopefully) temporary distancing, like a parent suffering the drug addiction of a teenage daughter and practicing hard love by evicting her or cutting off her allowance. It seems necessary to consider the nature of God's love when thinking about ultimate personhood, rendering Schellenberg's strategy to be not as clear cut as he claims regarding the parsing God's desire for relationship, from the nature of His love.

Moving to Aijaz & Weidler (2007) responding to Schellenberg's book earlier that same year, "As a matter of fact, it appears that Schellenberg's 'conceptual analysis' of divine love collapses into another, distinct strategy he uses to support P1—using human love as an analogue for divine love..." (p7). While Schellenberg's dispositions argument (condensed above) for entailment escapes this charge, the entailment carries no implication about the nature of love and intuitively the burden is with Schellenberg to say more. Perhaps attaching the burden is not so clear if Schellenberg doubles down on the soundness of a simple entailment while I can only appeal from suspicion that something must be wrong with it. Here I offer an argument to show the dispositions argument inconsistent with his thin principle. I judge Schellenberg's idea that God would value relationship *for its own sake* as quite empty, because it leaves unexplained of what that relationship will comprise. As near I can imagine its composition by way of a parent's unconditional love wanting closeness *for its own sake*, is to that extent nothing beyond a *feeling*. My understanding seems to be supported by Schellenberg:

God would be unwilling to remain distant and so would be found drawing close to the feelings of other beings, gaining a sense of how they feel or "feeling with" them instead. It's natural to call this the divine empathy if—as I will—we assume that it's motivated by the kindly concern just mentioned. ...God would be willing to come close to any created persons there might be, out of relational love. That insight generated the hiddenness argument. (2019, p56)

However, Schellenberg's argument has God relating to certain *dispositions* in people, *contradicting the thin principle* by essentially differentiating people such that it will be *impossible* that He love everybody with equal intensity as he plausibly could if only through simply desiring relation *for its own sake*, dispositions aside. This is because those different dispositions I assume will confer *incommensurable* interests amongst people, rendering it impossible for God to value those interests in themselves with equal intensity, and on that basis, it would appear likewise impossible for God to love everyone equally deeply.<sup>39</sup> If this is right, then Schellenberg's dispositions argument is inconsistent with the thin principle.

If Schellenberg is not committed to God loving everybody with equal intensity, then there must be some further variable aside from relating *just for its own sake*. Schellenberg might appeal to the dissimilarity of what it could be like for God to experience this basic relationship: "...if we think of God as a loving person, it has to be allowed that the mode of God's loving behaviour and the texture of God's inner life might be rather different from that of any human person." (2017, p2). But this move is a retreat to

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<sup>39</sup> Jordan (2012) makes the point about incompatible interests, which I have connected to Schellenberg's disposition argument and thin principle.

mystery in support of the thin principle, which falls foul of the injunction he places on the theist regarding divine personhood. Although we might judge Schellenberg's offense less serious by averting to mystery only as a placeholder compared to the theists' more indiscriminate appeal to ignorance.

A methodological motivation to premise a refined version of the ADH with necessary truths and evident facts about persons and love, was part of Schellenberg's transition to his mature position, "what I regard as the importance of starting "far enough back" or reasoning "from above," using necessary truths as premises wherever possible". (2016, p23). This strategy aims to resist theists 'reasoning from below' against whom Schellenberg would complain are prejudiced to read religious notions into personhood and love from the start, by slanting a conception of God to fit what they see in the world rather than scrupulously grounding their reasoning from what an omni and personal God must be like if He existed. We can think of reasoning from above as Schellenberg means it as starting from concepts, compared to reasoning from below as starting out from how one characterises the world. Schellenberg's ambition to derive meaningful conclusions from just logical inference by reasoning 'from above' regarding unsurpassable personhood seems to miss out too much. This impinges on how we locate the burden because an atheist supposedly without prejudice or thinking from a clean sheet may more readily assent to the thin principle, whereas a thinker who intuits the character of love as an inseparable basic constituent of ultimate personhood will resist it. However, even if we deem Schellenberg's necessity claims from above to be on shaky ground, we may still be persuaded 'from below' on the purported evidence we find of hiddenness we observe or intuit in the world.

It is interesting and important for background, to mention a thought which Schellenberg offers on several occasions as tentative explanation for why philosophers of religion have ignored or neglected the idea of God valuing relationship for its own sake (2004 p169, 2015 Ch3, 2016). Schellenberg sees the modern cultural focus on feminism and patriarchy as helping to divert our attention from the model in traditional theology of the strong and solitary male figure of God as father, with relational love, compassion and empathy typically imagined more as female strengths or attributes (2004, p169). Though this idea whether true or not is somewhat ancillary for analysing the ADH, it is interesting to note because it speaks to the different emphasis individuals inevitably bring to thinking about love. Schellenberg (2019, Ch 5 & 6) offers an, "updated and morally more adequate conception of God" (p97), which aligns with his views on the moral evolution of society that helped motivate his conceiving of the ADH from the outset.<sup>40</sup> Schellenberg (2019) offers an explicit thesis of 'progressive atheism', chiming with an observed evolution in ethics that places increasing value on *empathy*. Schellenberg

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<sup>40</sup> This is also the opinion of Adam Green (2022, in correspondence). Prof. Green led a graduate seminar on divine hiddenness at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 2022.

counsels that our idea of God must evolve in line with our maturing ethical disposition that has jettisoned certain artifacts of our immature behaviours, including: "...rude insensitivity toward other people's feelings, patronizing attitudes toward women and the feminine,..., insensitivity to the importance of loving relationships, and an easy acceptance of a relational "distance" on the part of men" (p87). We will see Schellenberg relying a lot on examples involving parents and children, for which he is often charged with anthropomorphising the divine (Coakley 2016, Cuneo 2013, McGinnis 2015, Gellman 2016, Trakakis 2016).

Michael Rea (2016) claims that Schellenberg would see the majority view in contemporary analytical philosophy of religion as reasoning 'from below', because that view will usually derive divine attributes at least partly through theology or scripture. This view eschews purported conceptual truths about divine love that are not grounded in divine revelation and is suspicious of a priori arguments about divine attributes such as ADH. Rea feels that the hiddenness problem conditioned by the ADH may be seen,

...as a referendum on that concept of God, and as a general challenge to rethink the biblical and systematic theological warrants for thinking about divine love and about personal relationship with God in a way that privileges parent analogies understood in light of contemporary (probably also predominantly American) ideals of parenthood. (2016, p225)

Rea judges the ADH as a straw man argument against traditional theism by attacking a 'straw deity', for which I find Schellenberg clearly upfront and unrepentant:

The "God" described by those who say that God might, for all we know, choose purposes quite unrelated to finite persons that require God for some time not to be open to relationship with them isn't an ultimately loving being at all. Such a "God" would be comparable to a limited or delinquent father or mother who simply can't or won't live up to the demands taken on board when the commitments of marriage and family are entered into—which is to say, wouldn't be God at all. (2015, pp.46-47).

While it is fair that human expression and understanding of love must *inform* a conception of divine love, Schellenberg's insistence that we derive reciprocity as a necessary component of perfect love flowing from omnibenevolence is not obviously sound. Hudson (2020) develops the point, that God's benevolence means he is morally unsurpassable, and that may override His inclination to reciprocal relationship, making it less of a priority than His other purposes. Hudson illustrates with many examples how God's love for individuals may be complicated by all sorts of purposes both for individuals and by

way of overarching priorities, meaning the parameters for a notion of love may be questionable almost without end.

Schellenberg claims that what we normally mean by love must be our primary guide, lest we fall into meaningless claims because the concept is so vague: “For either when one speaks of “what it is for God to be loving” one is referring to our concept of love or not...If not, then why should we regard the suggestion relevant to our discussion? In that case, who knows what someone who makes that suggestion is talking about?” (2015, p48).

Schellenberg has a closely parallel thought in terms of a collapse to generic ultimism (which remember, is his theory about a *non-personal* transcendent divine), which my worry potentially converts into a parallel collapse to benevolence:

...because we are purposely testing one way of thinking about the ultimate, we must deliberately stick to the concept of a person. If we do not, what we say in description of God threatens to collapse back into the more generic ultimistic idea we have elaborated, and the point of the exercise is lost. (2017, p2)

Remember, Schellenberg has perfect love entailing reciprocal relationship for being maximally beneficial for the person. If God’s moral perfection is more fundamental than his maximal personhood, then the ADH as it derives the personal aspect of theism may be amiss. That may depend on whether the notion of *openness* in premise three sufficiently presents that target, which I will now consider in Section Three.

Section Two has considered the concept of Perfect Love that Schellenberg builds into the first two premises of his argument, and I have questioned it in multiple ways and found his claims about how perfect love would operate to be undermined mainly by thinking about God’s benevolence. Section Three will interrogate Schellenberg’s concept of Divine Openness that he puts to work in premise 3.

### Section Three.                      Divine Openness.

Premise 3. If God exists, then for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t *open* to being in a personal relationship with S at t.

The notion of openness is crucial to the ADH. Schellenberg insists that a perfectly loving God will be *always* available or open to anyone capable of relationship with Him:

If one is always open in the sense I intend then, even if one does not actively seek or promote personal relationship... expressing unsurpassable love is for God to ensure that there is never something *God* does that prevents a person from being able, just by trying, to participate in personal relationship with God. (2016, p21).

Schellenberg intends God's openness to entail or carry the consequence that if a person is not in relationship with God, it must be due to *resistance* on her part, "if God is open...then the divine light will remain on unless we close our eyes..." (2016, p55). Regardless of the potential depths to God's greatest possible love which may be beyond our ken, Schellenberg claims that Him being open can simply be *seen* as a necessary constituent of that love in a similar fashion to how we simply see the truth of a basic principle of Euclid (2015, ch4).

To understand how openness might inform the dynamic of entering a conscious reciprocal relationship, we must consider its application in situ, and here I sense an ambiguity that will linger in the analysis and present an opening for my contribution that I'll introduce after surveying the greater-goods responses to the ADH in Chapter Four. The ambiguity I point to renders even a sympathetic reading of Schellenberg unclear on whether openness can only be understood as a *passive* state of God, which will put tension on any conception of non-resistance by nonbelievers, "Openness...doesn't require that God do any particular thing to pursue relationship—suffocating us with attention or even politely asking for it. It's compatible with God standing back." (2015, p41).

Openness features only in the most recent versions of the ADH, and it may implicitly operate somewhat as a fallback from the thin principle, because it orients God as less of a seeker or desirer of relationship by not implicating God's *activity*, in that, "*nothing God does or fails to do* puts relationship with God out of reach for finite persons at the time in question." (2015, p41, my emphasis). This is important for the argument by putting tension on the crucial idea of non-resistance in nonbelievers because if that is also passive, and neither side of a potential relationship *do anything* to engage, then as many of us experienced on school disco days, no relation can ensue. Schellenberg has it that openness, "doesn't even require that God want such relationship...No, being open in the relevant sense at a certain time simply means not (then) being closed." (ibid).

If openness operates as a fallback, or characterises a weaker disposition toward relationship in God, then passive non-resistance will not do the work for the ADH because hiddenness will only be in play when the agent is trying to relate to God with no response, and the onus is therefore shifted (or shared?)

by the aptness of the agent's trying. I risk oversimplifying Schellenberg's thesis with my line of thought here, because he doesn't draw a clean line between *initiating* and *developing* relationship. However, at this point I am effectively only flagging my suspicion about non-resistance and how it might undermine the cogency of the ADH. I will postpone a more complete look at non-resistance until Chapter Three, here I only complete my suggestion that Schellenberg appears committed to *action* on the part of the non-resisting agent, "it will be possible for creatures who haven't made it impossible themselves through their own God-obscuring resistance of the divine, to participate in relationship with God; if they want to, they will be able to do so simply by *trying to do so*" (ibid, my emphasis)

Schellenberg attempts to crystallise the concept of openness by comparison with God being *closed* to relationship, which includes any times when a person may *want* to relate to God but cannot (even if because, as the theist might say, God maintains distance for our well-being). He insists the thin principle is in play again because the unsurpassable love of a God who chose to create finite creatures has the capacity and knowledge to create a world that is *always* compatible with never being closed to people. Schellenberg claims support from Eleanore Stump whom he calls "a fairly conservative Catholic philosopher" (2015, p51, fn43), when she argues that God's love *essentially* involves a desire for union. However, Stump does not imply that God's desire means He would *always* be open to union, but only that union will be necessarily on His agenda or amongst His purpose. Stump would not reject the idea of God sometimes being 'closed' in Schellenberg's sense, *including* God eyeing *future* opportunities for a person to draw close while maintaining their overall well-being as priority throughout, and this perhaps a person not being able to relate whenever they simply try. This points to my earlier consideration that God's benevolence may have priority over personal relations, which Schellenberg argues makes the personal aspect of theism redundant. Remember it is only the absence of the perfectly loving aspect of God which Schellenberg needs to support his conclusion that such a God does not exist. He drives this home with a complaint of often being misunderstood about this and mistakenly saddled with the idea that God mainly relates for our well-being and not relationship for its own sake.<sup>41</sup>

To be precise, Schellenberg views it as a conceptual truth that consistent openness in human relationships is *admirable* and thereby implied as an *essential* component of unsurpassable love. It seems the only sure model for the distinctive way Schellenberg envisages unsurpassable love is that of the mollycoddling mother, while his thoughts about love from siblings and teachers is overly sentimental:

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<sup>41</sup> "Here are some examples of me correcting the error: J. L. Schellenberg (2005) "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41: 207, 210 (cf. 202). And here is an example of the error still being made: Stephen Evans (2010) *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*: OUP, p. 163." (2015, p51, fn 44)

And if it is hard to see why consistent openness should be built into our idea of God's unsurpassable love, then it may be worthwhile contemplating a bit the most obviously loving people in our experience. For such people—loving parents, siblings, friends, teachers—consistent openness is taken quite for granted: this is where things start in the story of their interaction with us. (ibid, p42).

I see other characteristics of those relationships rendering empathy and reciprocal closeness as less important than (though compatible with) sharing common values between friends and the dutybound teacher only concerned with student learning. The claim that openness is admirable between siblings or teacher and student requires qualification according to context and the temperament of those people. The parental example is most fitting, because one might enjoy all sorts of friendships where openness is nuanced and varied enough to render it too ambiguous as a model for the ADH.

Let me emphasise a critical point from Schellenberg about openness. All goods pursued by God will be relationship compatible and He would have the resources to ensure that any possible consequences of His openness will be consistent with the flourishing of everyone whatever sort of relationship may come about, and God would structure His creation so that no situation could make his openness secondary to any greater good requiring non-openness (2015, Ch4). Schellenberg's position here appears to mirror a classic rejoinder against the theist free will defence to the problem of evil introduced in Chapter One. That rejoinder proposes that God could structure the world so that human free choice simply does not range over bad acts, in order that bad consequences are somehow out-of-bounds so that humans could still have free will. Under this view, responsibility would only accrue for good acts and the subject of ethics is radically transformed, and life is nothing like we know it.

By way of a side thought: Since my introduction to the problem of free will years ago at secondary school, and through postgraduate essays on the topic, I have never been able to imagine life anything like that. Existence would be somehow profoundly different – I say 'somehow' because my imagination fails. That failure is not really an objection to the atheists 'out-of-bounds' rejoinder, because there is no *kind* of imaginative access to such life, so I do not really have a rationale for explaining my bewildered failure to imagine. The exponent might insist that an omni-God could have created a world without any suffering, including mental discomfort or anxiety, and that my lack of imagination is neither here nor there. Enough philosophers think that the 'out-of-bounds' rejoinder is intelligible, which gives me some pause that my intuition is off.

I am struck (again) by the similarity of a world like Schellenberg requires for a perfectly loving God creating a universe where no good justifies Him being closed to relationship, and the theist idea of heaven (where God is presently available for conscious connection and evil is out-of-bounds because

agents in heaven will be purely motivated by the good). It seems to me that Schellenberg could go all in and infer that God's unsurpassable love would not withhold heaven *at all* for those non-resistant to Him. Taking Schellenberg's insistence that relationship should be primary for a personal God, he could ask why God should value life on earth at all for those non-resistant and not move them to heaven in fuller relationship with Him? Rather than a problem for Schellenberg perhaps that thought suggests an alternative and more stark hiddenness argument: because God does not bring people to heaven with Him in full relationship as soon as they are non-resistant, then He cannot be a perfectly loving God. If the ADH does implicate such a stark extension, then my theist intuition senses a *reductio* objection to the ADH. I am somewhat conditioned or perhaps as Schellenberg would phrase 'prejudiced' by the idea that there must be some overall good to this life in God's eyes, and Schellenberg at that point might rejoin his idea that I should jettison the attribute of perfect love that logically prioritises relationship, which is redundant if my intuition is correct.

(Bringing my pondering down to earth) Schellenberg says that relationship may vary between deep and shallow, as tuned by God to engage our particular personalities, which might imply benefits to life on earth before heaven, consistent with perfect love. This sort of consideration may generate a multitude of questions. Aijaz & Weidler (2007) note that Schellenberg revises his phrasing to supplement the notion of 'reciprocal':

...and opts for the adjectival phrase 'positively meaningful' instead. "I have always intended 'positively meaningful'", he says, "but that notion is perhaps not entailed by 'reciprocal', so now I mention it explicitly". We are not sure what Schellenberg means by a 'positively meaningful' relationship with God, since he never states precisely what that description of it refers to. (2007, p17).

I suspect considerations in this vicinity may point to ambiguity enough to defeat the ADH by way of the thin principle. I postpone further consideration about this until Chapter Four when it will come into focus in the context of 'greater goods' responses.

Howard-Snyder (2016) argues that being closed to relationship at certain times can be the most loving thing to do, that is preventing the ability of a loved one to come close even when they might try, and only "gratuitous unavailability" (p130) would be inconsonant with love desiring of personal relationship. The previous examples of the mother apparently ignoring her toddler's crying or the addicted teenager suffering 'hard love' are examples of this. That is, benevolence toward the flourishing of a loved one that trumps the desire for reciprocal relations *at the time of their trying*. A more general point is raised by Poston and Dougherty (2007) who doubt that the concept of 'personal relationship' is open to analysis beyond citing of examples. I am prompted to remember that the study of psychology to date

has not provided anything near analytical closure on the concept of personal relationship, and that study by examples will evoke open ended contextual considerations.

Cuneo (2013) presents an example he thinks shows that Schellenberg's purported conceptual truth about consistent openness in human and divine relationships being *admirable*, whereby a person is always able just by trying to engage in a meaningful conscious relationship, "is, far from being a conceptual truth, not even true." (p159). Cuneo illustrates a situation of a mother giving up a baby for adoption just before she is imprisoned. Over the years she never stops loving the child but is not allowed contact of any sort. Upon release she discovers her son is thriving and decides attempting contact in the short term is not in his best interest and better to wait until the child is older while she looks in on him anonymously from time to time. Cuneo appeals that this sort of love is certainly admirable, and she is "pursuing, in a patient and resourceful way, a more intimate relationship." (ibid), yet she is not open to engaging in a meaningful conscious relationship at that time, so 'admirable' love fails as a minimum threshold for what Schellenberg requires for openness. These sorts of examples can weaken while not refuting the ideas that support the premises of ADH, because Schellenberg can appeal to the maximal nature of God, which in relation to these cases above can implicate the notion of God's *infinite resourcefulness* (Vandergriff, 2018). This sort of consideration may always give us pause in rendering definitive judgement on the ADH from real life examples, which may be all both sides have to go on. Perhaps we may find room to weigh up the ADH to the conclusion that God *probably* does not exist. Not according to Schellenberg who is adamant, "premises that seem clearly true even after objections have been considered, and with conclusions that clearly follow with necessity. This is one reason why I am happy to give the hiddenness argument a deductive form." (2015, p113).

Now we come to a more philosophically tractable and intellectually fertile contention about God's openness, which will segue into the next Chapter Three for our study of premise (4) and (5) on non-resistant non-belief. Schellenberg contends that a conscious reciprocal relationship can only be such that one explicitly recognises oneself to be engaged in, and this is impossible without the person *believing that God exists*. It is a settled idea in philosophy that one cannot *volunteer* belief in a proposition such as 'God exists', (unlike cognitive or affective attitudes like hope, faith, trust or acceptance, which may be volunteered, but that Schellenberg rejects as candidates for supporting conscious reciprocal relationship). One normally can only be caused to believe a proposition by experience of evidence, and so to the extent that God does not reveal himself to a person enough to install belief (or otherwise somehow bring a non-resistant person to belief), then it is impossible for that person ever be able to try and engage God, which means God is *not open*:

A doxastic consequence [of openness] is exposed by the following general principle... I call it Not Open because it identifies a condition in which, at a certain time, a person B clearly is not open to personal relationship with a second person A: Not Open Necessarily, if a person A, without having brought about this condition through resistance of personal relationship with a person B, is at some time in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that B exists, where B at that time knows this and could ensure that A's nonbelief is at that time changed to belief, then it is not the case that B is open at the time in question to having a personal relationship with A then. (2016, p23).

There is a wide array of pertinent issues around this aspect of Schellenberg's thesis. One significant topic of research bears on the nature of engagement grounded in *non-propositional* belief such as *de re* belief in God via His attributes, enabled without explicit belief that God exists. Also, theists may claim that their purported relationship with God functions via one or more of those other attitudes connected with hope, faith, trust or acceptance, without assenting to the proposition *that God exists*. This raises epistemological questions about the intelligibility of those purported relationships, and somewhat separately the capacity of a non-resistant agent to *freely* relate to God. The epistemology of belief, hope and acceptance, as they pertain to my position will be the subject of Chapter Six.

## Conclusion of Chapter Two.

In this chapter I have analysed Schellenberg's concepts of perfect love and divine openness. To drastically summarise the wide-ranging nuance of the discussion, I have pressed the case that both concepts might be called naïve in relation to classical and traditional understanding of Love and Benevolence. For instance, Love is willing the good of the other, which may not be served by the sort of openness Schellenberg has in mind which resembles a mother's for her child. Perhaps the problem stems from Schellenberg's method of conceptually constraining how love and openness will necessarily operate, which yields an artificially narrow interpretation of how relationship with God could play out.

The next chapter will consider his notion of 'non-resistant non-belief' which appears in the following premises. There will be both standalone worries and an array of issues concerning how non-resistant non-belief connects with openness and perfect love.

## Chapter 3

### Schellenberg's Argument. Part Two — Non-Resistant Non-Belief

#### Introduction

This chapter continues the analysis of Schellenberg's argument by focusing on the crucial factual premise: that there exists non-resistant non-belief. It examines what Schellenberg means by "non-resistant," how he supports the claim empirically and conceptually, and how this premise fits within the broader architecture of the argument.

Section One, Kinds of Non-Resistant Non-Belief. Schellenberg distinguishes several types of non-resistant non-believers. Each type is briefly surveyed in terms of scope and prevalence, before I specify the form of non-resistant non-belief most salient for this thesis—introduced already in Chapter Two—as Schellenberg's broader, more diffuse category.

Section Two, What Is Non-Resistant Non-Belief. This section considers constituent elements of non-resistant non-belief and related philosophical issues.

Section Three, Challenges in the Literature. Here I discuss what I take to be the most pertinent and interesting objections raised against non-resistant non-belief, especially those that intersect with themes I develop later in connection with my own thesis.

Section Four, Schellenberg's Requirement of De Dicto Propositional Belief. I examine and challenge Schellenberg's insistence that openness requires de dicto propositional belief that God exists.

Section Five, De Re Belief. Finally, I explore the alternative of de re belief, according to which a person may consciously relate to God via his attributes without realising that it is God to whom they relate.

Overall, Chapter Three clarifies and tests the premise of non-resistant non-belief, setting the stage for Chapter Four's consideration of theistic responses which appeal to greater goods for purportedly justifying the occurrence of non-resistant non-belief.

I will begin again by stating the relevant premises:

Premise (4). If for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, God is at *t* open to being in a personal relationship with *S* at *t*, then for any capable finite person *S* and time *t*, it is not the case that *S* is at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

Premise (6). There is at least one capable finite person *S* and time *t* such that *S* is or was at *t* nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists. [Premise]

Premise Four and Six rule out the coincidence of God's openness with non-resistant non-belief *that* God exists.

## Section 1. Non-Resistant Non-Belief.

After describing four categories of non-resistant non-belief identified by Schellenberg, I will point to the more general and diffuse category of Western secularity that will be most salient for my thesis, which I introduced at the start of Chapter Two. I will then evaluate the notion of non-resistant non-belief. In both sections I will first discuss Schellenberg's thinking before leaning into the literature.

Let's start with an instance of Schellenberg specifying what nr-nb *is not*.

One might fail to believe in God even while God is open to a belief-entailing personal relationship if one prevents oneself from believing in God through self-deceptive resistance of God. So, the hiddenness argument needs to show that not all nonbelief is of this sort: that there is (or has in the past been) nonresistant nonbelief. (2015, p74).

In the previous chapter I introduced the four different sorts of nr-nb proposed by Schellenberg that may separately or together support the Argument from Divine Hiddenness (hereafter abbreviated to 'ADH'). These four types of non-resistant non-belief that are taken to illustrate the real-world presence of such states. Though my focus lies in the broader cultural category of western secularity, an analysis of these specific types provides conceptual groundwork for that discussion. Underlined section headings will now take up each sort in turn.

### Lifelong agnostic seekers who never achieve belief.

We can quite easily (*prima facie*) imagine such people who might fit this simple description, and indeed certain friends come to my mind as potential candidates (if they end their days agnostic). The notion of

*seeking* picks out a big range of behaviour, which could take any number of forms ranging from sparsely sporadic and emotionally shallow to persistently humble with open heart and mind. Schellenberg's model of God's openness implies perhaps that any form of seeking will operate for the Argument from Divine Hiddenness (ADH).

Schellenberg characterises this sort of agent to include those who may not be explicitly searching for God, but who are seeking belonging while being "open to finding and being found by a divine parent" (2007, p233). This description would seem to fit a toddler not much self-aware and does not conjure the picture of seeking, but more one of unintentionally waiting to be found, which strikes me as too shallow a state of being to be called 'seeking'. Elsewhere we find a more plausible contender for this category who fail to find relationship with God even though they try, "...by virtue of their own, often prodigious, efforts and genuine sensitivity to the truth." (ibid). Schellenberg makes a fair appeal to divine distributive justice, by comparing that person to others who enjoy relations with God without anything like such levels of effort or sensitivity. However, this seems more like a presumption rather than an observation. Nobody could really know what sort of effort or sensitivity *any* faithful person holds in relation to God other than that person themselves. Still, this is a plausible category of nr-nb.

I note that the modern notion of self-seeking may complicate matters. Much is made in our age of the self-help industry, of 'working out one's own authenticity' or suchlike vagaries as 'seeking one-self'. This kind of seeking, whatever it is, is *not* at all what Abrahamic tradition prescribes as a quite *selfless* project of seeking God. This is not an argument against Schellenberg here, but relevant to bear in mind in relation to this category.

While my thesis will target nr-nb under the purview of modern secular atheism and agnosticism, the scope of the research will also relate with varying degrees to these four categories. That is to say, while the issues I take up will have that more general subject in mind, many issues of mind and epistemology may be more or less applicable to these four categories also.

Schellenberg perhaps speaks to my last point about self-seeking when he mimics a potential objector, "it is in God's "appointed time" that the evidence for theism will appear, not necessarily when we demand to have it." (2007, p234). Schellenberg stages the *humble* seeker who is sensitive to theological criteria for determining how God may be experienced, such as a morally transforming sign for those genuinely open to God's morally transforming character. He takes it that a seeker who satisfies this criterion must depend on God's appointed time, which entails God *not* being open at all times. Notice however, this implies that God cannot be open while He has any reason *whatsoever* for not relating at

that time.<sup>42</sup> Schellenberg does say that ADH does not require that relating with God should be easy or require no effort, but he needs to qualify what non-resistance really means or in what it consists, and I will return later to that question. The ‘greater goods’ sort of theist response to Schellenberg in Chapter Four includes positions that explain why God might delay relations and not be open at all times.

Schellenberg poses another potential objection as reason for agnostic seekers failing to find God: It may be that seekers miss God’s response because it doesn’t fit their expectations. He judges this to put too much onus on the agent, because God’s love should mean that He provide sufficient notice for the agent to believe that He is there. Again, he compares a mother providing nothing less for the child than is required for the assurance that she is there, and that anything less would be either unjust or uncaring. He asks how could we think that God’s “immeasurably greater goodness and love” (2007 p235) would not do the same? He considers a potential response that God, unlike the mother, may be present all the time without our noticing, and judges the response a failure in the context of the lifelong seeker with which I tentatively agree, but with more to say in the next section about whether God must bring the lifelong seeker to belief in advance of (or concurrent) with relationship. The challenge will be for those positions that discount belief as a prerequisite for relationship *not to* freewheel too far from how we normally characterise the nature of personal relationship. Schellenberg claims that other ways of understanding God’s love that (even temporarily) exclude personal relationship is incommensurate with perfect love, because His infinite capacity and resource will supposedly block the plausibility of any justifying explanation for him deprioritising relationship, or else Schellenberg claims the personal aspect of God is not maximally perfect.

Now let’s move to another category of nr-nb amongst those people who move away from theism to another religion.

#### Converts from theism to non-theism.

There are people who leave behind theist belief and embrace Buddhism for example. Schellenberg claims God is here absent by not enabling belief in Him if people who are honest and diligent with their religious outlook move from theism to accepting the truth Buddhism, which may be described from a theist perspective as:

[Enmeshing] them in a meaning system distortive of (what must, if God exists, be) the truth—a system according to which (for example) there is no loving personal God and no substantial self

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<sup>42</sup> A similar point is made by Ajaz & Weidler (2007) regarding an earlier generation of Schellenberg’s ADH.

either, or according to which all distinctions between the world and the Ultimate must finally be erased. How could a truthful, nondeceptive God countenance such a state of affairs? (2007, p237)

Schellenberg's point is that if even somebody with good disposition can go off the rails in relation to theism without the belief that God exists, then a perfectly great God would appear to be negligent by standing by and allowing honest and diligent agents to be misguided and enmeshed in a system of false beliefs. Further, that hypothetically false belief system will engender a sense of identity and worldview that reduces the likelihood of a return to theism which might require, "...their uprooting a traumatic and psychologically far-reaching event." (ibid).

One might imagine all sorts of possible experiences with experiential goods resonating for each individual, however I accept that it is uncontroversial that there have existed individuals who become nontheists without reconversion before death; and so this sort of nr-nb is also very plausible on the face of it.

#### People isolated from the idea of a personal God.

This category is the most straightforward and clearest support for the ADH and probably requires least elaboration. It is immediately plausible to imagine pre-historical people not exposed to the idea of personal monotheism, or those geographically isolated like Hindus in southern India before the apostle Thomas arrived, or perhaps everyone on earth before around 3000 BC. These examples are only for illustration while 'cave men' will fit the bill. It is fair to assume there were times and places when human beings had no idea of a personal God (see Maitzen 2006, Marsh 2008, Mawson 2009 & 2012).<sup>43</sup> Schellenberg is so confident in the assumption that he contends that no "serious investigator will dispute" (2015, p78), that some such people lack belief and satisfy his description of nr-nb. Indeed, Schellenberg's most careful specification of the premises in the version we are using, only require that one person at any time from these (or any) group to be in a state of nr-nb (2016, p27).

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<sup>43</sup> Maitzen offers an atheist argument that naturalism best explains the history and location of nonbelievers. Jason Marsh claims that while naturalism best accounts for the occurrence of non-theist populations around the world (such as Saudi Arabia and Thailand), the theist in defence has some appeal to an extensively developed thesis about God's enabling free choices (Molinism). Mawson offers a theist account under which we could expect the historical and geographical distribution of belief and non-belief.

Ex-believers who desire a return to belief.

My example of Mother Teresa mentioned earlier is a stark example (assuming she lost her belief rather than experiencing silence), or we can easily picture an individual saying, ‘I wish I still had the faith I had when I was young.’ Interestingly, Schellenberg observes that ex-believers, “...in many cases of reflective doubt, it is precisely an infusion of new information and reflection thereupon that has caused it, not resistance of God.” (2015, p80). Schellenberg thinks that persistent doubt generated from persistent reflection, from God’s perspective amounts to the person’s closing their eyes to God and not choosing relationship. A general point is that a theist might question the aptness or sufficiency of ‘reflecting about God’ as sufficient support or grounding for a choice to relate or not, as far as that reflection is purely about *information*. Becoming or staying open hearted in orientation to God will involve emotion, which may be a more important prerequisite than intellectual assent to ideas or arguments, because it involves more of the person or self than only their reasoning does.

On a related point aside from Schellenberg’s specific point about this particular category of nr-nb, it might qualify as resistance if a person backs out of relationship with God *only* because of information (of course, we would need to hear more about the content of such information). This thought connects with the important topic about the *involuntariness* of belief and that a person can volunteer trust or acceptance without the level of evidence required for belief which may counteract with a person’s capacity for free choice. These issues will be investigated in detail through Chapters Five through Seven and will partly inform my thesis.

Schellenberg repeats a line he uses in several contexts that a fair judge, rather than seeing the agent as insensitive to evidence, will conclude that such non-resistant reflective doubt strongly implies that there simply is not adequate evidence (2015, p83). Evidence for belief in God is some degree subjective because evidence like the gospels, for example will not persuade everybody, so it seems there is more in play than simple sensitivity to evidence. There are many psychological questions in this vicinity that will bear on the notion of non-resistance.

This completes my review of the four categories or ‘modes’ as Schellenberg calls them, for informing our understanding of the notion of nr-nb. Let’s now move to the more general sort of nr-nb sometimes appealed to by Schellenberg that I introduced in Chapter Two and which is the focus of my thesis.

### The Western Secular.

If it is true that one or more people are correctly described by each of these four categories of nr-nb, then a comprehensive theist response to Schellenberg would address all four (bracketing the ‘sceptical theist response’ broached in Chapter One, appealing to the idea that we cannot expect to understand God’s mind).<sup>44</sup> As explained in the first few pages of Chapter Two, I have in view a less distinctly circumscribed sort of nr-nb variously appealed to by Schellenberg, which I am calling the ‘*Western secular*’. This target is more generally interesting and prompts more fruitful exploration, by connecting to themes with wider philosophical application and payoff. My thesis, being limited in this regard will technically leave Schellenberg’s argument standing. My narrowed aim at the Secular Westerner as a mode of non-resistant non-believer encourages a wider scope, for sympathising or imagining different sorts of cognition and analysing their epistemology, and for holding up hiddenness in a more generally familiar form and problem for the theist, with people all around us fitting the bill.

Green & Howard-Snyder (2022) note, “Schellenberg appeals to increased secularity, especially in western cultures: what is the probability that *all* of the hundreds of millions of nonbelievers in the secular West are, at the dawn of their capacity to relate personally with God, resistant? Vanishingly small (2015: 76ff; 2007a: 205, 228ff).” There is a reported dwindling of religious belief in the west. The UK census of 2021 found less than fifty percent of people self-reported as Christian for the first time in census history with a thirteen percent drop since 2011. There has been a similar increase in those reporting ‘no religion’, amounting to thirty seven percent.<sup>45</sup> Similar changes are occurring in the US and across Europe.<sup>46</sup> Schellenberg remarks that this trend is more pronounced within universities where the most “estimable aspirations...are broadly scientific” (2015, p84) and that secularity has advanced so much that the idea of theology regaining its old prestige in the academy is unthinkable.

Schellenberg is probably right about that, but this next claim is most curious, “People spend months and years and lifetimes in universities, as in many other spaces of the modern city, ..., without ever once thinking about God.” (ibid) It is a speculation that strikes me as unlikely describing many people. It could be my bias or naivety, but it seems obvious that almost anyone at all in the west who had *never*

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<sup>44</sup> For specific responses to Schellenberg’s four types, the interested reader might begin with a good survey at: Howard-Snyder, Daniel and Adam Green (2022), “Hiddenness of God”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/divine-hiddenness/>>.

<sup>45</sup> UK Office for National Statistics. Census 2021.

<sup>46</sup> PEW Research. September 2022. “Modelling the future of religion in the USA.”

*once* thought about God in their adult years is profoundly negligent. Schellenberg is clear that he takes non-belief to be entirely natural, “for many people the fabric of life is quite complete though it includes not a stitch of belief or its denial or even of doubt.” (ibid) My intuition and tentative judgement on this before we address the nature of nr-nb more carefully is that such people are subconsciously or otherwise resistant by *never* casting a thought to the idea of God. I will begin to argue in Chapter Five that such agents are epistemically reckless because objectively speaking, the idea of God should for *some time* be of ultimate concern to every able person.

Schellenberg finds similarity between present day nr-nb and the prehistorical category (though he contends cavemen were probably ‘closer to belief’ than those today by holding proto-religious notions). He suggests that many Western Seculars in our day are not ‘post-doubt’ as such, in the sense of leaving belief behind, but rather are thriving, “without ever considering the question of God at all.” (2015, p85). Before we more carefully consider the concept of nr-nb, as an interesting auxiliary I will briefly mention Schellenberg’s experience and intuition which prompts his realization that people who have never thought about God are good intuitive motivation for his premise of the existence of nr-nb.

A religious evangelical upbringing in rural North America set Schellenberg for a great surprise at his first summer job in the city. His new colleague was, “an earnest and decent guy who I thought might be an evangelical Christian— had never thought about God at all. I was sure he was kidding. But he eventually convinced me. The subject had just never come up.” (ibid). He claims this discovery was enough to show a religious small-towner previously inclined to imagine that such an uncurious person must be somehow resisting God, that this was in fact clear evidence for nr-nb. I take Schellenberg’s inference here to nr-nb to be absurdly quick; I might have anticipated Schellenberg’s naïve surprise at the fellow’s lack of curiosity to incline a diagnosis of resistance instead of immediately inferring the naturalness of non-belief. Perhaps it was the man’s decency which impressed Schellenberg that such a person could be an upright character without belief in God, which challenged his worldview. Obviously, one’s psychological disposition shapes one’s intuition and I am inclined to think that Schellenberg’s naïve surprise about such an uncurious fellow is related to his lack of connection with non-believers or perhaps even non-Christians until entering adulthood with his first summer job. It isn’t clear to me why that surprise would incline him to infer a naturally occurring nr-nb, unless perhaps he had thought up to that point, implicitly or not, that decency was incompatible with non-belief. Before spelling out a little further how Schellenberg explains his intuitive response, I emphasise that my reflections here about psychological disposition is not an argument and is only provided as backdrop. While Schellenberg’s intuition may be off, his judgement on the naturalness of non-belief could be correct, however it appears that Schellenberg’s thought on this is derived only from his intuition.

The religious country boy, new to the big town wonders why “non-belief has become natural there.” (2015, p86). He reports on the discovery of new information in the library, the minds of new friends, and cyber space, about which he “never would have guessed was available while living in the small town.” (ibid). That new information sharply conflicting with what he had been taught and bringing a new perspective. I can empathise somewhat with this reported large-scale shift in perspective stemming from a closeted religious upbringing and his surprise that a civilised decent life was not exclusive to evangelical Christians, but I don’t see that the existence of nr-nb among such people is self-evident, as he seems to. It is worth noting that Schellenberg’s evangelical tradition interprets the whole bible literally, which we might expect to encourage the cognitive dissonance he felt in his new environment.

Alternatively, we can envisage another emigrant remaining in faith and equivalently say about her that such an outcome is ‘natural’, which I take him to mean something like ‘fairly expected’. Also, consider that persons raised in a diverse secular city may come to faith, or remain in it, while likewise immersed in that dissonant information. In the case of a persistently and completely incurious person, I contend that such a person is inadequately attending to life to the point of negligence or stupidity. For an able person to never entertain thoughts of God is either self-deceptive and resistant or dim witted.

Let us now move to the central philosophical task of this chapter and analyse the purported nature of nr-nb. I will begin by presenting the clearest and most informative parts of Schellenberg’s thesis, before analysing a range of the most pertinent responses from the literature. So, what does it mean to be in a state of non-resistant non-belief? The clarity of this concept is crucial for evaluating the force of Schellenberg’s argument.

## Section 2. *What is non-resistant non-belief?*

Schellenberg thinks it follows from his case about perfect love and God’s openness that non-relationship between a person and God can only follow from a person closing the door to that relationship. One metaphor he uses is, “the divine light will remain on unless we close our eyes to it.” (2015, p55). Schellenberg deduces that a coincidence of openness and no-relationship must mean that a person desires consciously or subconsciously not to be in relationship, or else some condition aside from desire in that person blocks relationship. This might involve a person cultivating values or engaging in behaviour which she knows is incompatible with relationship with God. Or we

might imagine careless investigation of one sort or another in relation to the existence of God, or someone deliberately consorting with people who carelessly fail to believe in God and avoiding those who believe, or just over time mentally drifting, with her own acquiescence, away from any place where she could convincingly be met by evidence of God. (2015, p56)

Schellenberg pushes the line that all sorts of nr-nb'ing people have potentially available to them *at all times* some sort of conscious awareness of God, or the implication would be that religious experience is only available or attainable after inculcation into a practice, or for the spiritually elite (2007). Schellenberg appears to hedge or at least complicate this strong claim regarding constant availability while considering issues about the conscious state of a person that might not be conducive to relationship, when he elaborates that he is, “not suggesting that God should satisfy our every whim, our every sudden and unreflective and unreasonable desire; only that a God would respond to *serious attempts to be united or reunited with God in loving relationship.*” (2019, p170, my emphasis). He mentions this in the context of a person missing a sign or indication of God’s presence, which would conflict with the concept of perfect love which necessarily would not resist a person wanting to start or resume relationship.

Schellenberg elaborates that constant availability of God means a nr-nb person is not coerced, while God can enable interaction with Him in nuanced ways to suit every individual’s sensitivity to evidence and moral or intellectual dispositions (2007, p5-17). He emphasises in several places often in response to objections, that he has not suggested and neither does ADH require that God would *bring us into relationship* but rather, his claim is the “*heavily qualified* claim that God would put in place the conditions necessary for us to be able to bring ourselves into such a relationship, insofar as we have not already made choices leaving us in a contrary position.” (2007, p207). We will need to return time and again to consider what efforts can be made to ‘heavily qualify’ this claim because *prima facie* the notion of God *enabling our volunteered relationship* via conditions suited to a person’s non-resistance may appear straightforward, but we will see that such a notion is beguiling in its simplicity. How can Schellenberg draw the line where God sufficiently enables a person’s orientation toward Him while not at the same time bringing a person to belief? Remember, a key rationale for the notion of openness is to make way conceptually for a person to *freely* choose as a condition on authentic relationship.

Helpfully, Schellenberg is often upfront about the strength of this last claim and admirably makes repeated effort to clarify away from potential ambiguity and vagueness (which is perhaps one of the over-arching reasons the ADH attracts such attention). He accuses objectors of commonly conflating the proposed incompatibility of God existing and nr-nb, with the idea that if God existed then non-resistant people would receive evidence sufficient for belief, alongside the contention that such a non-

resistant person may not be sensitive to evidence. We will see Schellenberg in the next chapter resisting proposals that God could have varied justifications for delaying or withholding sufficient evidence for belief in His existence. Schellenberg is clear that the ADH premises mean there can *never be a time* when a nr-nb person fails to believe because perfect openness means belief is always available: “belief is made available as soon as there is a capacity for relationship with God.” (ibid). As clear as Schellenberg takes this notion to be, it is fertile for inviting varied objections.

Another effort to specify the tension I alluded to by my earlier rhetorical question (How can Schellenberg draw the line where God sufficiently enables a person’s orientation toward Him while not at the same time bringing a person to belief?), is that Schellenberg needs to make coherent the notion of ‘capacity-for-relation’ in connection with an agent volunteering belief, without God coercing the agent’s spontaneity for free choice, by not necessarily providing sufficient evidence for that belief. My phrasing may appear quite awkward, but my hand is somewhat forced by sympathetically trying to specify nr-nb in a way suggestive of the conceptual work Schellenberg requires of it. That work is often alluded to with inadequate simplicity when he proffers that God would make provision for propositional belief *while* leaving us free to choose. Schellenberg runs up against this tension because the ADH explicitly requires that one cannot be in relation with God *without* believing that He exists, and he walks a fine (and perhaps vague) line characterising the difference between belief that is freely acquired versus belief that is instilled by God

...belief in God need not be produced through some brilliant display of celestial pyrotechnics. Religious experience, subtly modulated so as to meet the needs of every moment and the psychological quirks of individuals, is also possible. Thus the free will of those who always believe in God need not be compromised.” (2016, p28)

The thought, however, is that free will is radically altered by the surety that God exists. Timpe (2016, p27) frames this idea with the notion of *epistemic distance*: that God always providing epistemic clarity for belief in His existence could function in some sense *coercively* by changing the conditions for free choice.<sup>47</sup> More broadly, the value or virtue of free action is affected if an individual is sure that God is a witness. It seems that a God who valued our free initiative to engage would need to provide an epistemic distance that makes room for nr-nb.<sup>48</sup> This will be important for my thesis in Chapter Five.

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<sup>47</sup> The philosopher John Hick is famous for his ‘soul-making’ theodicy which emphasises epistemic distance for ‘cognitive freedom’ and the operation of free moral choice (1983 p47, 56 & 1985 p281, 287). Swinburne (1979 p153-159) also argues along similar lines.

<sup>48</sup> I take up this issue again later, calling it ‘Schellenberg’s Tension’.

Prima facie, the theist has an easier time respecting this free-choice aspect of relationship, because they may cite other cognitive or affective attitudes to initiate or sustain a relationship such as faith or acceptance, which may be volunteered in the absence of evidence required for belief. We can think of those other attitudes with different epistemic foundations than is required for belief, which crucially can be volunteered or ‘chanced’ for initiating and supporting a relationship, unlike propositional belief which cannot be volunteered. This claim is also an important element of Chapter Five which is followed by a study of belief and its connection to the propositional attitudes of hope and acceptance, in Chapter Six.

Schellenberg’s sensitivity to the requirement for our *free* engagement is piqued while responding to objections (1993 pt II, 2005a & 2005b, 2015 ch1). In summary terms for now, Schellenberg’s position is that a perfect God would provide for our belief and *then* we could freely choose whether to engage. My summary response just for now is that his idea is suspect at best, and perhaps absurd, because nobody of right mind would choose not to relate with a perfectly loving God whom they believed to exist.<sup>49</sup> It is around this conceptual vicinity or controversy that I offer my own contribution in Chapter Five. My ambition is to generally undergird or precondition those greater-goods responses (of the next chapter), which I take to be vulnerable to a related tension. My proposal will involve a novel resolution of a problem in the philosophy of free will, if only for initiating relationship with God.

It is interesting and perhaps instructive that Jordan (2006) notices Schellenberg’s tension and then fails to resolve it with his proposal. Jordan notes that God would desire that a person chooses Him or accepts Him as a vital concern in life and that God would value an initial choice of free acceptance. However, “since belief is a passive state over which one has no direct control, God would not present one with evidence sufficient to elicit theistic-belief, since such ‘automatic belief’ would not preserve the free choice to align oneself with God.” (p207). Jordan stumbles with the same tension by suggesting that God would provide sufficient *reason* to motivate chosen acceptance of Him without providing strong evidence. Jordan expects God to desire free choice for acceptance to be “as unfettered as possible” (ibid), but God providing *sufficient reason* does not align with *voluntary* acceptance of Him because it would only require a person to be *rational* in some degree without evoking a free choice. Jordan notices Schellenberg’s tension, but his proposal does not escape it.

I will tentatively stick with the vague phrase ‘tension’ rather than flagging an inconsistency because most often when Schellenberg faces an objection involving this tension, he diagnoses a

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<sup>49</sup> I could be biased as a theist and this issue will be analysed in chapters 4 and 5. Schellenberg may be in good company with this contention (John Hick 1983, 1985, and Trakakis 2007), but I will argue a distinction they develop of ‘belief that and belief in’ is unstable or vague for the work Schellenberg and Trakakis require of it, by applying it beyond Hick’s frames of reference.

misunderstanding of his argument and avoids directly confronting the objection on its terms. I want to be tentative in advance of more fully assessing those objections and judging whether Schellenberg's tactic is unsatisfactory. It is a prima face tension rather than an incoherence or inconsistency because we may wonder about the voluntary component of belief acquisition with the effort employed in seeking and thinking about evidence.

We now have an initial picture of what the notion of nr-nb is conceived to be by Schellenberg. Let's now deepen our look at the cogency of the notion by analysing a range of challenges and ideas through the literature.

### Section 3. Further challenges or objections related to nr-nb in the literature.

Cuneo (2013) is one of the more insightful treatments of hiddenness and is quite widely cited in the literature. Cuneo argues that God could love people in an admirable way while remaining hidden and that Schellenberg's argument against that is based on unsatisfactory understanding of admirable love, either human or divine. Schellenberg (2013) diagnoses "subtle misunderstandings" (p265) by Cuneo which I take to require Schellenberg framing nr-nb in a way that could not apply to anybody in their right mind. He charges Cuneo with conflating somebody trying *to be in relationship* with God, with them trying to *become consciously aware* of God. To clarify he tells us that the premise citing the agent's *trying* to relate with an Open God is an event *after* one has become aware of God and is aiming for "...some relational goal." (ibid). An example he uses is one trying to express gratitude to God, in comparison to trying to become aware of God with the aim of expressing gratitude. The former is an act of developing relationship, which for Schellenberg requires that one already believe in God. He agrees with Cuneo that an act of developing relationship might be hard, "even if one never has to try at all to become consciously aware of God." (ibid). This makes clear that central aspect of the ADH which requires that God would not withhold belief that He exists, because perfect love would not impose such a barrier for starting a relationship. So, a world without nr-nb is a world where it seems God is only hidden to those resistant.

I suggest Cuneo has in mind people *subconsciously* resistant, because a person consciously resistant to God *while* believing He exists is likely not on his radar, because such a person is mentally disordered and self-undermining in rejecting God's love, especially to the extent such resistance is persistent or worse, permanent. More context may be needed here on these points, but they probably in some sense describe Cuneo's subtle misunderstanding. We will see more generally satisfactory ways Schellenberg

conceives of nr-nb, which is good because if we allowed the ADH to go through on this reading, the world as we know it would be turned on its head, because a world where the ADH found no purchase would be one where nearly everyone is sure God exists (similarly bizarre in the sense I touched on in Chapter One where I could not imagine a world where free will did not involve the possibility of evil acts). Presumably Schellenberg might suggest that such a world is only bizarre from a prejudicial theist worldview, and retort that it is comparably bizarre that a theist find perfect love compatible with widespread nr-nb. Such a world without nr-nb will remind a theist (again) of heaven (except there everyone would see no reason or convey any cause for acting badly), indicating that a logical equivalent of the ADH might infer from perfect love the consequence that God would not condone anyone existing outside of heaven. If that is correct, and perfect love is incompatible with an un-heavenly world, it would over-reach as an argument for atheism because it entails that God *could not have any reason* to create a world that is not heavenly (and chimes with Schellenberg's frequent appeal to motherly unconditional love).

Brief mention of a broad consideration regarding evidence for belief will be helpful at this point. Ambiguous evidence for God is seemingly ubiquitous in the world, given the spread of faith and atheism and everything in between. Schellenberg argues in many places (1993 p212,...,2019 ch1) that such ambiguity itself shows in support of atheism because we would expect a loving God to be less ambiguous, in line with his expectation that propositional belief be more extensive than it is. Draper (2002) argues that religious ambiguity better justifies agnosticism over atheism, developing a case for an agnostic orientation in relation to possible or potential religious experience.

Some writers take the position that there is no nr-nb in the world (or what may be interpreted as a stand-in notion for nr-nb prior to the ADH). A range of examples include John Locke (1690), Jonathan Edwards (1758), Plantinga (2000), Henry (2001), Wainwright (2002), Lehe (2004), Evans (2006), Moser (2008, 2010), Azadegan (2013a), Taber and McNabb (2018). Broadly these approaches argue that people are subconsciously or sinfully or negligently, in some way blind or insensitive to the evidence or signs of God's existence. Schellenberg usually accuses such writers of unreasonably relying on theological support or inspiration (2004, 2005a, 2005c),<sup>50</sup> or suggests what he takes to be obvious instances of nr-nb (2010b), such as prehistorical people and those located such to have no possibility of sufficiently conceiving of a theist god (as described earlier). Greco (2015) argues that these sorts of

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<sup>50</sup> Schellenberg was then trading with an ancestral notion to nr-nb which he coined 'nonculpable non-belief', so some of the issues (especially in Wainwright) may not be so pertinent for nr-nb, but the gist of objections is often along lines that could be applied. Nr-nb explicitly emphasises perfect love entailing relationship, which Schellenberg claims is not directly related to evidence for belief. That contention is debated and will come up in many guises throughout the rest of the thesis, including the next point I make from Weidner (2018).

approaches which lay the fault for nr-nb at the door of the atheist are unsupported by any satisfactory epistemology for religious belief. My position will not require, nor will argue for there being no nr-nb in the world, either of the sort Schellenberg thinks is obvious,<sup>51</sup> or of a western secular sort. My position will concede that there is nr-nb in our society, though we still have a way to go characterising what nr-nb *is supposed to be*, and some of those cited here will come up later in connection with our target of western secularists.

Weidner (2018) worries that nr-nb is underdetermined or vague. She argues that the significance of *resistance* in the ADH requires clearer formulation regarding what the *object* of resistance could be (p116). Weidner contends that Schellenberg needs to disambiguate between whether the object of resistance is belief in God, or resistance to evidence provided by God. Weidner's broader thesis is that Schellenberg cannot avoid taking a position on questions about sensitivity to evidence. However, she quotes Schellenberg (1993) where even if she is correct, later versions of ADH based on nr-nb are not vulnerable to her charge because they stand on the idea that perfect love is incompatible with non-resistant capacity for relation and seemingly need not identify the locus of resistance. While Weidner is incorrect that the ADH is ambiguous, perhaps the inclination for her worry derives from her not taking seeing clearly the novel simplicity by which the ADH avoids the thorny subject about evidence (Schellenberg never claims that God must provide evidence, only that He be open to an agent's attempt at connection). Also, she worries how we could ever know or identify that an instance of non-belief was non-resistant, but that is a query about the world rather than a direct challenge to the ADH.

Michael Rea poses this query while being explicit that he is not offering an objection to rebut the ADH, and which I will take as directed at the motivation and rationale for ADH. He questions how we might ever have warrant to think non-belief is non-resistant. Rea claims that good evidence would be required to conclude that a person's "resistance to belief in God, bias against relationship with God, and the like have in no way *colored her attention to or assessment of the available evidence for God's existence.*" (2018, p28) [my emphasis]. He claims that it is hard to imagine how we might ever acquire evidence for resistance in a person that would rule out something like self-deception, or an unrecognised disposition to avoid experience of evidence, both because of our limited access to the minds of others or even the unreliability of detecting implicit bias in ourselves (Brownstein, 2016). How could we know that such bias or disposition does not feed into a person's null or negative assessment of evidence that

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<sup>51</sup> The interested reader should consult Marsh (2008, 2013) and Baker-Hytch (2016) who consider that non-belief amongst prehistorical people cannot clearly be shown to be nr-nb. Maitzen (2006) followed by Marsh (2013) are concerned with people born in places largely disconnected with theism such as Thailand and Saudi Arabia, and argue that theistic nr-nb at those places is not obvious. Schellenberg (2017c) contends with their objections.

otherwise would incline her to theism? Though perhaps usually we might be entitled to some confidence that our assessment of evidence for any belief is free from bias, when the stakes are so high and consequences for life so far-reaching Rea suggests that entitlement is, “undercut by a proper appreciation both of the tremendous existential import of believing or failing to believe in God.” (2018, p28). Green & Stump make a similar point about the average person being unreceptive to love which “has a level of moral rectitude and self-sacrificial expression built into it.” (2016, p5).

Related to Rea’s point, Lehe (2004) alleges that Schellenberg under-acknowledges complications around the psychology of religious belief. Lehe says the decision to enter religious life is momentous, and one that he expects is usually shot through with ambivalence from one side for faith and belief and from the other with anxiety or apprehension about new demands on the self. He questions how we could ever know whether a person including oneself is not subconsciously resistant towards the submission to God. This matter is more complicated by an order of magnitude than described by Lehe. I expect the experience of a curious agnostic and their hesitance to engage with religion stems from the fact that choosing to enter religion is not a *standardly* rational exercise. That is to say firstly, one cannot imagine the consequences of entering into faith because it involves a fundamental change in outlook that cannot be foreseen, which means one will not be able to assess conversion from that original or initial perspective. Secondly, one does not engage religion with the firm assurance that God exists and with the possibility of becoming deluded if God does not exist, so there is a risk that may not be rationalised in the process of conversion. There has emerged an area of philosophy devoted to this sort of problem, sometimes called ‘Transformative Choice Theory’. Laurie Paul (2014) is usually seen to have inaugurated this topic after thinking about the question one faces regarding having children, which exhibits some parallels with the question of religious conversion. Paul attends to the religious question in more recent writing, which will help me later develop my thesis in Chapter Seven in the section Transformative Choice Theory.

Nr-nb may range over a spectrum of attitudes ranging from the curious and active agnostic to the passive agnostic who seeks with very little effort. The passive sort of person’s experience of potential evidence for God may be coloured by an indifference (Moser, 2002). While this consideration may not serve to rebut the ADH because Schellenberg will claim that perfect love would somehow engage passive disposition, one is however inclined to wonder if the concept of God’s openness is being overworked if such a diverse spectrum of nr-nb is treated as one sort of variable. Prima facie, the theist is under most pressure to account for the active seeker who never attains relationship, but less pressure to account for the passive sort of agnostic. Schellenberg might say that this suspicion about the concept of openness over-reaching derives from an implicit theist starting point that has not absorbed the

implications of what perfect love should mean. The theist will push back on his simplistic model of love which does not acknowledge the good of a 'not-so-open' God. The next chapter considers greater goods which may require or justify God allowing nr-nb.

Henry (2008) also picks up on the epistemic problem for proponents of the ADH of identifying instances nr-nb (although Henry is talking specifically in relation to *culpability* for non-belief, we may derive a similar concern trying to understand the consistency and rationale for non-resistance). Schellenberg's thesis that perfect love cannot abide with non-resisting non-belief is complicated by Henry's consideration that the purportedly passive or active non-resistant person, however self-critical and honest they think themselves to be, "it is possible to subtly shade one's take on the evidence, or faintly trim one's diligence in seeking evidence, or imperceptibly privilege one's long-held judgments." (p283). People's self-understanding as most everyone learns who has undergone even basic counselling is to some degree produced by unreliable belief-forming practices or attitudes. Shaun Floyd (2004) also writing in relation to culpability for non-belief rather than non-resistance argues that an active agnostic may self-deceptively believe they are rationally investigating God's existence but really their enquiry is superficial because self-deception by its nature is undetectable for the subject herself. Schellenberg will place the onus on God's enabling the conditions for belief rather than on a person's inadequate epistemic attitude, and that an open God would require only that a person try to engage Him. We might question however in what *trying* would consist to the extent that it is immune from self-deception or trying to relate for inappropriate reasons.

Further nuance in connection with this theme derives from how different people are disposed to the same evidence. The eminent philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen writing about the capacity of love and desire to influence the subjective weights we inevitably apply to evidence, asks "how shall we ever find a spot of safety, secure from the distrust of one's own opinion?" (2018, p145). Schellenberg will claim that ADH side-steps the issue of sensitivity to evidence because all that should be required is non-resistance, but the division is not clear. Michael Rea suggests that the difference between people who experience the divine and those who don't has nothing to do with God's *causal* interaction with them, and that "the difference has everything to do with differences in how people cognitively engage with perfectly natural phenomena." (2018, p98). Rea broadly assents to Schellenberg's notion that an agent should be able to relate with God just by trying; by acquiring the learnable skill to experience the presence of God, not necessarily via training or religious tradition, but simply by tuning one's attention like when attending to any non-rudimentary phenomena (though he says achieving more attuned sensitivity may require engaging scripture and liturgy, (ibid, p135). Rea proposes that God's availability to people is on a greater scale than implied by Schellenberg's ideas, which may be better accounted for

in terms of people lacking attention, while Rea is clear that divine encounter is available even for those lacking the concept of God (ibid, ch7, Fn48). Rea's point about natural phenomena is proposed within a nuanced discussion about religious experience, including the person's inner voice and dispositional character. Let us note that these sorts of queries and objections to nr-nb may be characterised as a scepticism toward the *existence* of nr-nb, rather than directly against the rationale or consistency of the notion. While they do point to a potential lacuna in Schellenberg's position as far as he claims that ADH does not imply God *doing anything* specially to engage us, and only that perfect love entails that we would be engaged. Schellenberg will simply fall back on his contention that it is absurd to think nobody has ever been in a state of nr-nb while being adequately attentive.

We now have an initial picture of what nr-nb is supposed to be, which will be developed and filled out in Chapter Four and later where I develop my own account through Chapters Five to Seven.

The next section is concerned with Schellenberg's claim that a person cannot engage or develop a relationship with God without first believing that God exists.

#### Section 4. Schellenberg's Requirement of De Dicto Propositional Belief.

...how can anyone express gratitude for what she has experienced as a gift of God's grace or try to find God's will for her life or recognize God's forgiveness or do or experience any of the hundred similar things involved in a conscious, reciprocal relationship with God if she does not believe that God exists? It's impossible (2015, p58).

Schellenberg contends that the existence of a perfectly loving and open God entails the necessary truth that anyone both non-resistant and capable of reciprocal conscious relationship with God *will believe that He exists*.<sup>52</sup> Schellenberg's thrust is that the benefits of reciprocal relationship can only manifest with *believing that* God is there. He claims that only propositional belief that He exists can ground a person's *confident* choice of how to lovingly respond, including praying while expecting to be heard, feeling His presence, and experiencing His forgiveness. Schellenberg implicitly builds on the necessary entailment claim by implicating God being "...able to give us spiritual receptors and provide a sense of the divine presence..." and "He could not be open while *preventing* them from believing in [His] existence." (ibid). This appears to place causal responsibility for a person's belief in the hands of God

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<sup>52</sup> Wherever the phrases perfect love and openness or open are used without qualification, they reference Schellenberg's concepts.

providing evidence to warrant belief, such that anyone capable and non-resistant will believe in Him, seemingly negating their free agency in achieving belief (the tension discussed above).

Apart from the thorny issue of the agent's *passivity* in the process of coming to belief, Christian theism attaches much significance to the changing, nuanced epistemic character of a person's relationship with God. That dynamic relationship is variously considered to range over psychological states which are *voluntary*, and may be experienced without assured belief, such as faith (Swinburne 1981, Pojman 2003, Howard-Snyder 2016, Audi 2019), hope (Pojman 1986; Audi 2011), acceptance (Cohen 1992, Alston 1996), and others (Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2022). I will research theist responses in Chapter Four which propose the compatibility of God's love with the existence of nr-nb. Some of those theist positions are vulnerable to a free will objection similar to that tension I have been pressing on Schellenberg about 'freely believing'. Chapter Six will investigate the relevant epistemology for my thesis.

Potentially connected to this, Schellenberg (2016) curiously claims that his argument will go through with a modified premise that instead refers to, "nonresistantly being in a cognitive condition, in relation to the proposition that God exists, that is incompatible with then being able to participate in a personal relationship with God just by trying should one seek to do so." (p24). That cognitive condition we are told could be a non-believing hope or faith and his claim is that a modified argument could incorporate those (see also his 2021). My thesis in Chapter Five through Seven is conscious of his proposal for a modified premise. I will contend that an attitude of hopeful-acceptance may be volunteered by a non-resistant non-believer, in relation to the proposition that God probably exists or even that God might exist, sufficient for initiating relationship. The aspect of voluntariness renders the non-resistant aspect of the conjunct incoherent or at least unclear for operating in a way Schellenberg would require for a modified argument to go through.

My idea is that the affective component of the attitude being hope, coupled with a cognitive attitude of acceptance, cannot conceptually conjoin with non-resistance. Howard-Snyder (2013) suggests what he calls 'acceptance states' that must be governed by some norms of rationality for Schellenberg plausibly to claim that someone could non-resistantly *not* hold those states by *rationality withholding them*. I will argue that acceptance is partly governed or constrained through practical rationality for directing action, unlike epistemic rationality for justifying belief from evidence, and hope can be legitimately motivated by non-rational variables, or to say, hope is *not* epistemically irrational. Further, I will characterise actions and behaviour stemming from that voluntary attitude as conforming with a sort of humble chance taking or vulnerability (perhaps to that extent resembling adult relationships like

marriage that involve some yielding of self-possession). I will motivate my approach by reasoning that God will value our chancy venture for *freely* initiating relationship with Him.

Howard-Snyder gestures with a skeleton proposal that may be in the same ballpark as my scheme:

My proposal is that there is such a thing as belief-less and Schellenbergian-assent-less assuming; it can stand in for the positive cognitive stance required by faith; and, when it does, the result is a faith that sits well with being in doubt about its propositional object.” (2013, p193).

Weidner (2018) develops a case for the unorthodox notion which she defines and calls ‘belief-less assumption’,<sup>53</sup> as a stand-in for propositional belief for supporting a relationship with God. In a footnote at the end of her book she remarks it had already gone to press when she learnt of Schellenberg’s potential objection to her thesis in the sense of ‘non-resistant non-believing assumption’, and she admits to having no immediate reply. I would counsel her to explore the *voluntariness* of belief-less assumption and the incoherence that might connote for the proposed conjunction with non-resistance, as well as investigating how believing with only probability or warrant for assumption in the absence of propositional belief might support her idea. However, she would need to explain the grounds for the operation of assumption.

The next section investigates the concept of de re belief.

## Section 5. De Re Belief.

It is widely proposed that a person may (de re) consciously relate to God via his attributes without knowing that it is God to whom they relate, perhaps even while attesting atheism. One can be *de re* aware of something under a certain description without awareness that the same thing satisfies another description. A classic example in the epistemology literature is that one could be observing the morning star without realising that the same object is the evening star. Another classic example more analogous perhaps to the divine context is one may know Clark Kent without recognising him as Superman, though we might say (roughly) by knowing him under one description, one knows him de re under the other.

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<sup>53</sup>Weidner is in good company with Swinburne (1981, p116), who proposes the possibility of faith on pragmatic grounds when a person acts on the *assumption* of God’s existence.

Michael Rea coins this basis for relating to God as “deviant conceptual awareness.” (2018, p172).<sup>54</sup> As we consider ideas for deviant concepts throughout the dissertation which may support relations in the absence of explicit belief, I should avoid offending Schellenberg by discounting theologically loaded prescriptions and being cautious of freewheeling with vague concepts. An example of such freewheeling is the often-heard gesture these days, ‘thank the universe’ or ‘ask the universe’ and such like. The universe is the sum of all matter in existence, and it is a category error to endow *that* with personal qualities such as intellect and will and therefore ‘the universe’ cannot plausibly portend as a *de re* stand-in for a theist God<sup>55</sup> (or any sort of God at all - at best it is a placeholder signifying complete ignorance).

Schellenberg offends against theism in the other direction by suggesting that religious trust is operationally like faith in the universe (2005c). At a first pass trust in God is a personal investment in that (potentially existing) other person, whereas faith in the universe is to free oneself of any commitment as to what that other thing *is*, and operationally more resembles *carelessness* than trust. Cordry (2008) cautions that vague *de re* belief will not support an objection to Schellenberg’s requirement of *de dicto* belief, “some polytheists, some mystics, and some spiritualists could be described as ‘knowing God under a different description’ just as Tom knows Mark Twain under a different mode of reference.” (p2).

Cawdron (2021) discusses relations with God under pantheism whereby one relates with God seemingly just by nature of existing. While such theology might imply a metaphysical connection, it will not license a thesis of personal relation and seems to resemble that oft-heard phrase these days signifying a misdirected act of thanking ‘the universe’. Cawdron claims to offer a “form of panentheism that is reconcilable with the form of theism that is the target of Schellenberg’s argument.” (2021, p2). I will only say that any such *reconciliation* will render his proposal too vague to be a fair objection to Schellenberg. On vagueness about God, David Lewis remarks,

the foolish suggestion that all of us at least agree that God exists, although we disagree about His nature: some say He's a supernatural person, some say He's the cosmos in all its glory, some say He's the triumphal march of history, . . . . Given that much disagreement about 'His' nature, there's nothing we all believe in! (1986, p140).

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<sup>54</sup> Eleanor Stump informs us that Aquinas is clear about salvation being possibly achieved by implicit faith in God (2010, p163).

<sup>55</sup> Alvin Plantinga subsumes ‘intellect and will’ under a broad or minimal image of God, with more specific personal qualities making up a narrower image (2015, p 48).

A mode of de re relationship is suggested by Poston & Dougherty (2007), who argue that an experience of God could support a relationship without the person realising that God is the grounding stimulus of such experience and while the person puts *low credence* on their belief that God exists. They illustrate a hypothetical example of a prisoner in a solitary dark cell who hears faint knocking through his cell wall. The knocking might suggest another person trying to communicate but our prisoner isn't aware that anyone is in the next cell. Nevertheless, he taps back in response and the interaction continues so that he comes to think that there is probably someone there. Poston & Dougherty take this case to illustrate a way that two people might carry on a "fairly meaningful" (p191) personal relationship while only believing to "quite a low degree" that the other person exists. My take is that any meaningful interaction could not be achieved if the tapping on the wall did not encode a basic level of conversation (perhaps like Morse), and that once encoding equated even rudimentary conversation then both sides *would believe that the other person exists*, so I take their example to fail.

Schellenberg objects to the notion of low credence or 'partial belief' employed by Poston and Dougherty, "which, given its compatibility with a confidence level below 0.5, need not be belief at all." (2007b, p200). I will be considering the notion of credence in Chapter Six, but apparently Schellenberg thinks having a credence above 0.5 may qualify as belief that God exists. Might that mean he thinks that nr-nb can carry positive credence of 0.49 while not being enough to support relationship? Rating credence for belief with a number seems only properly apt for empirical propositions for which evidence might be quantified.

I take the prison example to fail because of the lack of meaning conveyed by uncoded knocking, but God would have infinite resources for interaction other than 'conversation'. An intelligible model of divine interaction consistent with low credence belief is not difficult to imagine, and many theists without propositional belief that God exists will pray and interpret aspects of their life as divine response and indication that they are in relationship with Him. Those people may not be brought to sure belief that God is responsible for what they take to be His response because there is a possibility that those aspects of life could be natural and serendipitous instead of providential. Schellenberg might object that personal interaction is hardly intimate if events stemming from purported personal relationship are indistinguishable in principle from natural events. My phrasing here simplifies a more technically refined point in Cordry (2008).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "The mere fact that the ascriber is in position to see that some outside thing is playing a causal role in a subject's cognition (and hence what is present in the subject's consciousness) does not suffice for ascribing to that subject a belief in that object. ...part of what blocks successful de re ascriptions are the sorts of ontological categories the subject uses or has available." Cordry 2008, p10). This article offers sustained objection to the prisoner example which I have only summarised with brief remarks.

Schellenberg's view is overly simplistic or short-sighted regarding God's transcendent resources for interaction, by insisting that divine interaction must resemble human interaction:

...perfectly loving God might rest content, for protracted periods of time, with making available one of the weaker non-explicit sorts of relationship...especially in the midst of a flood of evidence from relationships all around us, and from the language of love, that even a passably loving mother or sibling or friend will spontaneously reach out to the beloved in a more explicit manner. (2007b, p201).

God might 'rest content' for several reasons we will discuss in the next chapter and because he may value our *freely* disposed orientation to respond while in doubt which connects with my thesis in Chapter Five.

The renowned philosopher of religion and pluralist John Hick (2005) defended the view that each of the world religions was a valid response to whatever is God, or less committedly whatever is the real proper object of worship.<sup>57</sup> Michael Rea reads Hick as tacitly defending the idea that worshipful responding may underwrite a relationship with God without the worshipper thinking they are relating with God but, "...under a suitably accurate concept of God." (2018, p173). Rea describes a situation whereby a person may unwittingly participate in relations with God by seeking while not believing. He suggests (in line with commonly heard reports) that a person who eventually became a believer and looking back on their life became aware that God was at work in subtle ways which were not apparent at the time, could conclude that their relationship with Him had begun when they were then seeking and in disbelief.

Schellenberg insists that one cannot only hope or trust to be in a reciprocal relationship but must recognize oneself to be in a relationship and such recognition is only achieved with *de dicto* belief that God exists (2015 p59). There are many proposals across literary history of how *de re* belief could suffice for relationship with God such that, "every human being can believe that God exists, by implicitly believing in Him, even though one does not know that this is what one is doing." (Howard-Snyder 2002a, p8). We might picture a person who values and pursues a morally upstanding life as relating to God via His essential attribute and origination of goodness (Wainwright, 2002)<sup>58</sup>. Similarly, short of explicit

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly in this connection, the Catholic Catechism acknowledges that other religions may *partially* aim at and share of the true good, grounding *some level* of relationship however lacking.

<sup>58</sup> Plato argues in the Symposium that we are responding to the form of *The Good* when we respond to particular goods and Theism identifies God with something like Plato's form of *The Good*. I am not offering analysis but only indicating how the idea is supposed to work, about which there are libraries are half full.

belief it is thought one might implicitly believe in God by acting in the same way as one would with explicit belief.

Jordan Peterson on stage with the famous public intellectual and atheist Sam Harris (2018) argued that Harris implicitly believes in God because he acts in the same way and takes his moral direction *as if* he believed.<sup>59</sup> There is much to contend with about this idea but Wainwright (2002) perhaps over reaches when citing a purported supporting argument from Robert Holyer who contends that it is reasonable to attribute an unconscious belief *that p* [to Sam Harris], if he “displays some of the dispositions constitutive of a belief *p* [acting in terms of it, experiencing emotions appropriate to it, drawing inferences from it or holding beliefs from which it can be inferred] without giving assent to it.” (Wainwright quoting Holyer (1984 p428)). We should be wary of the claim that a *display of dispositions constitute belief* because this implies a long out of favour thesis of ‘methodological behaviourism’ along the lines that belief is in some sense equivalent with disposition to action, which could be seen as glossed over here by Wainwright, “Acting in accordance with the Good is more or less extensionally equivalent to acting on theistic belief. (*The conduct and intentions are similar.*)” (2002, p114 my emphasis).

Wainwright’s more subdued platonic-like proposal is that when a person responds to the Good, she can be responding to God (ibid p113). Schellenberg accuses Wainwright of not respecting the sort of relationship cited in his argument as supporting explicit and reciprocal interaction (2005a p108), but I take it that Schellenberg needs to spell out or illustrate what such an explicit and reciprocal relationship could look like without pointing only at mundane human relationships (although as we saw in Chapter Two, he says we should not stretch beyond our normal understanding of loving personal relations).<sup>60</sup>

Ajaz & Weidler (2007), wonder why Wainwright’s proposal must be lacking explicitness or reciprocity of relationship as Schellenberg alleges. They envisage a person acting on their conscience of which they are explicitly unaware is the voice of God. They cleverly draw an example from Matthew’s Gospel of when a person’s actions are “more or less extensionally equivalent” (2007, p18) to actions otherwise grounded in explicit belief in God, so that they may embody interactive and reciprocal relations:

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<sup>59</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jey\\_CzIOfYE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jey_CzIOfYE)

<sup>60</sup> Rea (2018) is a book-length thesis for the general objection to Schellenberg that God’s transcendent personality might involve no inclination for reciprocity and interaction in anyway pictured by Schellenberg’s anthropomorphic models. On the other hand, Alvin Plantinga views God’s personhood as “a conscious individual in the same class as you and I.” (quoted in Davies 2003 p279). There is a broad field of views around this issue.

Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:37–40).

Howard-Snyder (2002b), Wainwright (2002) and Cullison (2010) countenance the more restricted claim that relationship may be *initiated* through one's actions, on the way to explicit belief, which may be compatible with Schellenberg's claim that a relationship grounded in belief will be *more fruitful* than one supported by belief-less hope or faith (2002b). A tentative everyday sort of example of this phenomenon which perhaps treads the line between implicit and explicit belief might be a person in the Alcoholics Anonymous program<sup>61</sup> which encourages non-religious people to a sort of surrender to an *ill-defined* God to *function* as a sort of powerful substitute for their own lack of control over addiction. Robert McKim (2001) takes Schellenberg to differentiate between weak and strong belief and allow that the former may undergird some relationship while not supporting intimate personal relationship (p102), and so there appears logical room for Schellenberg to admit the potential for something prior to intimate relations on the basis of weak belief, which may be compatible (in the face of Schellenberg's dissent) with Howard-Snyder's *de re* proposal via The Good, at least for *initiating* relationship.

Cuneo suggests that a nontheist may relate to God by appropriately responding to His goodness and beauty (2013), whereby God is unnoticeably present while always open. Schellenberg (2013a) objects to the coherence of Cuneo's suggestion by picturing a situation between a mother and son whom he calls 'Cuneo'. (I will strengthen Schellenberg's hypothetical example by posing instead a charitable benefactor). Ben is a great benefactor who has anonymously designed and built a living environment for a disadvantaged young man from his old neighbourhood called Dan. The environment includes Dan's transport, clothing and housing, including all conveniences and sustenance for everyday life, all of which is procured from the best sources who are fully briefed about Dan's requirements and taste. Schellenberg correctly contends that (ibid, p266) however much Dan appreciates and responds to the utility and beauty of those provisions, he cannot personally relate with Ben without conscious connection with him. While that may be true, the analogy does not carry because theism identifies good and beauty as more like an *aspect of God's self* which emanates, rather than an artefact of his production like Ben's effort. The degree that good and beauty prompt response in the mind and life of the nontheist is purportedly then profoundly distinct and of different order than the connection

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<sup>61</sup> Adam Green's seminar example at the University of Oklahoma in October 2022.

between Ben and Dan. Howard-Snyder (2016) suggests that something like the Ben-Dan dynamic could prompt a relationship *on the way* to an ideal salvific relationship that incorporates more explicit awareness.

Paul Moser (2016) offers an explicitly Christian thesis along the lines that one may cooperate with Christ's power *de re*, without awareness that one is channelling God's power of redemptive love. Moser suggests people may cooperate and experience God without familiarity with Christianity (2010, ch5). Schellenberg dismisses Moser's position (2010 & 2015) as theologically presumptive and question begging against the ADH (2017b). I only mention their dispute here in advance of closer inspection during Chapter Five when I will assess Schellenberg's judgement and extrude insight from Moser separated from the theological load that prompts Schellenberg's complaint. However, let me briefly show here that Moser (2019) offers a simple argument against Schellenberg's (2019) claim that it is *logically impossible* to hear God speak while disbelieving that God exists. Moser makes the distinction between, "(a) hearing God; and (b) hearing God as (interpreted as) God." (p191), claiming cogently that (a) does not require (b). And he makes the point that ordinary listening to a person can take place without hearing that person as (interpreted as) that person, such as whenever we hear a voice without identifying whose voice it is, and I would add that this happens all the time via the radio: "So people may actually hear God through conscience without correctly identifying the "voice" of conscience as God." (ibid). There is more to say about the cogency of this argument, the theme of which we will revisit, but it seems *prima facie* plausible.

### Conclusion of Chapter Three.

This chapter has clarified the conceptual stakes of non-resistant non-belief and criticised the alleged necessity of propositional belief for divine relationship claimed by Schellenberg. I have broached several cogent worries about Schellenberg's understanding and application of nr-nb and pressed many concerns about the necessity for *de dicto* belief to support relationship with God. These and related ideas will be further considered throughout the rest of this dissertation with Chapter Six focused on alternative propositional attitudes that I propose for supporting the initiation of relationship with God.

Along with the previous chapter, we now have in place Schellenberg's argument from Divine Hiddenness and its core concepts. The next chapter will survey and analyse theist responses of the sort that argue for the compatibility of nr-nb and God's love, to the effect that nr-nb is unsurprising from a theist perspective.

## Chapter 4

### The Greater-Goods Defence

#### Introduction

This chapter examines “greater-goods” responses to Schellenberg’s argument. Such responses propose that God may allow non-resistant non-belief (nr-nb) because it enables goods more consistent with perfect love.

The discussion begins with Daniel Howard-Snyder, who argues that God may wait until individuals develop dispositions suitable for relationship. Schellenberg counters that God’s unlimited resources could adjust those situations for more ideal outcomes without delay. Richard Swinburne proposes the good of moral freedom, suggesting that doubt about God preserves meaningful moral choice. He also gestures to social goods, such as intergenerational knowledge transmission, though Schellenberg replies that such goods could be realised without non-belief. Paul Murray adapts John Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy, claiming hiddenness prevents coercion by divine oversight while fostering character growth.

Other contributions refine or challenge these themes. Lehe links hiddenness to moral immaturity, while Lovering objects that epistemic distance connects with moral nihilism. Trakakis sides with Schellenberg, arguing how belief in God need not eliminate free choice of relationship. Later, Cullison suggests that the very important virtue of genuine self-sacrifice requires the possibility of doubt, and Dumsday proposes that resentment or immature motivations can justify hiddenness. Teeninga points out that worlds with a mix of belief and non-belief yield richer cumulative goods.

Schellenberg’s “accommodationist strategy” serves as a general rejoinder: any purported goods could still be achieved with belief in God, since God’s infinite resourcefulness can integrate moral freedom, responsibility, and cooperation within ongoing relationship.

The chapter concludes that while no single greater good convincingly explains all cases of nr-nb, taken cumulatively they do carry explanatory weight. Yet, the plausibility of accommodation continues to press theists. This chapter sets the stage for the constructive turn of the dissertation in Chapter Five: a positive free-will-based account of ‘Originating Initiative.’

## Aims.

The premises of Schellenberg's argument entail that if a perfectly loving God exists, then there is never an instance of a capable person being in a state of non-resistant non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists. The greater-goods-defence is a theist category of response in the literature arguing that a perfectly loving God may not be always open to relationship consistently with perfect love, offering explanations for why God may allow the existence of non-resistant non-belief (nr-nb).

In short, greater-goods responses argue that the existence of non-resistant non-belief can be justified by appeal to other goods that are so valuable that their attainment requires, permits, or is best achieved through divine hiddenness. These goods are said to be "greater" in the sense that their realisation is more consistent with or even required by perfect love.

I will assess proposals for what these greater goods might consist in, including moral freedom to choose, and autonomously derived responsibility of different sorts (such as character cultivation, life destiny or social cooperation). Schellenberg argues that if the fundamental spiritual reality is God, then all serious spiritual development must begin in relationship with that fundamental reality which would be the greatest possible good for every individual. Greater goods defences may accept this while arguing that God could have reason to *defer* that highest good for a time. Schellenberg's general rejoinder is that God has infinitely rich resources to support these goods without the sort of autonomy usually posed by those responses, and he thinks the idea that those goods could not be achieved *after* beginning conscious relationship with God is "extremely odd" (2007, p211).

The chapter proceeds by examining key contributions to the greater goods literature (roughly chronologically as they appear in the literature, unless ideas are better assessed together), beginning with Howard-Snyder, through Swinburne, Murray and others, before concluding with more recent proposals. Schellenberg has both specific and a general somewhat all-encompassing reply to arguments for greater goods. I will discuss his general reply around mid-point of the chapter, so to get an orientation of proposed greater goods on the table beforehand.

## Howard-Snyder's Dispositional Argument.

The first significant philosophical response that fits the greater goods mould comes from Daniel Howard-Snyder, whose 1996 work directly engages with Schellenberg's original formulation. Howard-Snyder proposes that God would wait for a non-believer to develop appropriate disposition for relationship *before* they come to belief or else they may not have the maturity to develop in that relationship and be inclined to easy or weak wavering. I will only consider the two main sorts of non-believer that are Howard-Snyder's focus.

In the first case we have a sort of individual that God knows will have a negative disposition towards relationship that will activate indifference or rejection if they were brought to belief, and so God views it to be good that He wait, so that disposition is not *confirmed* to the person, making it less likely or more difficult to change that disposition than had it otherwise remained unactualised. By 'confirmed' he means if the person *experiences* their own negative disposition, then their self-identifying with that state makes that disposition less likely to be changed and making future engagement more difficult compared to if that negative disposition remained only an inactivated potential that the person had not become aware of. God views their non-belief as the preferred situation for *a time*, because their bad disposition may be less liable to shift after the person has self-confirmed that disposition. Schellenberg argues that Howard-Snyder must be assuming that such a person will be likely to reject relationship with God "...no matter how they came to know [Him]" (1996, p460), and that this is in tension with God having unlimited means to convey any possible experience of His love and connect with even the most disconnected or bitter personalities, and therefore there cannot exist such individuals with dispositions that are beyond God's reach (those who are *incapable* are not included under the premises of ADH). Schellenberg claims further, that *even if* a person is most likely to reject God upon coming to belief, then God could use his limitless resources in any number of repeated attempts (especially if their original non-belief is not their fault)<sup>62</sup>. He continues, that it seems obvious that God's project of pursuing a relationship would be *easier* using influence that presupposed belief.

Howard-Snyder's second case (*ibid*, p442) is like an inverse of the previous, with the non-believing person predisposed to respond well to belief but who is not responsible for their amenable inclination. In this case the person may confirm to themselves a positive disposition for relationship that is perhaps motivated by a shallow or trivial outlook that is better left inactive, so the person may become more maturely oriented without having become explicitly aware of their positive (albeit shallow) disposition. Schellenberg (1996) supposes that such a person may acquire belief and initiate relationship, "without

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<sup>62</sup> The reader may recall that the hiddenness argument in the 1990's traded in 'non-culpable non-belief' rather than nr-nb, but this does not impact my interest here.

having a say in the matter” (p461). Schellenberg takes that period of non-belief to do no work for Snyder’s inference because the agent may be better challenged and confirmed in their obedience along with the benefits it brings after they have belief. Schellenberg notes that the agent has an ongoing informed choice whether to stay in relationship, after her initial *automatic* response, which he insists would be viewed by God as the best outcome.

Several potential topics of discussion are evoked by this exchange which I aim to cover in later discussion, but for now I will mention an idea I have offered previously: I can barely begin to fathom the situation whereby a *positively disposed* person would reject a relationship with a loving God who she believes to exist, so there would not really be any ‘ongoing informed choice’. There will be choice about how much effort or time is spent engaging with God but not whether to engage at all, which is the choice Howard-Snyder has in view.

I expect Schellenberg may accept that point and reassert that the person is achieving their best possible life in relationship such that God should not want to risk that situation by indefinitely waiting while hidden. Every character would be understood individually by God and His interaction would be configured with each different person in His mind. It seems very plausible that at least some people will be well described by Howard-Snyder’s contention and so I would judge his point to be more persuasive than Schellenberg’s idea that everyone would be better brought to belief regardless of present disposition.

Howard-Snyder (2015) develops his case that God would wait for a non-believer to develop appropriate disposition for relationship *before* they come to belief in His existence. He uses the example of Mary considering a potential suitor who impresses her in all important respects but who has never demonstrated the virtue of faithfulness in life through persistent difficulty, which is a character trait important for lasting relationship. Mary is the analogue of God who Howard-Snyder counsels would be wise if she were to hold off beginning a relationship until she was assured of the man’s staying power.

This seems comparable to God holding out until a person was holy before initiating with belief and relationship. Mary could well begin dating without that greater confidence which she might want before agreeing to marriage. Ostensibly, Schellenberg seems right to respond that God would better encounter that person sooner rather than wasting quality time (2017 p6). Howard-Snyder risks setting too high a bar for initiating relationship, which a theist could worry is in tension with Church teaching that all grace is gifted and unearned. Although motivation for that sort of theist worry is blurred by his suggestion that some level of relations could be achieved with *de re* belief in advance of explicit *de dicto* belief. Schellenberg repeats his general accommodation that God could vary the intensity and character of

relationship to suit the condition of his beloved rather than waiting for an ideal starting point for relationship. (ibid, p7)

We now consider a more familiar and traditional sort of greater good. Swinburne contends that moral freedom can explain how perfect love is compatible with nr-nb.

## Moral Freedom and the Role of Doubt: Swinburne.

Moving from the good of dispositional readiness to moral freedom, Richard Swinburne's argument centres on the idea that doubt about God's existence is necessary for meaningful moral agency.

Swinburne (1998) devotes a chapter to answering "Schellenberg's fine book", arguing that moral freedom can only exist if doubt in God is optional. Swinburne develops a starting point not straightforwardly comparable to Schellenberg's datum for nr-nb, by positing a *duty* on everyone capable to investigate God's existence. He argues the agnostic's failure to attempt serious exploration is a moral evil because if there does exist a creator to whom duty is not paid then there ensues not just the "absence of a good but a wrong, because there is now someone wronged by the failure—God." (p170), and wronging God is a supreme sort of wrong. An agnostic may push back on this starting point arguing that non-resistance may stem from prima facie justified low credence, such that on balance their attitude is fair and not compelling of any more serious seeking of God. What might constitute serious investigation is a deep question, but apathy is typical across our target profile of western secular people. Perhaps questions around this issue are what motivated Schellenberg to jettison responsibility-for-belief and employ non-resistance instead, shifting the onus to lack of clear evidence rather than weak investigation.

Swinburne thinks that non-belief informs the free option of investigation and is part of deep friendship with God, "...in this situation of ignorance there will be the possibility of seeking and obtaining not merely theoretical knowledge but the deep friendship with God, which is such a good thing." (p211). Schellenberg thinks deep relationship is impossible without belief, while Swinburne cites faith as the enabler, allowing some element of doubt. The topic of the non-resistant person's attitude to investigation will become pertinent in Chapter Five.

Swinburne's idea resonates with Joseph Butler (1736) who thought investigation of God is inseparable from our moral formation because impetus for action will be affected by our level of doubt about God.

This is related to Swinburne's argument that the good of free moral choice is only feasible under some uncertainty about God.

If one becomes "deeply aware" (ibid, p205) of the presence of God then one will be deeply aware of the strong disapproval of bad actions of an all-good creator, so if God's existence is unquestionable, and because it is natural and rational to desire to be liked, then one is inclined to the good with no free choice for the wrong. Epistemic distance is deemed by Swinburne an essential component for the free choice between good and evil, while he allows the possible situation when the desire for divine approval is weaker than desiring the bad, so the bad choice is open to those whom God has made naturally malicious who are uncaring about deceiving and hurting others. Swinburne thinks our inclination toward the good or bad can be swayed by the balance of probability we put on God's existence along with the prospect of reward or punishment in the afterlife, "the possibility of a free choice between right and wrong will only exist given a certain ratio of strength between the desire to please God and the desire to do wrong." (ibid, p207).

The reader may think of a person who acts only for reward or to be liked by God acting from sort of shallow automatic duty rather than for love of a person or for good itself and so we may think that uncertainty about God could provide room for the good moral quality of a person to develop independently of any thought of reward or consequential good.<sup>63</sup>

Another thinker who thought about moral freedom in the context of hiddenness is Immanuel Kant who thought that free moral choice requires doubt about God: "all our morality would break down. In his every action, man would represent God to himself as a rewarder or avenger. This image would force itself involuntarily on his soul, and his hope for reward and fear of punishment would take the place of moral motives." (Kant cited in Wood 1978, p123).<sup>64</sup>

Swinburne supports his case by pointing to scriptural examples where a certain ignorance of God coincides with serious moral free choice, that is where ignorance about God was involved in the capacity for moral failing, for example when Eve was persuaded to take the apple on the belief that God was weak, and Adam supposed he could hide himself from God. Another example is Christ's parable of the

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<sup>63</sup> Duty and moral quality are theoretically loaded concepts in the philosophy of ethics. I use them here in a basic intuitive sense that will suffice for my point. There is also more to say about the value of duty that derives its standing force gained through love of God aside from consequences.

<sup>64</sup> Although Kant did not address the specific question about the epistemic nature of that doubt about God that he thinks is necessary for free choice (McKim, 2001). Paytas (2019) considers related issues in defence of Kant's position.

sheep at the Last Judgement, where reward and punishment is rendered to those ignorant of Jesus, "In so far as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me." (Matthew 25:40).

Moral freedom is *prima facie* a very plausible motive or reason that God may have for being hidden. I will later consider Schellenberg's reply. Another sort of good proposed by Swinburne deserving brief review concerns social epistemology.

### Swinburne on the Social Good of Knowledge Transmission.

Worth brief mention is Swinburne (1993) broaching a different good made possible by non-belief. The social good of people helping each other find God, made possible by many people being ignorant over prolonged periods (p211). This involves the important social good of older generations passing on their knowledge to descendants. Schellenberg objects that God would view society's great responsibility for future generations to be a crucial social good without over-loading that responsibility with something as eminently important as knowledge of the divine. A loving God, he thinks, would not risk such supremely important belief and "would not give anyone the opportunity to put others in a position where neither explicit acceptance nor explicit rejection is possible." (1993, p199).

Swinburne views the social interaction as a good for its own sake. While this may be good to the extent of humanity developing all sorts of knowledge down the generations, the good is surely realised in the consequences the knowledge has, rather than the causal interactions themselves. If we assume those interactions are necessary for the increase of wisdom and knowledge, they are the mechanism for a good rather than the good itself.

At risk of misunderstanding and oversimplifying Swinburne's idea, I will pass quick judgement on this social good of knowledge transmission. In most usual circumstances, we may reasonably think that people's relationship with God cannot operate or develop completely apart from the experience people have of relating with each other (certainly in the early stages of coming to God that usually will require talking with others), However, making that mechanism for coming to belief in God an essential good *in itself* seems ad hoc. There will be all sorts of ways and means on the way to God or religion but the idea that God would be hidden *just for them to play out* is not well motivated.

Dumsday (2010) has a point that may address my sort of consideration in the last paragraph and Schellenberg's rejoinder to Swinburne: that cooperating to *deepen* knowledge (not just introduce it) could be equally or more valuable in principle, and so God need not risk the supreme good of relationship by jeopardising the initial state of belief. Dumsday seeks to develop the case for

Swinburne's social good of cooperation in finding God as a response to Schellenberg by referencing theology and scripture to emphasise *friendship as a constituent* of relationship with God and argues that helping one's friend achieve their goals is essential to friendship, not least helping God in that "highest of tasks" (p367) of introducing individuals to Him. Dumsday makes a further point that introducing individuals to avenues of belief in God is a greater privilege than *only* assisting in development of that knowledge as Schellenberg suggested. Dumsday privileges the task of introduction by way of its achieving great depth of relationship *in its performance*, and so the project itself of introducing God is intertwined with relationship.

The next response by Murray will develop our thinking about moral freedom as a justifying good for Hiddenness, spanning the development of moral character.

### Soul-Making and Moral Responsibility: Paul Murray's View.

Paul Murray (2002) argues in a similar vein to Swinburne that divine hiddenness inhibits the powerful awareness of God's existence which would otherwise compel most people to behave in accordance with His moral commands, "Such awareness can lead to this simply because God's presence would provide us with overpowering incentives which would make choosing the good ineluctable for us." (p62).

Murray writes with reference to a very influential thesis by John Hick (1966), who proposes a 'soul-making' theodicy in the context of the problem of evil. A theodicy being a justification for evil that is otherwise argued to be incompatible with the existence of a benevolent God (as outlined in Chapter One on The Problem of Evil). Murray makes repeated use of Hick's phrase of 'soul-making', so I will briefly outline Hick's thesis in the following paragraph before returning to Murray.

Hick's soul-making theodicy offers a response to the problem of evil by reframing suffering and moral challenge as essential components of a divinely ordained process of spiritual development. Hick draws on the Irenaean tradition<sup>65</sup> to argue that human beings are not created as morally complete but are intended to grow into the likeness of God through a gradual, often painful process. The existence of evil and suffering is not gratuitous, and it serves as the necessary environment in which virtues such as courage, compassion, patience, and self-sacrifice can meaningfully develop. Hick argues that a world

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<sup>65</sup> Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century) is considered a Church father with the title of Doctor of Church given him by Rome in this century. He was a pupil of Polycarp who was in turn a student of Apostle John.

without danger, moral struggle, or the possibility of harm would be one in which these virtues could not emerge. Thus, rather than seeing evil as evidence against the existence of a good God, Hick proposes that the world is structured for soul-making: the cultivation of morally mature persons who come freely to love and know God through their responses to real moral and existential challenges.

Murray argues for the good of moral responsibility as justifying hiddenness, for the development of *moral character*. In effect, he argues that divine hiddenness is necessary so that our characters are “to some extent self-wrought.” (p66). Murray alleges *coercion* if a person believes that obedience will provide eternal well-being instead of eternal punishment. Obviously, belief in heaven or hell will interfere with the experience of building character. Such stark consequences will direct the behaviour of any rational and sane person. (There may be some dispute about the compatibility of evil and sanity in a person).

Schellenberg (2002), however, rejects Murray’s position. He argues that divine hiddenness is not necessary to preserve human freedom or facilitate soul-making. He contends that clear awareness of God’s existence would not undermine human autonomy and disputes the idea that divine presence would be coercive, noting that belief in God can coexist with moral and spiritual growth over time.

Schellenberg thinks that coercion would depend on the *temporal immanence* of threat or reward, with any duress perceived in relation to the temporal proximity of judgement, and with various eligible actions possible over time allowing for ‘soul-making’. Murray is surely correct that any temporal proximity afforded by even a long human life will not be enough to mitigate the coercion of the surety of *eternal* punishment.<sup>66</sup> However, while Schellenberg is also right to the extent that moral character development will take place for believers, it will be under profoundly different guard rails than for someone who envisages no transcendent consequences either in the afterlife, or in the here and now, a person who believes themselves in relationship with God.

Schellenberg contends there would still be significant opportunities for believers to act freely, even for those with powerful conversions to belief, and he cites the example of St. Paul who persisted in his weakness to sin. This is true, and though we might note that Paul’s awareness of his sin did not extend to heinous sin. However, let us make the fair assumption that there have been believers who have engaged in heinous sin, while it is obvious that usually a person would be constrained in their actions if they were confident of drastic consequences for themselves. Determining if such constraint amounted

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<sup>66</sup> There is an idea derived from perfect being theology and (controversially) consistent with Catholic theology that God would simply eliminate any being at death who was beyond saving penance so that they do not suffer eternal punishment. Such a situation could alternatively generate positive coercion by the promise of eternal reward as compared to being gone.

to coercion would involve investigation of individual psychologies, but another fair assumption that such a constraint for some could amount to coercion.

Murray responds that *some people* may receive convincing revelation without being coerced, but that many will not have the capacity to resist coercion. Schellenberg is correct that a believer may have some leeway for sinful action if they do not believe that final judgement is imminent like in the case of Paul, but we can surmise that Paul would view some sorts of evil out-of-bounds and to that extent he would feel coerced. There is room for debate about the extent of free action that could be live-option for a believer, but Schellenberg must concede it is a profoundly different sort of freedom once a person is aware of God's oversight.

Murray nuances his suggestion such that we might expect God not to overwhelm any free creature (except on special occasions important for His intention), leaving them fitting room for soul-making to suit their individual capacity for autonomy or coercion, or as he puts it, "...the theist ought to argue that God will provide such revelations to those who can receive them and still remain free in the required way." (p77). The phrase 'required way' connotes that God may condition the evidence and epistemic immanence differently for each person as per their natural threat response, which is why large scale theophanies of parting clouds and suchlike are off the table because of indiscriminate effect they would have on people.

In connection with various or unique individual responses to evidence, Murray evokes a notion that will become important in Chapter Five, that is a person's "direct voluntary control over belief-forming dispositions" (p79). The idea is that we can cultivate our dispositions to sorts of evidence, like when a botanist trains on the visual elements of a plant and becomes more and more sensitive to evidence that would go under the radar of somebody untrained, or when we are instructed to be vigilant in dangerous environments so that we focus our alertness on specific sounds or smells. One's effort in training or preparation will affect non-voluntary belief-forming capacity. In terms of religious experience, one's ability to form true beliefs from evidence will be partly a function of the extent one has disposed themselves to forming belief on the grounds of such evidence.

We will see later that Paul Moser (2002) has a similar approach to Murray while concentrating more on the *will* alongside intellect. Moving on from Murray now to consider another morally related good for purportedly justifying a form of non-belief.

## Moral Immaturity and Openness: Lehe's Objection.

Lehe (2004) is concerned with spiritual deficiencies in a person that will block their desire to relate with God and trustingly submit to His good will, by way of their moral immaturity impeding that relation *aside* from their epistemic sensitivity. Lehe views the doubt arising from a failing intellectual search for God as sometimes involving moral flaws which can hinder the development or onset of faith, and "that one may need to seek spiritual healing and purification before God will disclose himself." (p7).

Lehe is writing in the context of Schellenberg's pre 2007 work, which involved the notion of *inculpable* non-belief instead of nr-nb, (which I mentioned at the end of Chapter One). One of Schellenberg's modes of nr-nb (that I discussed in Chapter Three) are seekers who will never come to belief, which Lehe's proposal could fall under. Lehe claims inculpable non-belief does not exist (p26 fn16), which if true would entail that all those active seeking non-believers who never achieve belief could be morally arrogant or have experiential expectations which block belief. Lehe's claim resonates more clearly with the idea of negligent seeking and it is less clear how it might undermine Schellenberg's newer emphasis on non-resistance, because we would need to evaluate whether moral immaturity translates into resistance. For those cases where it did not translate, Schellenberg will evoke the idea that these people's highest well-being would be served by God entering relationship, so to develop their moral immaturity.

Lehe's proposal is less decisive than the earlier ideas related to moral freedom from both Murray and Swinburne, because moral immaturity may not involve resistance to relationship, even while the person is in some way culpable for that immaturity.

Lehe also proposes that God may remain hidden in order that people come to realise their moral corruption. Schellenberg previously discusses that idea (1993, p180) and turns it on its head by contending that God would bring us to moral maturity *through religious experience*. Schellenberg charges a dilemma for this objection that proposes the good of doubt about God's existence: either people because of apathy, would not benefit from the absence of evidence, or (sufficiently motivated) they do not require an interval of doubt (1993, p202). I do not think this dilemma reflects the situation if the impetus for belief is not on God but rather on the person. On the objection, apathetic individuals *will benefit* from the absence of evidence because it may prompt their autonomous learning, and others sufficiently motivated may require a period of doubt for awareness to percolate and develop in better preparation for deeper relationship and faith.

Some of Lehe's points saddle Schellenberg's argument with limiting propositional belief to a thin conception of God, such as might be satisfied, "by their simply being caused to believe that certain

propositions are true, such as that God is omnipotent, omniscient, ...”(p11) Lehe argues that a thin belief in the existence of God by way of His attributes to that extent may not be enough to incline a person to seek relationship with God:

Let us grant that the inculpable doubter is zealous in her quest for belief that God exists. But given the gap between belief that God exists and belief in God, zeal for the former is no guarantee of openness to the latter.” (2004, p10).

This belief ‘*gap*’ suggested by Lehe, that might span the divide between a sort of intellectual assent to a God of the traditional omni-attributes and the personal God of religion, does not confront Schellenberg’s idea that belief in God’s existence is necessary to rouse the non-resisting person. Schellenberg can simply stipulate that such belief as we would expect a perfect God to make available for the non-resistant will be of the right sort for them. Schellenberg (2005c) argues to this effect with finer grain.

Lehe applies his suggested belief gap to animate an example, which I will appropriate in support of Schellenberg. The comparison is drawn between the intellectual assent to God’s existence and his expectations where such belief is reasonably undeniable, and the intellectual assent of an alcoholic to believe he needs to stop drinking (p12). The drunkard knows he needs to change but may not be willing to make the effort, like a believer who is not willing to comport themselves for relation. Contrary to this setup, Schellenberg would compare the non-resistant believer to the alcoholic who does *not* know that he should stop. The alcoholic who does not acknowledge their problem cannot begin recovery, and the person who does not believe that God exists cannot begin relationship. Belief is insufficient for Lehe, but necessary for Schellenberg.

The points of Lehe’s thesis against Schellenberg are less persuasive than the earlier ideas related to moral freedom from both Murray and Swinburne. Moral immaturity may not involve resistance to relationship, even while the person is in some way culpable for that immaturity. Lehe is targeting Schellenberg’s earlier notion of inculpable non-belief and so we might expect his arguments are not so decisive against nr-nb, but evaluating his paper has deepened our understanding of how greater goods might be evaluated.

I will briefly point out an interesting challenge to Murray’s soul-making idea, before taking up Schellenberg’s general position in relation to the greater-goods response that I promised in the introduction for the midway point in this chapter.

## Epistemic Distance and Moral Nihilism: Lovering's Challenge to Soul-Making.

The appeal to moral goods faces its own set of difficulties, particularly when God's silence appears gratuitous or unredeemed. Lovering (2004) takes up Murray's soul-making thesis (that free scope for character building requires epistemic distance, so that a person does not feel coerced by God's oversight). Lovering objects to Murray, that a *consequence* of epistemic distance will be that some people *cannot intentionally* choose the good or the bad, which is essential for soul-making. Lovering takes quite a jump for this contention by claiming that many reflective people believe that if God does not exist then moral nihilism is true. Moral nihilism is the meta-ethical view that there are no objective moral truths or facts. According to moral nihilism, statements like 'murder is wrong' or 'helping others is good', do not describe any actual moral properties or facts in the world. Instead, such statements are seen as expressions of emotion, social convention, or mistaken beliefs.

Lovering claims these people rationally and inculpably become nihilists and therefore cannot *intentionally* choose good or bad. Any choices they make are only accidentally or unintentionally good or bad and so cannot be part of Murray's supposed character-building process, because they believe all courses of action are *amoral*. Regarding such nihilists, Lovering claims God's hiddenness is no more compatible with character building than would be coercion brought about from His non-hiddenness.

Lovering offers potential rejoinders (p97-105), that would take us off course by requiring our study of metaethics. For our purposes I will offer a thought which broadly undercuts the points he makes. While nihilists deny that moral judgments about good and evil have a truth value, unless they *also* resist belief in God (and therefore are irrelevant to the ADH), they may be *naturally open by conscience* to intentionally build character consistent with Murray's soul-making. However, this insinuates a deeper problem for free will type responses like Murray's that I take up with my thesis of Originating Initiative in Chapter Five.

Now to a paper by Trakakis writing with reference to Hick and arguing along with Schellenberg.

## Freedom and Belief: Trakakis on Hick and Schellenberg.

Trakakis (2007) considers Hick's soul-making response to be inadequate. Hick argues that epistemic distance is necessary to preserve free will, which would be impacted if God's existence were *unambiguously* evident. Much literature on Hick's theodicy disputes the sort of free will that Hick wants

to defend; whether freedom for moral choice, or freedom to believe in God, or freedom to personally relate with God. Trakakis reads Hick to intend the freedom to enter relationship with God and proceeds to argue along with Schellenberg that epistemic distance is not required for that. Trakakis agrees with Schellenberg by claiming that believing God exists *does not* affect our freedom to choose personal relations with God.<sup>67</sup>

Reading Trakakis, Hick separates *intellectual assent* to God's existence, from *assent to enter relationship*, because the latter requires devotion through faith, and intellectual assent does not. Hick is in good company with Jesus, who told us that the devil and his demons believe God exists.<sup>68</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre thought that undeniable proof about God's existence would preclude *freely* placing our trust and faith in God, which is essential to the Christian religion (1959, p77). Newman famously outlined different grades of assent to God's existence (1870), and Hick suggests a valid proof of God's existence need only justify a 'notional assent' in Newman's terms, which is insufficient to influence a worshipful response because it does not equate to belief in God as an existing being. Notional assent to a proposition involves understanding its elements only as *notions*, which would not present a real choice of whether to relate with an existing God. These points allude to a difficulty for Schellenberg defending the idea that belief in God is compatible with freely choosing relationship, because propositional belief that God exists (for Schellenberg) means belief that cannot reasonably be denied, including that He is a perfect loving God being worthy of worship (by definition), so a non-resistant rational person *could have no reason* not to worship. It appears to follow that a choice not to worship must be grounded in emotion or delusion, which equates to resistance. The theist makes room for free choice because faith or hope that God exists is voluntary, unlike assenting to belief which is not voluntary. Chapter Five through Seven will include more focus on these ideas.

Assent to the cosmological argument might not in itself induce a religious response, but more engaging experience could motivate further investigation or adventure. Everything hinges on the encounter which generates the belief that God exists and to what extent the belief content extends beyond abstract notions to a loving personal God. For Schellenberg's claim to be true, that any believer could still freely reject relationship, we must question the irrationality of rejecting perfect love that is worthy of worship, and whether that is equivalent to resistance.

Trakakis cites somebody embittered by life experience or not prepared to change in a way for accepting God into their lives, and he points to the phenomenon of believers with wayward lives or those who fail to respond in religiously appropriate ways. This is too quick, because it is a central tenet of Christianity

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<sup>67</sup> Trakakis does not contend with freedom for moral choice as defended by Swinburne.

<sup>68</sup> James 7:2.

that *everyone* except Christ,<sup>69</sup> falls short in sin to varying degrees, which should prompt a humble acknowledgment of a need for relationship with God. Every person might present a unique case, so the analysis is difficult if not impossible to reduce into neat concepts for judging Hick's greater good from non-belief. This theme might not lend itself to analytic rigor because the *range* of belief content and subjective dispositions are incomputable.

In closing this section, I will summarise my argument from above against Schellenberg. Notional assent to a proposition involves understanding its elements only as *notions*, which would not present a real choice of whether to relate with an existing God. Then Schellenberg's idea that belief in God is compatible with *freely* choosing relationship, while propositional belief that God exists means belief that cannot reasonably be denied according to Schellenberg, including that He is perfect loving and worthy of worship (by definition), so a non-resistant rational person *could have no reason* not to worship. So that choice not to worship must be grounded in emotion or delusion, which equates to resistance. Therefore, we should reject Schellenberg's claim that propositional belief allows freely chosen relationship with God.

Now to Schellenberg's general position or blanket policy in relation to any greater goods proposed by theists for justifying God's hiddenness.

### Schellenberg's General Response: The Accommodationist Strategy.

Let us now consider Schellenberg's 'accommodationist' strategy. I will intermittently call on his idea over the rest of chapter.

Schellenberg (2005b) announces an all-encompassing or blanket sort of response to greater-goods responses to the ADH. It is a general response because he claims that any of the proposed greater goods as far as they purport to justify or explain God's allowing nr-nb may be achieved in conjunction with belief in God's existence, so God could enter relationship *and achieve those goods at the same time*. He coins the phrase 'accommodationist strategy' for *accommodating* proposed greater goods *within* relationship, seeing God able to provide the best of both worlds as it were.

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<sup>69</sup> Catholic doctrine understands Mary also to have been sinless, but by the grace of God.

Schellenberg first takes aim at what I take to be the low hanging fruit of Swinburne's proposal for the socially derived good of the transmission of belief and faith between people. Schellenberg admits this could be a supremely worthwhile good, that people care for the intellectual and spiritual well-being of others, but that it can be realised in multiple ways which do not exclude belief in God. Schellenberg deems that such goods as sharing of beliefs and culture are a *type* of good which may be *tokened* in equally good ways instantiated after acquiring belief in God, with unlimited opportunities for cooperative investigation carrying great consequence for how things go without the need for doubting God's existence.

Allowing that sharing knowledge and helping others overcome doubt about God might exhibit *deep value* in accord with *deep responsibility*, Schellenberg suggests a sympathetic conceptual framework involving God's trust and accorded dignity and surmises how several factors undermine the sharing of knowledge being a justifier of nr-nb (p289-291). The crux of his idea is that God could give us responsibility in other matters of equal value and dignity without jeopardising such an important consequence on our seemingly *arbitrary individual power* to influence others. Schellenberg also applies his general accommodation as far as there could be any amount of deeply valuable learning to be pursued once one is in relationship that accords with deep responsibility.

Schellenberg (2005b) takes up the more impressive proposal regarding the good of free moral choice (as proposed by Swinburne and Murray). Schellenberg contends that arguments for free moral choice encounter serious problems of application regarding God's cognitive proximity to us. He claims that God's influence or effect on moral freedom arguably may vary across a spectrum of epistemic distance from: "forcefully present on a continual basis [...to...] God only providing evidence causally sufficient for belief in the absence of resistance." (p292) Schellenberg concedes that Swinburne's position may be persuasive only in the first instance but not as God's epistemic distance increases.

This is interesting, but it somewhat muddies the water in relation to Schellenberg's insistence that relationship is only possible with propositional belief that God exists. Perhaps he envisages the believer casting God's existence to the back of his mind or blocking it out altogether, in order that they make moral choices influenced by how 'faraway' they imagine God.

McKim (2001) takes up Schellenberg's posit about epistemic distance providing scope for moral free choice. McKim thinks about a believer's capacity for free moral response and points out that we can only wonder both about intimacy with God and what the consequences of that experience would be on our actions. Given that limit to our imagination, he suggests that we can realistically think about our moral actions under the mundane conditions of them being apparent to *other people* (p37) and be sure that the influence on our actions under those conditions will be at least as serious as if they were

revealed to God. McKim claims that the restraint we feel under the mundane condition, deriving from shame, embarrassment, loss of respect and perhaps material loss, would also restrain us under God's gaze.

Both McKim and Schellenberg talk about a believer's capacity to rationalise or self-deceive about their wrong actions and how this must at least complicate our assessment of Swinburne's argument if not undermine its rationale. McKim suggests that people could "creatively redescribe" (2001, p38) their wrong actions while constantly feeling God's presence, even though they should know that they are wrong. I expect psychologists would have a lot to say on this idea regarding the levels of self-deception and clever rationalising for feasible redescription.

Trying to assess this while speaking for myself, I surely rationalise my activity when I sense I am doing something that somehow isn't quite on the level, which could be a form of self-deception whilst one is obviously biased under one's own perspective. However, that does not extend to clear foul play. I expect I surely would be more careful about even slightly wrong actions if I constantly felt the presence of an all-knowing God. My outlook is hardly ever coloured by the thought of eternal consequences, but rather by some sense of relating to the highest good that is God. More to say about that in Chapter Seven. I will not belabour this snippet stream of consciousness, only to mention that my faith is not like always feeling God's presence, although I will at times reflect on God's all-knowing perspective, especially when my envisaged course of action is morally complicated. There seems very large scope for creatively redescribing morally borderline actions, but less scope for those that may be wrong with quite clear-cut sense, especially those with potentially negative consequences for others.

It is intriguing to wonder about the ways in which God's constant presence might affect a person. Swinburne emphasises the freedom to *harm others* for considering most meaningful moral choice, and there seems less mileage in McKay's suggestion of imaginative redescription when harmful consequences are plain.

Schellenberg critiques the idea that the risk of wrongdoing justifies hiddenness, and he is unpersuaded that God's hiddenness is justified by the good of free choice, because if *believers* have scope for some immoral choice as all sides admit they do, then God need not be withdrawn from non-believers (ibid, p292-294), but this ignores the sort of freedom for more serious immorality which Swinburne thinks is most meaningful. Schellenberg reads Murray to agree with him that God could modulate religious experience to maintain distance for free choice and soul-building, "...in a way that removes reasonable non-belief while also leaving open plenty of bad choices..." (ibid p293). This is to assert that relationship should be of supreme value to God such that making space for some bad choice is not a valuable justification for allowing reasonable non-belief. This is close to the atheist objection against the free will

defence to the problem of evil. The atheist insists that an omnibenevolent God would create a world where we are only free to do good. In both the contexts of the problem of evil and the free choice defence to hiddenness by Swinburne, the theist must think that free will to perform evil, or the predicament of faith and doubt with reasonable non-belief, must in some way serve God's scheme. My thesis in Chapter Five through Seven will argue for that.

Now to a specific move Schellenberg makes in relation to the proposed greater good of soul-making.

### Freedom, Self-Determination, and Divine Control.

Schellenberg (2007) makes an intriguing move, by accepting for the sake of argument that belief will modify behaviour to do the right thing because of certain punishment or reward. He thinks this opens a space for an improved mode of soul-making, by elevating choice beyond purely self-interested motives for the afterlife, so to cultivate love of the good *for its own sake*: While prudent self-interest might never be extinguished, the person would have the possibility to more and more choose the good for its own sake to the point where non-self-interested motives encourage a more virtuous character building quite separate from self-interest, "and all without ever being in a position to make seriously wrong choices!" (p215). His idea is that within relationship we can become much more deeply attuned or trained to choose the good for morally more admirable reasons, which can cultivate motives and propensity to reflect the virtue of the good for its own sake (note, this resonates with my brief description a page back of how I experience moral choice, that is without potential consequences of heaven or hell bearing down). A different sort of *freedom* is made possible by God *not being hidden* by this "possibility of an individual choosing the good in a deeper sense than is realized simply by choosing what is good." (ibid).

Swinburne might respond that even if this sort of freedom does amount to a genuine moral freedom, it does cut off the possibility for a serious form of self-determination, whereby a person controls their future with an ability for seriously wrong action. Schellenberg repeats his assertion about the primacy of relations: that God would surely prefer not to empower us with such self-determination if it can separate us from Him in this life, when the alternative provides us with access to interaction with Him *and* substantial opportunity for soul-building at the same time. Schellenberg concludes that bad choices which could condemn a person to hell might be off the table in that case, while there would still be scope in choosing the good and whether we enter heaven, and a person with the right values would view the loss of paradise as significant a loss of well-being as going to hell.

Schellenberg makes a deeper point about autonomous self-determination, which I sense as a looming challenge to the rationale of any theist position (including mine), that requires freely engaging God in the absence of sufficient evidence for belief:

The critic exaggerates the extent to which what we have here is a power of self-determination in the first place. Even in the proposed scenario, what humans are and are not able to become is very much God's choice, not their own, since God determines their nature and all the parameters of the choices they make, thus drastically limiting the number of possible 'ultimate futures'. (2005b, p295).

If the theist accepts Schellenberg's premise that there exists *nr-nb*, then she must envisage *free assent* or *free engagement* as a greater good, or else why would God leave belief 'up to us' under conditions of insufficient evidence for propositional belief. The theist potentially faces the problem of explaining how the agent can take responsibility for assent if God determines both our nature and our parameters of choice. This is an analogue of the classic paradox of ultimate responsibility perhaps most fully presented by Galen Strawson (1994), after Nietzsche, who castigated the notion of self-determination as nonsense: "to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness."<sup>70</sup> I take up this problem with the free will aspect of my thesis in the next chapter. There I take up two classic free will problems presented by Schellenberg (2005 & 2007) against greater goods, *one of which* I claim to nullify with my thesis of Originating Initiative being an operational good for free initiation of relationship with God.

We are now in a position to examine another type of hiddenness challenge that brings into focus not God's nature or moral purposes, but the interpretive instability generated by apparent 'divine silence' that I recall from Chapter One. Divine Silence is the experience of a believer in relationship with God coming to find God silent.

### Hiddenness vs. Silence: Two Models of Divine Absence.

Schellenberg (2007) offers a further general way to accommodate *any* greater good which the theist might propose. Recall from Chapter One the phenomenon of 'divine silence' whereby a believer experiences God's absence or withdrawal. Schellenberg asserts that such a withdrawal that tests a person's faith could facilitate any number of goods which are alternately proposed by the theist to justify

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<sup>70</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*.

non-belief: “what possible reason could [the theist] have for insisting that God would leave some in doubt and non-belief in order to further those goods?” (p217). Schellenberg’s claim is that any proposed good from hiddenness with non-belief must be of a sort that cannot be realised instead by divine silence with belief, because God would prefer for the good instantiated that way. Schellenberg makes a somewhat flippant assertion without explanation that the “two sorts of hiddenness are phenomenologically very similar and so might be expected to produce similar effects.” (ibid). This assertion is flippant because as far as one might imagine, the phenomenology could be very *dissimilar*. Schellenberg may just mean purely sensual phenomenology, but that is an absurdly thin basis upon which to infer that experience involving *doubt* from hiddenness would produce similar effects as experience under *loneliness* from silence.

A purely sensual view of the phenomenon may have purchase under the guise of a stringent empiricism but that would unfairly shackle our thinking about religious experience from the start. It is surely more relevant to hold up for comparison a thicker concept of experience. Even limiting the comparison to phenomenology, the unity of a sensed experience includes *cognitive* phenomenology stemming from elements such as attitudes, intention, memories and *not least*, belief.<sup>71</sup>

That thin and simplistic phenomenological framing perhaps is what licenses Schellenberg to say that we are basically presented a choice between two pictures. The first is the divine silence scenario where God’s revelation is basic, and He withdraws to enable some good while never removing the bridge to relationship. The second picture where He is hidden and allows for non-belief while selectively revealing Himself only to some and not others. There is at least space for a third picture if we challenge Schellenberg’s constraint on God not being, “too much of a 'distant father' to relate easily with children.” (2007, p207). The third picture is that of there being good in the project *itself* of seeking God under conditions of non-belief, including the possibility of a uniquely good consequence in God’s view that justifies the existence of non-resistant (or reasonable) non-belief. That third picture summarily portrays my position coming later.

Before I move to the remaining third of this chapter which brings together later developments and contributions to the greater goods sort of response, I will briefly mention here another prong of the accommodationist strategy which evokes God’s infinite resourcefulness, because it invites a previous rejoinder of mine.

Schellenberg evokes the notion of the “infinite resourcefulness of God” (ibid, p210) allowing unique relationship with everyone and enabling unlimited and unending discovery and experience for every

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<sup>71</sup> See Strawson (2011), Smith (2018), also Bayne and Montague (2011).

one of them, and that *infinitely* rich character of God is the *greatest* good anyone could possibly experience, then there will not be any sort of good that inclines God to sacrifice relationship for it.

This framing of the relationship, consistent with perfect being theology, happens again to resemble the theist model of Heaven, by way of relationship and discovery being ever deeper and never ending. Schellenberg suggests there could be new opportunities at any stage in the relationship for the exercise of proposed goods such as, “moral freedom and responsibility, the cultivation of character, cooperation with others, and meaningful investigation and intellectual development...” (ibid). While there may be repeatedly new scope for depth in those ways, it seems obvious that the array of live options would be profoundly different if there was not a sense of freedom for moral choice. The theist envisages Schellenberg’s scenario being instantiated in eternity with God, literally realising the best of both worlds.

Just to mention another major contribution in the same ballpark as Swinburne and Murray is from Moser (2008) who broadly evokes free will as a greater good, presenting a book-length account about free volitional engagement with God as required by perfect love. We will study Moser from whom I take some inspiration while I introduce my thesis in the next chapter.

The remaining section about greater goods covers an array of ideas and responses in the literature that I will range over all together as a bundle, and not under separate headings.

## Later Developments and Contemporary Contributions.

King (2009) reviews greater-goods responses but is mainly concerned with obstacles to divine revelation which are not directly relevant if we are taking Schellenberg on his own terms. Soren Kierkegaard and Ferreira (2002) are in the same boat by thinking that God’s transcendence means we cannot talk of relations with God in the way Schellenberg does. Michael Rea (2019) is prominent in the hiddenness literature and develops the thesis that God’s transcendent *personality* means that Schellenberg’s idea of perfect love is on the wrong track.

Cullison (2010) argues that a great and noble good of ultimate *self-sacrifice* is only possible when God’s existence *can be doubted*, because if God exists then God’s ultimate justice in eternity will balance that sacrifice with reward, and then sacrifice with no mind to reward is ruled out. Cullison surmises that a world where everyone realises their greatest good in relationship with God as Schellenberg argues, may not be better “on the whole” than a world where a lot believe but some do not who can genuinely

sacrifice for one another (p128). Cullison thinks this good is not vulnerable to Schellenberg's accommodation strategy because genuine self-sacrifice *requires* lack of belief that God exists.<sup>72</sup>

Cullison also alludes to wider reasons related to sacrifice for why God might want doubt in the world. The suggestion is that God desires there to be epistemically good reasons for people to believe that naturalism may be true, so that we each must face the "real possibility of our own eternal nonexistence." (p130), and that any good we do with God in mind may always be attended with a lingering chance that it is ultimately for nothing. This possibility provides the sense of risk that is required for passionate faith that cannot be fully justified by reason alone. I expect Schellenberg will demand to know what inherent value there could be in such risk that warrants people missing the chance of relationship with God. My position later partly will try to answer that demand.

Schellenberg (2015) offers some response to Cullison's idea, by airing the thought that belief should not be equated to God's continual presence, which I earlier argued to be unsatisfactory because one either believes God will judge or not. He also points out that a believer still must demonstrate great courage in self-sacrifice by overcoming the biological impulse to self-preservation, which would require great strength whether one believes he is facing an afterlife or not. This may be so, but a believer faces a profoundly different fear while being conscious of God awaiting them. Schellenberg does not mention the broader theme from Cullison which connects with my research later in this thesis: that God makes way for epistemically good reasons for our thinking naturalism may be true, with a live possibility that we may be dust for eternity and that our good lives are ultimately for nothing. This possibility provides the sense of risk that is required for passionate faith that cannot be fully justified by reason alone.

Dumsday (2012) explains why God might allow nr-nb for preventing a bad consequence rather than enabling a good. Again, with reference to scripture he remarks that people may negatively react to God with "overwhelming jealousy and resentment—jealousy of God and resentment at not being more godlike [themselves]." (p43). Dumsday thinks God may not promote belief in some cases so not to activate that resentment. I take it that such unrealised resentful disposition would have to last a lifetime if this reason is to account for those who never achieve belief. Schellenberg could reply that such a disposition equates to a lack of ability and simply misses his target profile of those non-resistant, and anyway God's infinitely rich resources could engage everyone in a way according to how He made them.

Dumsday makes a claim that may reveal an incorrect reading of the sort of belief Schellenberg requires for the ADH. Regarding direct experience of God, Dumsday argues that it is better, "to live in partial

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<sup>72</sup> Cullison suggests this good of ultimate self-sacrifice requiring doubt about God might help resolve the controversy about Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross (complicated by Christ being omniscient who could not think the Father had abandoned him). Jesus' temporary doubt would allow ultimate sacrifice.

ignorance, *by faith rather than by sight*, the more likely it is that we will react with gratitude and relief when the presence of God is revealed.” (p48, my emphasis). Even though we may interpret Dumsday to be speaking figuratively with the phrase ‘sight’ by just meaning perhaps something like ‘more apparent’, nowhere does Schellenberg characterise belief by God being revealed, indeed he repeats talk about God *moderating* suitable experience for any able and non-resistant individual (2005b, pp292–293, 297), rendering the chance of unresolvable resentment in the process, somewhat moot.

Dumsday (2016) proposes a different tack, with the idea that a certain proportion of non-resistant non-believers must abound in the population so that rational doubt by resistant individuals are not influenced just by the *number* of believers, to attempt relationship before they are properly disposed. Dumsday (partly drawing on Howard-Snyder’s ideas that I discussed at the start of this chapter) investigates the more general idea that relationship with God may require different sorts of maturity or disposition that might render a person ill-disposed to relationship with God, with disordered motivation by simply following the pack (which I notice is common in society in any number of ways). Schellenberg will reply that God’s unlimited resource and prime motive of relationship could negotiate with any non-resistant individual (consciously or not). As interesting as Dumsday’s reflections are, the dispute boils down to a person’s readiness for relationship with God. Against Dumsday and others proposing various propensities for relationship, Schellenberg will insist that individuals simply must be capable of understanding and while non-resistant.

At bottom this disagreement arises from Schellenberg’s simple view of perfect love versus substantial pre-requisites for relationship, which he alleges are motivated by theists trying to explain what they find in the world, rather than owning up to the inconsistency between perfect love and that finding. According to Schellenberg God would fold any disposition, negative or otherwise, into a complex and reciprocal loving relationship: “...wouldn’t we have to conclude that continued openness, appropriately implemented to meet the occasion, would be more likely to facilitate the growth of a meaningful and positive relationship over time than a retreat into hiddenness involving the absence of belief?” (2015, p63).

Schellenberg (2015) revises his position on the good of free moral choice, with an intriguing suggestion that God could have chosen not to evolve individuals who are “morally weak and impressionable” (p66), who find themselves morally constrained by knowledge of God. I do not know where to start with this point, but he makes it only in passing. So will I.

Schellenberg there also repeats his idea that the objector need not envisage God as intrusively or overwhelmingly present, but more subtly felt so to present some space as it were, for a sense of moral freedom. I wonder about the coherence of this suggestion because one either knows that God will

judge every moral action or one does not, regardless of how present He is sensed. Schellenberg makes a couple of gestures to support how this could work: Firstly, there could be empirical evidence universally known which is judged on balance as explained by the activity of God, but “would not be psychologically intrusive even when effective in producing and maintaining belief in God.” (p67). It is unclear to me what Schellenberg could mean here. Is it that one could ‘psychologically’ put the belief that God judges every moral choice to the back of one’s mind when deciding on a course of action? That would seem to be a form of self-delusion or inauthentic conscious suppression, which by his own measure equates to resistance.

A second cognitive scenario which Schellenberg airs in suggesting how God could be experientially remote so that believers feel liberated to decide or act according to temptation is, “everyone everywhere could be gifted with a continuing quiet sense of God’s existence on par with belief in other minds or belief in an external world.” (ibid). This will not do. What meaningful import is achieved by holding in abeyance the all-pervasive evidence of the external world, except perhaps as a meditative exercise of imagination? Schellenberg’s idea is that believers need not have God at the forefront of their minds, while taking His existence for granted as they do trees and people (like the culture around Schellenberg told him through childhood, I recall). “For those who are especially sensitive or vulnerable to moral influence, the sense of God’s presence could recede or even be withdrawn altogether in moments of temptation.” (ibid). He remarks that the possible scope for believers freeing themselves of moral influence is limited only by imagination. I believe I have a lively imagination, but I cannot overcome a cognitive dissonance when I try to imagine what Schellenberg says he can. If the believer is effectively certain that God exists like Schellenberg himself growing up, then temporarily forgetting, or putting to the back of one’s mind that He exists to enable the chance of mischief is surely a form of self-delusion. Then we have resistance again.

If the thought instead was of God instigating His temporary withdrawal, then that would seem to rob us of part of our personality, which is integrated with belief in God, at times of temptation. That suggestion is ad hoc at best, and probably absurd under scrutiny. Belief in God frames moral outlook which is integral to personality, and a pared back personality would degrade that person’s will whose freedom is in question. God’s withdrawal would be like a temporary brain injury and any relevant notion of free will or moral responsibility falls out of the picture. Another thought, God’s varying presence would impart a disturbing inconsistency beyond one’s control and yet informing or affecting one’s choices. I estimate a cascade of psychological and other issues around this question that I will not pursue. Schellenberg needs to say a lot more to qualify his suggestion for serious consideration.

Schellenberg (2015, ch5) offers another new line against the free will response by canvassing the notion of moral *supererogatory* action which exceed the duty to perform what may be required to avoid divine wrath. Schellenberg thinks that such activity would involve a choice of destiny through significant moral freedom that God could enable while being perfectly open to relationship. There certainly would be a range of choice but the practically live options would not be morally wrong, and this is remote from any notion of free will I have ever encountered.

Schellenberg (2017) addresses 'sceptical theist' responses to the ADH that variously appeal to the unknowability of God or His reasons (which I flagged and isolated from my research back in Chapter One). However, also in this paper he pushes the priority of perfect openness against any goods purporting to explain non-belief. He repeats his family metaphor, "that it may be helpful to think of a loving father or wife or sister or friend who never lacks [God-like] resources." (p8). I will not get into this again now, only to offer a thought from Helen DeCruz (2016) who researches cognitive science and sees that Schellenberg's parental analogies conform to a recent western model of attachment, and God could well desire something different for some people.

Teeninga (2017 & 2020) aims to undercut Schellenberg's accommodationist response with a possible worlds approach for weighing potential value differences in worlds with and without nr-nb, and makes the case that cumulative goods in worlds with nr-nb would be more valuable than worlds without. The crux of Teeninga's point is that various goods could only be secured with non-belief, which add to the sum of goods that are enjoyed overall upon gaining belief. Both papers inevitably assume too much about value to secure the idea against Schellenberg who stipulates the unlimited value of being in relationship compared to without.

Teeninga also makes the case that a mix of (unique) lives and testimonies including stories made possible by non-belief, make for necessarily more learning opportunities of value than would be available if everyone believed. This sort of claim depends on a more fundamental idea we read earlier in Cullison, that non-belief allows the valuable experience that all meaning may in the end amount to nothing and that sense of risk infusing a passionate faith or hope that cannot be fully justified by reason alone.

For completeness I shall just note without critique two other papers which argue for goods we have already encountered.

Bozzo (2019) presents circuitous analysis which he thinks resists Schellenberg's contention that the pre-eminent good of relationship effectively forestalls any goods from non-belief. Bozzo concludes that relationship in the afterlife will be endless, and so perfect love would mean delaying the start of a never-

ending relationship in order to temporarily secure increased overall well-being from goods only available outside of relationship.

Robert Di Ceglie (2021) argues that ‘No fault unbelief’ (which we may interpret as equivalent to nr-nb), provides a social climate that will encourage believers to deepen their faith and seek closer relationship with God.

For closing this chapter, here is a summary list of the greater goods we have seen proposed to justify or explain why God might allow non-resistant non-belief:

- Moral freedom for actions.
- Moral freedom for character development.
- Freedom to investigate God partly conditioned by doubt.
- Socially derived good of the transmission of belief between people.
- Spiritual deficiencies that would prevent obedience to Gods will.
- cognitive or emotional dispositions better not confirmed because likely to corrupt opportunity for future relationship.
- Voluntary engagement requiring non-propositional belief.
- Self-sacrifice requiring non-belief.
- Friendship with God by helping him in the high task of introducing people to belief.
- To spare creaturely resentment.
- Conscious explicit awareness of God may require period of nr-nb.
- Too many believers may incline others to belief purely because of numbers, which is not conducive to proper engagement.
- To inculcate the emotional risk of trust or hope, not justified by reason alone. I will develop this element of risk or chance-taking as part of my own thesis in the following chapters.

## Conclusion of Chapter Four.

We have reviewed theist explanations for why God might allow non-resistant non-belief because of purported goods that are *temporarily* more valuable or important than relationship. It is not very plausible that any one of these goods can explain all instances of nr-nb, but these and other possible goods may together offer a cumulative explanation. I have not researched contending explanations for

Schellenberg's specific categories of nr-nb that were outlined in earlier chapters. The concentration instead was on those goods potentially applicable to my target of non-resistant atheists and agnostics in the secular west which helps set up my free will response as part of my thesis for originating Initiative. I have intimated against Schellenberg's idea that any proposed goods for deferring relationship could be accommodated *within* relationship, or that God may have created a world with universal belief in the first place. My thesis in the following chapters will argue for the operational good of hiddenness as it allows for authentic relationship that may undergird these other goods.

We now move to what can be thought of as the second half of the dissertation and focus on my thesis which carries a welcome shift in tone from discussion of the views of others to my own positive position.

## Chapter 5

### Originating Initiative

“...any religion which does not say that God is hidden is not true. And any religion which does not give the reason why does not enlighten” (Blaise Pascal 1670)

#### Introduction

This chapter introduces my constructive proposal: that non-resistant non-belief (nr-nb) is consistent with divine love because God values an agent’s free, volunteered initiation of relationship. I call this *Originating Initiative*. Whereas Schellenberg argues that divine hiddenness rules out God’s existence, I propose that nr-nb allows the good of a person’s voluntary initial move toward relationship with God.

Section One develops the concept of *Originating Initiative* (OI), against the backdrop of free will. Drawing inspiration from William James, Paul Moser, and others, I argue that relationship requires some agentic overture, and not merely the passive reception of belief. As a vehicle for this, I introduce *Gumption* — taking a chance on religious adventure with an attitude of hopeful-acceptance, whereby moral maturity is not a precondition, but minimal courage and humility is sufficient, and perhaps necessary, for initiating authentic relationship.

Section Two explores *Gumption* in terms of risk or taking a chance: emotional vulnerability, surrender of control, moral uncertainty, and exposure to social judgment. They underscore how humility and a measure of courage are involved in OI, like the risk component of other potentially transformative relational commitments such as romantic love, parenthood or developing friendship.

Section Three situates OI within the philosophy of free will. I engage Schellenberg’s two classic objections: determinism and constitutive luck. OI assumes an indeterministic framework, acknowledging the “problem of luck” but offering *Gumption* as a libertarian exercise of freedom. OI responds to the problem of constitutive luck (via Strawson’s “basic argument”) by proposing that in risking relationship and ceding some control, the agent exceeds or outruns their constituted disposition.

OI supplies a novel greater good without unfairly presuming theist sympathy in the non-resistor: the authentic freedom to begin relationship with God. This sets the stage for Chapters Six and Seven, which examine the epistemology, rationality, and warrant of hopeful-acceptance for Gumption.

I object to a constrained take of Schellenberg's argument pertaining to western secularity,<sup>73</sup> on the grounds that perfect love is *compatible* with non-resistant non-belief (nr-nb), because an agent's *originating-initiative* (with non-belief) for relationship is valued by God. I propose that nr-nb allows for the *operational good* of a *volunteered* initiation of relationship with God that *originates* with the agent, which I call Originating-Initiative (OI). An original idea of my thesis proposes the agent's taking a chance, effecting a rejoinder to a classic free will objection that Schellenberg poses against greater-goods responses.

Explicitly, my thesis rejects premise (4) which states: If for any capable finite person S and time t, God is at t open to being in a personal relationship with S at t, then for any capable finite person S and time t, it is not the case that S is at t non-resistantly in a state of non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

I claim that God's existence (and perfect love) is *consistent* with the case that S is at t non-resistantly in a state of non-belief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

I will lay out my thesis for Originating-Initiative (OI) across two main portions. Section one is something of a primer with related and background ideas that help situate my thesis. Section Two is more daring and provocative,<sup>74</sup> applying the operational good of OI (compatible with non-resistant-non-belief) for free initiation of relationship in response to the free will objection.

## Section 1. Formulating the notion of Originating Initiative.

A central doctrine of theism is that God created man in his own image (*imago dei*) which partly means humans are created with conscious free agency, enabling humans to engage in autonomous loving relationship with Him. Classic (or 'mere') Theism understands God as valuing our freely engaging with Him rather than us being 'puppet underlings' without choice. C.S. Lewis coined that phrase and thinks that God gifted humans with free will because it is:

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<sup>73</sup> See earlier, p.6-7 of Chapter Three where I explain that my thesis will concern 'Western-secular' nr-nb.

<sup>74</sup> I have not found any similar idea in the literature, which of course is not necessarily a good sign.

...the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him. (1952, p1).

Ekstrom (2016) connects free will with the idea of *imago dei* such that free choice may be of intrinsic value by expressing a uniquely personal act in which, “we express or experience our being made in the image of God” (p9). In that sense I understand free choice to manifest a glimmer of how God exists, by people sharing or enjoying a feature of His.

My thesis takes seriously William James’s view that autonomously engaging a person requires “that we make some initial overture of friendship, so getting to know God may require some overture on our part towards Him” (quoted in Fales 2006, p89). Without such overture, relationship (usually <sup>75</sup>) will not commence because God values our free approach. OI shares the intuitive thrust of the theist philosopher Paul Moser (2002, 2008, 2013, 2019). Moser contends that *humble* seeking of God is necessary for relationship, involving the person’s moral capacity, and is not limited to seeking evidence for belief. However, Schellenberg persuasively objects (2010, 2019) that Moser’s position is overly theological and begs the question against his hiddenness argument by incorporating a basic element of Christian sympathy as a primitive. I think Schellenberg is correct about that, but I take much of Moser’s thought to be helpful to the extent that voluntary initiation by the agent is required for engaging God, *beyond* only seeking evidence for non-voluntary belief, which Schellenberg argues should suffice. I will outline some of Moser’s insights insofar they help inspire my concept of OI, while I intend to satisfy Schellenberg’s atheist philosophical axioms.

I conceive a crucial enabling factor on the part of the person for Originating Initiative to be what I call ‘*Gumption*’, defined as ‘sometime humbly taking a chance on religious adventure with a tentative attitude of hopeful-acceptance’. Chapter Six will consider issues around the rationality and epistemology of hopeful-acceptance. Much of the Chapter Seven will develop a case for the warrant of *Gumption* from fundamentally basic intuitions which I offer as dialectic against Schellenberg’s potential complaint that my thesis like Moser’s illegitimately begs prior Christian sympathy. I will argue why a non-resistant non-believer *should* exercise *Gumption* while not believing the proposition that God exists.

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<sup>75</sup> I am not offering a constraint on how God could operate relationship, but how run of the mill relations originate. God may have purposes requiring atypical initiation with some people.

Moser coins the phrase ‘cognitive idolatry’ (2002), which points to the practice of a seeker requiring or expecting conclusive evidence of God’s existence without any concern for God’s will in relation to that seeking. According to Moser, a seeker requiring rationally compelling evidence for God’s existence is exercising cognitively idolatry. Moser’s idea implies that a *volitionally passive* exercise of investigating a hypothesis will not provide access to God because it lacks any element of passionate seeking and humble openness for finding God. Insofar as nr-nb is volitionally passive in regard to enquiring about the existence of God, because belief cannot be volunteered, such seeking will not suffice for initiating relationship with God.

A later phrase Moser employs is that evidence for God will only be “purposely available” (2008, p83), in that one’s purpose should be to find God and not just to evaluate evidence. Moser doesn’t explicitly engage with Schellenberg’s concept of nr-nb, but I take his ideas to counsel that theists should expect nr-nb to exist because some *active* volitional impetus is required that is sensitive to God’s will. As far as nr-nb is a purely rational disposition and not conveying any purpose in the seeker beyond evaluating a rational threshold for belief, then nr-nb will not promote finding God.

OI might be characterised as something of a fallback from Moser’s strong requirement that we must “appropriately value evidence for God’s reality, [and] take a morally and volitionally serious interest in the availability of such evidence.” (ibid, p86). The impetus from the non-believer required for OI doesn’t require as much commitment from the seeker, but instead something like a minimal humility. Moser’s notion of purposely available evidence would seem to imply an anticipatory bias on how one might view or interpret evidence, and Schellenberg (2004) complains that such sympathetic bias or attitude toward evidence is naturally unlikely in someone who is not *already* Christian oriented (p35). OI is intended to fit a realistic setting for initiating relationship from ‘square one,’ as it were, with that person not much, if at all, oriented toward religion, such as our Western secular non-resistant non-believer.

Moser sets the bar on God’s engaging a person with a morality gauge such that a person must be of good moral character before He might enter relationship. For OI there is no hypothesised expectation of a moral standard, but only the idea of God’s valuing free initiation enroute to authentic love so that beginning relationship is not imposed by Him.<sup>76</sup> In this way I am honouring Schellenberg’s prioritising of perfect love in the overall picture.

The crucial enabling factor on the part of the person for OI is *Gumption*. I define ‘*Gumption*’ as ‘sometimes humbly taking a chance on religious adventure with a tentative attitude of hopeful-

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<sup>76</sup> God’s purposes may include special plans for initiating with some individuals. I am not suggesting a necessary condition for relationship with God.

acceptance'. I picture a classic consequence of Gumption as *hearing* the Gospel. By 'hearing' I allude to any experience of close or proper attention, including fully attentive reading. Gumption is an action operating as a realiser for the role of Originating Initiative, and could take various forms such as prayer, liturgy, pilgrimage, or acts of selfless service while consciously inviting God into relationship; "Knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7). Gumption may be exercised through prayer, liturgy, service, or other volunteered acts without specific restriction only as God deems fit.

A person has *no Gumption* if they are always risk averse or passive and never take up any religious adventure beyond intellectual consideration of evidence for God's existence. Taking the chance of religious adventure carries an amorphous element of risk, which I will explore in Section Two below. I aim that my thesis for OI will not be vulnerable to the sort of objection Schellenberg raises against Moser by imparting or presuming Christian sympathy from the non-believer. That aim will comport my stance through Chapters Six and Seven. Chapter Six will explore the rationality of 'hopeful-acceptance' for OI and Chapter Seven deals with the value and motivation for Gumption including a section on Transformative Choice Theory, where I will argue that Gumption has a value even if God does not exist.

A brief note on a potentially looming question the reader might have about ambiguity regarding the target of prayer, if it is not informed by propositional belief. This question of religious ambiguity is a very large topic and a problem for everyone, as it were.<sup>77</sup> I will sidestep that issue with the thought that any ambiguity will be experientially resolved by God.

### Related ideas and Inspiration for Originating Initiative in the literature.

Now that we have some framing and motivation on the table, this next section will present the notion of OI in dialogue with ideas from the literature, as something of a *primer* for the following chapter on epistemology and rationality. I will point out a family of theories aiming to explicate the notion of faith in God, while keep in mind that OI is specifically pitched as an apparatus for an objection to Schellenberg's argument and *not as a theory of faith*.

We might imagine the adventure instigated by Gumption as operating like a *cognitive forerunner* or *instigator* for the tentative propositional/affective attitude of 'hopeful-acceptance'. I will spell out the epistemological nature of that attitude in Chapter Six. There is a cluster or family of theories which cite a range of cognitive or affective attitudes referred to in the literature as *doxastic venture models*.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See McKim 2001 & 2008.

<sup>78</sup> See Bishop 2002.

Prominent proponents in chronological order include: The Gospel of Mark, Aquinas,<sup>79</sup> Kierkegaard, William James, Paul Tillich, Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Robert Audi and Daniel McKaughn. I will briefly discuss some ideas under this theme.

Schellenberg discusses a model of faith in this vicinity that includes an element of risk-taking behaviour toward the good (2009, p41-44). Such risk taking is countenanced once relationship is underway, rather than risking whether God exists for *initiating* relationship, as countenanced by me with OI.

Bishop (2002) discusses several writers who think about faith on a doxastic venture model. A prominent example is Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' which explicitly incorporates *risk*. Bishop cites William James from his famous 1895 lecture promoting the idea that a person is justified in religious belief which is uncoerced by logical intellect. James argues that our 'passional nature' must decide about faith or, "must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds." He argues that leaving a question open because it is not evidentially or rationally secure is also infused by our passional nature, because it runs the same risk as 'losing the truth' (or deciding 'no', as Bishop interprets him).

Swinburne (1981,2005) presents a model of faith as doxastic venture based on the *assumption* that God exists, implicating an element of risk. Swinburne calls his approach *pragmatist* and partially derived from William James who advocates a sort of faith that is *acting-as-if* (1981). He construes James to counsel the assumption that God exists, because unless He does exist then "...that which is most worthwhile is not to be had."(p115). On these lines, James prays (Swinburne tells us), under the assumption that God exists because if He doesn't then there is no chance of setting the world aright, and he lives the good life not because he believes in heaven, but because only upon assuming that there is heaven can he find long term deep well-being. I take James to accept risk by living as-if God exists, though seeing it as the 'least of risks' because it enables the most fulfilling or best sort of life. I will heed some of James' thinking for developing the notion of risk around Gumption, and a notion of justified risk will help comprise my case for the value of Gumption in Chapter Seven, where I will also return to William James.

Howard-Snyder (2017) observes that the Greek word 'pistis' in the scriptures is often translated as 'belief' which he thinks is misleading and influences an artificially limited understanding of the meaning of 'faith' in the New Testament. Howard-Snyder interrogates stories in the gospel of Mark, most notably the story of the blind beggar who calls on Jesus, and draws from an extensive study by Morgan

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<sup>79</sup> It is controversial whether Aquinas falls into this category.

(2015) who finds the meaning of the Greek *pistis* and *fides* (faith) “coexists inescapably with...risk” (p121).

McKaughn (2013) offers an account of faith based on trust which also acknowledges risk regarding the existence of God. McKaughn draws on a family of accounts including Swinburne’s that he thinks incorporate some form of trusting-acceptance including Schellenberg *himself* (2005b, 2007a, 2009), Audi (2008, 2011), and Alston (1996, 2007). The epistemology for OI in Chapter Six is inspired by McKaughn’s insights and I will draw from Alston’s thesis on the attitude of acceptance. McKaughn undertakes epistemological analysis about the cogency of trust or hope or acceptance in the absence of belief that God exists and makes a persuasive case that trust can operate with the belief that God’s existence is *more probable than not* or “some other propositional attitude entirely” (p116).<sup>80</sup> I propose a less demanding epistemological rationale to be sufficient for Gumption: that a person believe that God might exist.

The *intermittent* risk for OI can operate with tentative hopeful-acceptance that He *might* exist, compared to *persisting* trust or acceptance as a mode of faith which may require higher credence. I take my project to be easier or less substantial than underwriting a theory of faith.

On the ambiguity of God’s existence, McKaughn considers two agnostics more and less inclined to belief and says that so long as both theism and atheism are live options for both, then separating them need not be disagreement about evidence for God’s existence or a differing inclination to credence or scepticism. It may come down to one of them being “willing to *risk* accepting an invitation to trust where [the other] scorns it.” (2013, p21, my emphasis). The risk cited by McKaughn is not quite the same risk as I am thinking about for OI because he has the person responding to invitation whereas OI is initiating, however the comparison is not clear cut because Gumption is pertaining only to our category of the secular-wester and does not operate from a position of zero understanding in the person, but has Christianity mooted in the background. Any comparison or straight connection with McKaughn is blurred because Gumption is set up for nr-nb and not for someone of existing faith, while he includes people who may be epistemically rational and justified in their faith while epistemically only minimally committed, and with “the absence of belief by deciding to take the risk, acknowledged as such, with eyes wide open”. (ibid, p90). Remember, my aim here is only to situate or connect Gumption within a family of related ideas, in advance of a more expansive account of hopeful-acceptance for partly constituting Gumption in Chapter 6.

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<sup>80</sup> These themes have been perennially debated. For example Plantinga (1983) and Penulhume (1983) both claim that trust *does* require belief that God exists.

This completes my brief sketch of connected theories of faith and trust by way of a primer, and I will now move to the main dialogue with tighter connections to the literature for formulating OI, before the sections on risk or chance taking and then free will.

## Closer Formulation of Originating Initiative.

### Kierkegaard.

Perhaps a philosophical soulmate of mine for describing OI might be the great Dane, Soren Kierkegaard. We might envisage a non-resistant non-believing seeker as holding out for justifying evidence alongside intermittent potentially endless reflection about the existence of God. Kierkegaard maintains that one must terminate this in-principle never ending process by *choosing*.<sup>81</sup> That is, choosing to set aside the repetitive attempt of balancing evidence and arguments and giving over to some passion as a primitive in the exercise and simply either 'going for it' or not, as one's conscience inclines. The supra-rational motivational risk for such choice under my scheme is circumscribed by Gumption – that proclivity to sometime(s) take a chance on religious adventure. The difference between Kierkegaard's either/or as I understand him and the risk of OI through Gumption may be that taking the risk of passionate choice can be intermittent or even rare under my thesis, whereas Kierkegaard counsels taking that choice as a standing commitment and so is more like a theory of faith. I will revisit Kierkegaard in Chapter Six in connection to the rationality of OI.

### Terence Cuneo.

Cuneo (2017) is writing in the tradition of debating Pascal's wager and is interested in a problem he calls the 'inaccessibility of religion', concerning people who are attracted to religious enquiry on broadly practical grounds such as the endowment of life purpose or significance. While such agents do not dismiss the belief claims of a tradition, they cannot assent to those beliefs and satisfy the norms of faith of said tradition because they perceive inadequate evidence for such belief claims. Cuneo evokes notions under the purview of a 'religious enquirer' which I take to implicitly overlap or straddle distinctions for understanding non-resistant non-belief and present an opportunity to put OI into further relief.

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<sup>81</sup> See Hanson 2016.

Cuneo proposes that a religious seeker can maintain an attitude he calls “*receptivity* to the experience of God” (p671), enabling a person to partake of those practical benefits of a religion supposedly without any dereliction of epistemic duty and not offending “external epistemic norms or internal religious ones” (p669). Let us consider Cuneo’s ‘religious enquirer’ and expose the way he thinks of the difference between a *passive* and *active* seeker, which will be helpful to envision my picture of the functioning of OI.

Cuneo tells us that while a receptive person is *passive*, it will be circumstances that “put in her path the opportunity of being the subject of that state or event” (p8) And a person will be *actively* receptive “only if she intentionally takes steps towards putting herself in (what she takes to be) a better position to be the subject of that state or event” (ibid). I suggest that Cuneo’s distinction between active and passive receptivity is interesting as far as openness to religious experience goes, but it is insufficient for conceiving of a *free* attempt for engaging the divine. There may be a lot more to say generally about his distinction, but for my purposes in developing the notion of Gumption I maintain that both these states are *passive* as far as seeking relationship with the divine. They are passive in the sense that Cuneo’s seeker requires the world to impinge on his involuntary cognition for making him the subject of some event or state. The only difference between being active and passive here is whether she thinks herself more likely to be impinged upon in some places rather than others. Perhaps the distinction does the job Cuneo needs of it, but OI needs a different *kind of activity* if the agent is to bring something more to the table than simply being available to experience; there must be some psychological impetus that ‘exceeds’ a bare openness to being affected via involuntary belief acquisition. My thesis of OI takes that psychological impetus to include taking a risk if the agent is to be free. How such risk qualifies the agent as being free for a relationship will be shown in the free will section later.

### Michael Rea.

Rea (2018, ch9) is not centrally concerned with free response to divine love as I am, but he senses some impotence in Cuneo’s notion of receptivity which may be helpful. I get the impression Rea wants to *bolster* Cuneo’s notion of receptivity seemingly more toward the work I set for OI. Rea borrows Cuneo’s idea because he rightly thinks one must at least be receptive if one is to try to seek God, but he wants to ‘upgrade’ receptivity to be more than just an *attitude* as Cuneo presents it. Rea believes that his and Cuneo’s conceptions are not far apart, and he thinks of receptivity “...as a stance or disposition that may or may not include attitudes like desire, interest, attraction, and so on.” (p167). I take it that there is certainly greater psychological impetus at play with desire, interest and attraction, than there is for an attitude of receptivity, but that impetus may still only amount to a kind of self-seeking because the

satisfaction of those cognitive or affective aims is dependent on the person's constitution as they appear on the scene, and might require no *risk* beyond that constitution. I will be arguing for the claim in section three that such *risk is a component of free will*.

In his comparing *desire* with receptivity, I sense that Rea is reaching for 'something extra' to play the sort of role I intend for Gumption. Rea does not take a position on what he sees as the controversy about whether one can seek God without concurrently desiring to seek Him, but he claims that one may be receptive to experience without desiring that experience by perhaps being attracted to an object or experience "in ways and to degrees that do not quite rise to the level of desire" (ibid). Rea discusses a few examples whereby a person could be receptive to a potential experience without the knowledge or belief to enable her explicit anticipation of that experience, which she would desire if only she could anticipate what it was like (p168-170). He thinks that a person could seek God without knowing that it was God she was seeking, or that one could be receptive to a relationship with God while unable to "entertain it" (p168). I understand him to mean receptive to relationship with God but not desiring of it while unable to imagine it. Gumption in contrast involves her positively taking a chance on relations with God, which differs from Rea's psychological scenario, because Gumption has Christianity in the background, to whatever extent mooted.

It is not clear how to characterise the connection between desire and receptivity from Rea's surmising. Perhaps it is something like the idea of a person who had not tasted mango but would desire the fruit if only she knew what it was like, as Rea suggests "One can also be receptive to objects or experiences with which one has no acquaintance and to which one has given no thought." (ibid p168). It seems that this could be true for countless things.

Let us compare Gumption to an example from Rea. A receptive disposition is in play, he tells us, when someone subscribes to a dating site. When signing up,

presumably one does not at that very moment desire to date any one of the other members, much less all of them; but, at the same time, neither is she indifferent to the prospect, nor, in the typical case, has she at that point ruled out dating any of them. Her disposition, at that point, is one of receptivity. (ibid p167).

There might be some aspect of volunteering here, beyond passivity. But the person is passive to the extent of wanting to be prompted by an interesting profile before any positive engaging. While Gumption with God in mind bears no simple comparison to this mundane scenario, but Gumption might parallel something like said person instead taking a chance on a blind date (albeit not so risky because the meeting with God is set up or prompted by billions of people, compared to friend setting up a date).

There is more of an active or volunteered chance-taking with Gumption. The comparison does not really hold up, but we see how receptivity is somewhat passive compared to Gumption.

I interpret Rea to be wrestling with the practical or embodied transition between receptivity and desire, because acquiring belief is involuntary and one might not notice the route to that involuntary belief without an unrealised(?) disposition to be interested. Even if my interpretation of Rea is wrong, it might help put OI into further relief as follows: the prompting of desire or attraction which Rea is attempting to derive from receptivity will be purely *accidental* (that is, dependent on prompting by the environment) and not compliant with a free initiation of relationship beyond one's constituted disposition that one has not chosen (this will be spelled out more fully in the free will section). While the agent cannot know in advance what to expect of relationship and so cannot *desire* in advance of knowing what it might be like, her *free* initiation must involve risk of the unknown to include consequences beyond any unrealised disposition to desire. The reader might worry that there is little or no control in risking the unknown and wonder what level of free will is compatible with such lack of control. I will describe in the free will section how risk and limited control feature in a coherent proposal for a notion of free will to part constitute OI.

#### Julian Pearlmutter.

Rea is unsure if the act of seeking without belief is epistemologically plausible and refers the interested reader to Pearlmutter (2016) who thinks that it is. Pearlmutter thinks a person may obtain knowledge of God's attributes by *desiring* to believe He exists. His idea is that one way a person may exercise desire for God is by cultivating an enjoyment of sacred music, for setting up the conditions for relationship with God without belief. This strikes me as an example of Cuneo's notion of active-receptivity where a person puts oneself in a position to be impinged upon, which is essentially passive and does not conform to the active requirement called for if initiating relationship is to be *free on our part*. We will see that my conception of the risk of 'jumping ahead' of our constitution is aimed at disconnecting us from how we are made and where we find ourselves, for which we are neither blameworthy nor free to determine. The difference between my model and Cuneo's is that he envisages a person choosing an environment for impinging on one, and that choice will express an aim to control the outcome of our newly found circumstance, whereas I envisage risking a new circumstance. Cuneo's 'aiming' will express a disposition with which we are thrown into the world and is not chosen, which in that sense generates a passively acquired aim, in contrast to risking a new circumstance that does not express our disposition through risk, which actively outruns disposition.

While it may appear counter intuitive to posit a *lack of control* as an aspect of free will, I will attempt to show that it might be essential to freedom if we take seriously a persuasive classic argument from Galen Strawson that I will exhibit below.

Pearlmutter (2016) fields an objection that relates to my idea responding to Rea (that a person cannot anticipate what to expect of relationship and so cannot *desire* in advance of knowing what it might be like). The objection is that relationship with God would be transformative and of another kind or paradigm to any previous experience, so how “could anything prior to such an experience of God give a clue as to what it would be like?” (p61). Desire in his account must partly preconceive God’s attributes which puts the horse before the cart. Pearlmutter talks of engaging with a “live hypothesis” (p62), which may roughly correspond to the operation of Gumption under my scheme, except Gumption involves a proclivity to risk that the hypothesis is *true*, rather than seeking to test for truth. There may be fine psychological distinctions for delineating the difference here which may be bound up in how humans experience the world. I will just say that the hopeful-acceptance of Gumption requires more ‘skin in the game’ by the agent than might be the case for a pure enquirer.

This problem may provoke a question about the coherence of Gumption in terms of what the content of risk or target of the gamble can be if Gumption is open toward what the agent does not know. Gumption involves something like the discrete volunteered psychological transition to *accepting* that God is listening, and that one is talking to Him, or to risk acceptance that the gospel is true and then to judge the fruits of experiential consequences, in contrast to *passively* inviting the environment to mould one’s emotion into a desiring-state. Someone might ask, what is the difference between belief and acceptance for Gumption? My thesis is guided by Schellenberg’s understanding of propositional belief *that God exists*, that is one adopts the attitude of taking something to be the case by regarding it as true whereas there is a voluntary component to accepting that something is the case unconstrained by inability to consider the truth. I will further draw out the difference between belief and acceptance that God exists in Chapter Six and I will argue in Chapter Seven about the value of Gumption with potentially such great consequences from low-stakes.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> There we will see how Laurie Paul worries that the risk is more dangerous than I suggest, and that Gumption is an unwise risk. She argues there are negative consequences if the gamble does not payoff if God does not exist, to which I object. I maintain that Gumption is valuable for well-being even if God does not exist.

Jacob Ross.

Ross (2002) provides a reading of Hick (1989), which encourages another way to think about the risk profile associated with Gumption, by way of a discrete psychological-transition. Ross interprets the ambiguity in religious experience which Hick talks about as a sort of “under-determination belonging to the experience as such, which requires to be consciously interpreted in one way or another” (p187), and he proposes the famous duck/rabbit Gestalt experience as a perceptual example of our conscious resolution of ambiguity in experience. If we think of the risk undertaken with Gumption as a simple commitment to go one way or the other to resolve the experiential ambiguity about whether God is listening, then the transition away from ambiguity about whether God is listening to the tentative acceptance that He is, parallels the transition from rabbit to duck. Ross considers Schellenberg’s objection to Hick that the idea of resolving ambiguity sneaks in the illicit notion that belief may be volunteered. Ross maintains that because both rabbit and duck are equally present, that seeing one or the other is not an act of arbitrary will but instead only depends on the perceivers “frame of reference or point of view” (ibid). While the observer can consciously switch attention between the rabbit and duck, the non-resistant non-believer can (tentatively) hopefully-accept that God is listening.

It might be argued that this point of view imparted with Gumption must include some propensity to good faith which is partly conditioned by our constitution, and this may be a metaphysical objection to the free will aspect of my thesis if I cannot separate some part of inclination to risk from constitution. Relevant in this vicinity are ideas from psychology which connect with personal constitution in the form of ‘attachment theory’. Green (2015) draws insight from that body of theory to show that someone’s inclination to open (risk) themselves to relationship is a product of their early development which of course is outside of their control, or as Schellenberg might say, ‘is within God’s control if he exists’. My idea that Gumption operate free of our constitution if OI is to avoid the problem of constitutive luck will be developed as we proceed.

This chapter so far has been an attempt to begin formulating Originating Initiative by connecting it with somewhat related ideas. I now further develop the concept in the following sections on taking a chance, the philosophy free will, and then continuing through Chapters Six and Seven.

## Section 2. On Humble Risk or Taking a Chance with Gumption.

Let me first briefly suggest under nominal headings how taking a chance may be relevant for OI. Mention of cognitive or affective attitudes such as acceptance, hope or faith will be preliminary before development in Chapter Six.

### Emotional and Psychological Vulnerability.

Gumption involves an openness and some level of willingness to face the unknown. When someone accepts the possibility of engaging with God, this will involve openness to emotional vulnerability. This may bear some resemblance to how one reveals vulnerability in a romantic relationship.

However, this vulnerability should not be overstated because one is not 'going in blind' with God, whom by hypothesis we comprehend through the gospel and various testimony. Remarkably, emotional vulnerability may be greater when becoming a parent, because physiological hormonal and brain changes occur directed by natural processes rather than our intentions, and it is not possible to imagine from the first person what it is like be a mother or father (so many people say). This comparison will come up again in Chapter Seven.

There is also the potential risk of disappointment. Gumption brings the possibility of undesired results, not answering to psychological longings. Submission to such risk in this respect will be warranted by the prospect of our being raised to our best potential selves with superior desires superseding old longings. There is scope for feelings of disconnection or disappointment if any anticipated experience or transformation is off the mark.

### Loss of Control.

Connected to the previously mentioned risk of disconnection with desires, there is a lack of control over the outcome from Gumption which requires an individual to accept doubt about the future. Relinquishing control over the future to the extent necessary for growth, carries unspecified risk because it means surrendering some power to direct the future.

If the traditional take and interplay of positions in the free will debate that I will lay out below is cogent, then my thesis is no small thing because taking a chance through Gumption is a demonstration of free will. And furthermore, if God does not exist then neither does free will.

### Moral and Philosophical Uncertainty.

Gumption conveys the possibility of revising one's moral framework. There is a chance of shifting one's ethical commitments, which may lead to questions about previously held beliefs or the implications of those changes, including the fear of losing apparent satisfaction in ways of living one enjoyed previously.

Gumption invites the prospect of reconsidering old moral assumptions and challenging previously held assurance. There is a subjective risk of destabilizing one's sense of identity or creating internal conflict, which can be uncomfortable or disorienting. This risking internal conflict should feature in any well lived life, which will encounter morally difficult choices, so moral uncertainty and the prospect of changed moral outlook is not peculiar to OI.

### Exposure to Judgment and Criticism.

Facing judgment from others when an individual takes a step with Gumption is a social or cultural risk. Peers might not approve of such openness, and one could face criticism or ridicule for taking such a risk. The courage to risk rejection from others or more likely whereby there might be a vague sense of potentially risking changed relationships with peers may feature with Gumption.

In summary, the chance taken with Gumption is stepping somewhat into the unknown without any assurance of outcome, risking emotional, social, and moral vulnerability. Gumption requires a level of courage and humility to risk beginning some process of change and exploration. Courage and humility are required for any life well lived not least for religious adventure, but the incomparable payoff from OI might be out of this world, and in it. I will argue in Chapter Seven that a non-resistant non-believer *should* exercise Gumption

Although Buchak (2012) is writing in a more general context regarding a practical account of faith, she evokes a notion of risk which may be helpful for thinking about Gumption. While I have it that an attitude of hopeful-acceptance will bare those elements of risk for Gumption, Buchak identifies a more general 'pro-attitude' towards a faith denoting proposition, where evidence is insufficient for underwriting the truth of that proposition. She claims that faith carries an aspect of *risk*, because faith that God exists means one is willing to take a risk that God exists, acting on the basis that God exists is true instead of acting as if it is untrue. The agent takes the risk of committing to faith on the basis that she will not further investigate the truth of the faith proposition, at least not for the sole purpose of deciding whether to act on the basis that God exists.

Buchak argues that the risk of committing to suspend any investigation of the truth can be practically rational if certain conditions are met. We will cover close ground in the next chapter on the

epistemology of hope and acceptance, but I will just say here that Gumption carries less risk than Buchak prescribes for faith, because our non-resistant non-believer need only commit to tentative hopeful-acceptance to carry her religious adventure, unlike deciding to be confirmed into the faith.

Buchak (2017) thinks the same risk features in the doxastic venture model of Bishop (2002) that I discussed early in this chapter, whereby an agent gives enough weight to practical considerations for action, while his reasons are not sufficiently supported by evidence for to seem fully justified. (p53)

There will be more rigorous analysis of the attitudes of belief, hope and acceptance and how they relate in Chapter Six. Now to my ideas about free will and OI.

### Section 3. Originating Initiative and The Philosophy of Free Will.

#### Introduction to the free will objections.

There are two classic free will problems presented by Schellenberg (2005 & 2007) against greater goods defences, *one of which* I claim to nullify with OI being an operational good for free initiation of relationship with God. For clarity and completeness, I address both free will problems, namely: the ‘problem of determinism’ and the problem of constitutive luck that is also called the ‘basic problem’. I will briefly specify each problem here starting with the former.

What humans are and are able to become is very much God's choice, not their own, since God determines their nature and all the parameters of the choices they make... (2005, p295).

I take this to be a statement of the truth of *determinism* if God exists, which is a challenge to OI because then Gumption is determined if everything is. The reader should note that determinism is a challenge to understanding how free will is either empirically *or* conceptually coherent, both under theism and naturalism (in a universe without God). OI will presume a metaphysic of indeterminism. That is, I take it that the universe is non-determined and I will show how my thesis does not avoid what is called ‘The problem of luck’, which threatens the coherence of *indeterministic* free will.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> I will clarify these issues later after this introduction. Here and in the next page I am only setting up OI in relation to Schellenberg’s free will objections to greater goods.

The other classic free will problem is that of *constitutive* luck (not to be confused with the ‘problem of luck’ just mentioned).

...if persons being caused by factors over which they have no control to have the nature they have..., then even a scenario including [non-determined] free will must be problematic, since...if created by God, [people] are also “caused by factors over which they have no control to have the nature they have,” and they can no more choose their wants than do those who are unfree [determined]. Nor, we might add, is the range of their freedom chosen by them. (2007, p275).

Both free will issues are a problem for everyone and implicitly also a problem for Schellenberg. We saw in Chapter Two that Schellenberg concurs with Lewis that authentic love must involve free choice. In several places he asserts that God’s openness does not equate to Him *providing* belief, while without belief relationship is impossible. Schellenberg suggests that God could do this in a way that respects every individual’s freedom by modulating evidence to suit their disposition (see Chapter Three), but this is in tension with Schellenberg’s understanding that assenting to propositional belief is involuntary whereby we cannot be to blame for believing or not (2019 p170). This implies that an agent must *volunteer* whether to believe if we are to be blameworthy. But a choice grounded on God’s modulating evidence will not involve free assent because it will be grounded in the agent’s constituted sensitivity to evidence, which according to Schellenberg previously quoted is determined either by God or by nature, both outside of the agent’s control, and not conveying blameworthiness.

Both Schellenberg and the Christian Tradition acknowledge that authentic engaged love must be free, and OI is an attempt to make good on the notion that we are free to initiate relationship with God. Readers familiar with the free will problem will immediately recognise that this is a very tall order.

Schellenberg’s suggestion that an individual is free to engage with God *after* coming to belief is very peculiar, because (as I mentioned in Chapter Three) only a mad or bad person would *choose* to reject perfect love, and madness precludes rational free will and badness equates to resistance. I take Michael Rea to have in mind something close to what I have called ‘Schellenberg’s Tension’ regarding the act of seeking God compared to investigating evidence for God:

What does it mean to try to seek God? ...trying to seek God is just a matter of trying to perform actions that one believes, rightly or wrongly, to be directed somehow toward the goal of ultimately finding God. It is an interesting and controversial question whether one can try to seek God without at the same time desiring to seek God, or to find God. (2019, p167)

Rea admits he has no answer to this question. I am proposing Gumption as a component of a free seeker who will take a chance on religious experience, as somewhere in between the rational seeker who cannot choose because evidence compels, and the desirer (who may flout Schellenberg's prohibition of religious sympathy).

I will now take up the two free will objections from Schellenberg, which reflect two classic independent free will problems long recognised by the analytical tradition of philosophy.

I claim to nullify one of these objections only to the extent of OI being an operational good for free initiation of relationship with God. While OI counters the problem of constitutive luck, it is frustrated by determinism.

The two problems will be treated under the headings: 'The Incoherence of Indeterminism', and 'The Problem of Constitutive Luck'.

### The Incoherence of Indeterminism for Free Will.

The problem of determinism is probably the most well-known problem of free will outside the academy and has inspired more debate in the literature over the centuries than any other free will topic.<sup>84</sup> The thesis of determinism holds that all events or interactions at every level are necessitated by antecedent conditions in conjunction with the laws of nature such that the state of the world at any moment in conjunction with the laws of nature entails a single physically possible future path of events. Consider the arrangement of *any* items (billiard balls, brains, forests, galaxies) together with the laws of physics that describe their states and interactions, then according to determinism, the future state and position of all items will follow one unique possible unfolding chain of events. I along with most theists presume the universe is *not determined* and assent to the thesis of *incompatibilism* which maintains that free will requires *alternative possibilities* for the agent (incompatible with determinism).<sup>85</sup> Most theists reject the idea that our free choices can be determined either by the laws of nature or God *and that we can*

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<sup>84</sup> See Hoefer (2023) for encyclopaedic review article.

<sup>85</sup> This is controversial like almost everything in philosophy. A worldwide survey of philosophy faculty in 2009 and 2020 found barely a majority "leaned toward" thinking that free will is compatible with determinism. (<https://philpapers.org/surveys>). I will be assuming that alternative possibilities are incompatible with determinism.

*be blameworthy* in God's eyes because we enjoy alternative possible choices.<sup>86</sup> I presume indeterminism, which requires that I acknowledge a problem that raises regarding an apparent *incoherence of indeterminism* pertaining to free will, usually called 'the problem of luck'. (Not to be confused with 'constitutive luck' in the next section).

Simply put, my starting point assumes that free will is incompatible with determinism and that some choices must be *indeterministic* for being blameworthy in the eyes of God. *Libertarianism* is the name given to this thesis that the universe is indeterministic and free will *does* exist.<sup>87</sup> I take it that theist greater goods defences ultimately require a plausible account of libertarian free will (on the received view, such an account is elusive).<sup>88</sup> The chance-taking element of OI is a libertarian response to Schellenberg for initiating relationship with God.

Philosophers of free will may not be very excited by my application of Gumption for OI because my proposal does not contend with the most central and enduring concern in philosophy, which is *control for justifying ascriptions of moral responsibility*.

The most pressing objection to libertarian theories is called the 'problem of luck', which concerns the requirement for alternative possibilities, because that requirement generates a distinct problem about control over actions.<sup>89</sup>

Here is the problem. Libertarians require that for a free act to happen at a specific time  $t$ , a person must be able to choose (X or refrain (Y) from that act at  $t-1$ , immediately preceding the moment of choice. This situation requires *insufficient cause* for the outcome until that moment of choice at  $t-1$ . We might model this as two different possible worlds at  $t$ , where X and Y are chosen. Here is the rub: if the hypothetical agents in each world are identical right up to the moment of choice (because there is no sufficient cause for X or Y up to that moment  $t-1$ , and in the actual world she still has open alternative possibilities (just before the actual world 'splits' into one or another of the possible outcomes)), then the difference between the worlds at  $t + 1$  would seem to be just a matter of *luck* because there appears to be no contrastive explanation in either world at  $t-1$ . Both counterparts are in identical states at  $t-1$  because we require that they can choose either way at  $t$ . It seems that the difference indeterminism is

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<sup>86</sup> Calvinists may be an exception.

<sup>87</sup> Nothing to do with 'libertarianism' of the political sort.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Van Inwagen is a libertarian within the top rank of contemporary philosophers with wide ranging expertise. He makes a persuasive case that all types of free will theory are principled failures (see Van Inwagen 2000).

<sup>89</sup> See Melia (2010) who considers Kane's (1996) 'event-causal' libertarian theory (which is a naturalist account in contrast to another sort of libertarian 'agent-causal' theory). What I say about the problem of luck in this section does not engage the nuance in the literature about locating indeterminism at different points in the cognitive process of choosing.

making to the situation is at best otiose for free will, and how do we judge the difference in moral responsibility between one agent choosing the good and the other choosing the bad if there is by hypothesis no difference between them to cause the choice. If it is just a matter of luck, then neither agent can be said to be morally responsible. If one agent chose murder and another agent did not, and there are no distinguishing factors right up to the instant of pulling the trigger, then the murderer appears simply unlucky because there is no contrastive explanation between him and his innocent hypothetical twin.<sup>90</sup>

The same problem challenges the alternative possibilities of either taking a chance with Gumption or not. It may be pressed that my presumption of indeterminism for OI operates like a specification to uphold blameworthiness from God's perspective. My presumption of indeterminism is motivated to the extent of undergirding God's perfectly loving purpose such that Gumption is undetermined, leaving the future open for a person to take the chance of inviting His loving response and therefore the person can be somewhat responsible or blameworthy for the lack of relationship, in contrast to Schellenberg putting the onus on a hypothetical god along with the incoherence (or misnomer) of voluntary belief. While OI is under pressure from the problem of luck, it has some mileage as a libertarian response for undercutting Schellenberg's determinist objection, and at least I am in half-decent company if Van Inwagen is right (see footnote 18 above).

It is interesting to note an inclination for misunderstanding how the problem of luck for theism is equally pressing as it is under naturalism. There is a tendency to think determinism *without* God is a problem, but not so much for a universe *with* God. This tendency may be somewhat explained by Van Inwagen's idea that our concept of free will is irreconcilable with our concepts of causality and determinism, "that free will remains a mystery---that is, that free will undeniably exists and that there is a strong and unanswered prima facie case for its impossibility." (2000, p1)

Menssen & Sullivan (2017) appear to be a recent example of this,

if naturalism is true then libertarian freedom is illusory. The only way of explaining the existence of libertarian freedom is through a non-naturalistic perspective according to which we are not merely matter in motion, but instead agents with immaterial minds or souls." (p34)

This claim implies unawareness that the problem of luck is about insufficient causal explanation, regardless of the cause-carrying medium. Whether the medium is physical stuff or immaterial souls,

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<sup>90</sup> See Mele 2006, for an extensive treatment of the problem of luck.

indeterminism does not help us understand how free will incorporates alternative possibilities because the problem of luck applies regardless of the medium.

In the next section I investigate Schellenberg's other type of free will objection to greater goods, which is more interesting because it doesn't matter whether determinism is true and my response has greater traction. I daringly offer it as a solution to the free will problem to the extent of freely initiating relationship with God.

### The Problem of Constitutive and Circumstantial Luck.

Bernard Williams (1976) and Thomas Nagel (1979) are often cited as founding the modern problem of moral luck. Nagel notices four sorts of luck that nullify or significantly undermine the level of control a person has over their actions which impact moral judgements of responsibility that apparently depend on that control. Most interesting to us of those four are *circumstantial* luck and *constitutive* luck, which are circumscribed by Schellenberg's second free will objection to greater goods quoted above in the introduction to this Section Three.

*Circumstantial* luck arises from the lack of control over the circumstances in which a person finds themselves. These circumstances range from where you are born and bred, to what time you arrive at work due to traffic and weather. *Constitutive* luck arises from the lack of control a person has over their personality and traits so much as they are laid down by our genes and environment as well as social factors beyond our control such as parents, teachers, and others. (We needn't be too careful about any crossover between the two.) Just like section one, I will not be critically engaging the nature or cogency of these concepts,<sup>91</sup> but instead I will assent to a widely received argument based on these concepts that is most challenging for a theist understanding of free will and offer OI as a response for underwriting free will for initiating relationship with God. Galen Strawson famously presents what he calls the '*basic argument*' against free will, which rides on the lack of control arising from these two forms of luck (whether free will is compatible with determinism or not).<sup>92</sup> I will present Strawson's argument and then apply OI in response.

Strawson offers the basic argument in both technical (1994, p6) and more easily read form (p7). I will paraphrase the latter:

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<sup>91</sup> See Nelkin (2023) for encyclopaedia review article on this topic.

<sup>92</sup> The basic argument had been intuited before at least by Augustine and Nietzsche.

1. It is certainly true everybody initially is the way they are due to genes and childhood experience, and it is certain that one cannot be held responsible for these “morally or otherwise [including religious sensitivity].”
2. After this initial period a person cannot accede to responsibility for the way they are by attempting to change how they *already* are from genes and childhood, because:
3. *Both* any way a person is moved to try and change themselves and the extent to which that change is achieved, is determined by the way they initially are over which they had no control. And:
4. A person’s disposition for both trying and achieving change is determined at every stage of their life by the preceding stage which was initially set by genes and childhood. A person cannot change beyond their potential cemented by genes and childhood for which they are not responsible. [Premise 1-4 cover constitutive luck, which Strawson couples with circumstantial luck in premise 5].
5. Some changes a person undergoes may not stem from genes and childhood, but instead from circumstances they unintentionally find themselves in (or else their intended attempt is covered by premise 4). [Strawson labels those circumstances the influence of “indeterministic or random factors”, and such circumstances cannot contribute to a person’s moral responsibility for how they are.]

Conclusion. Nobody has ultimate control over who they are, and neither can they change themselves such that they acquire such ultimate control, and so nobody can be truly responsible for how they are or how they act.

The basic argument has attracted a wide range of responses.<sup>93</sup> I take the argument to be compelling and offer an application of OI in response, as far as underwriting the freedom of an agent to be responsible for the initiating event for beginning relationship with God. (Gumption may also operate for a person being responsible for events of inviting further engagement with God once a person has faith, but my response to Schellenberg will not depend on this). The agent has no capacity for change beyond their potential disposition which is constrained by the initial way they are made, for which they are not responsible, and which forever forestalls ultimate responsibility for a person’s formation or actions (prima facie including Gumption). Any newly activated disposition can only be generated by a potential disposition that is already a part of a person’s makeup. Schellenberg’s objection to the greater goods type response transposes God as causal instigator of a person’s formation to the same conclusion that we cannot be truly or ultimately responsible.

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<sup>93</sup> Istvan (2010) impressively defends the Basic Argument against all sorts of response.

I will pursue a few ideas for applying the risk of OI for potential adventure with God that might underwrite a judgment that a person is truly responsible for being the originator of a relationship with God.

The risk taken by OI involves in some sense an outcome or consequence of adventure that is not in view because one cannot specifically intend an outcome or consequence. This opens a break between a person's constituted outlook for what she can become, and how God controls His response to her risk in laying down a consequence. In the naturalistic context of the basic argument, Strawson characterises unintended circumstances as 'indeterministic or random' for which the agent is not responsible. However, in our context, God determines the outcome or circumstance by His response rather than nature. While the cases are the same in regard to a lack of control by the person, all my thesis requires her to be responsible for is the initial gesture of taking a chance, and the consequence is then in God's hands. In the natural case she just happens upon her new circumstance but in the case that God exists, she finds Him if He wants, and if she finds Him then she has outrun her constitution beyond the parameters of her constituted potentiality.

If the basic argument is sound, OI proposes a revisionary view of *what free action is* for engaging with God, to the effect that we only outrun our initial constitution and exceed our potential by taking a chance that God is there.<sup>94</sup> I mentioned in section 2.1 that OI will not satisfy philosophers' central concern about sufficient control for moral responsibility because it explicitly involves some *lack* of control. OI endows responsibility for taking a chance and conceives *freely* initiating relations with God by taking some risk in making the first move that outruns one's constitution, through Gumption chancing what one might become, and with God configuring the consequence.<sup>95</sup>

Earlier I suggested OI being something of a forerunner to a standing faith being in relationship with God. We can relatedly, think of it as complementing received wisdom by describing Gumption as a tentative mini-surrender for initiating relations with God, compared to what we could think of as more substantial surrender for deepening relations with Him over a lifetime, as Jesus instructed, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Matthew 16:25). Christ taught that *maximal freedom* is achieved by surrendering our naturally endowed constitution along with its disordered appetites, so that it may be more constituted as God

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<sup>94</sup> I take my lead in calling OI 'revisionist' from Vargas (2014), "even if the meaning of 'free will' is fixed by our thoughts about it, this putative fact does not mean that we cannot change how we think about free will, thereby changing its meaning." (p35).

<sup>95</sup> This idea bears some affinity with that fundamental instruction from Jesus who said in the opening of Mark's Gospel, "go beyond the mind you have." (Metanoia).

will endow. The potential but latent possibilities in one's constitution are exceeded once God transforms that constitution once in relationship.

While my thesis only concerns non-resistors in responding to Schellenberg's argument, perhaps ironically, traditional Christianity might involve a more pertinent problem of luck. The *doctrine of grace* insists that grace of God is necessary for salvation and cannot be earned from our own effort but is wholly gifted by Him. If God's grace is out of one's control, then a similar problem of luck enters in, which my thesis would have to negotiate if offered in that broader context of Christian doctrine. Linda Zagzebski deals with the problem of luck as it pertains to morality and religion, as she finds "little in the tradition of direct relevance to the problem" (1994, p411). Moral luck as I have already intimated is a deeper problem than luck for OI because moral responsibility requires control in contrast to OI which involves risking some lack of control. My initial thought is that God's grace could be evoked in His responding equitably perhaps by sensing Gumption in relation to one's naturally endowed proclivity for taking a chance for Him. Issues around the doctrine of grace and free will have been a recurrent theological and philosophical debate since Francisco Suarez and Molina in the 1500's challenged the ideas of Aquinas.

Compared to one's moral behaviour, OI is much less vulnerable to circumstantial luck. Whereas a person may enact moral sin at various times while circumstances out of her control play a part, she has a lifetime of abundant opportunity for Gumption and need only take a risk at some time(s) in her life. Compared to the moral case, OI is less affected by constitutive luck because while moral character may depend on our disposition or endowment for good will, OI depends on a potential disposition in one's character for a moment of religious adventure at *some time*. For such a fleeting moment never to be realised, then one must be persistently resistant. We could characterize such resistance as lacking humility and picture a sneering dismissal that 'there could not be anything like God', or the over-bearing self-conscious pride in a person who *never* prays because they 'feel silly because maybe nobody is listening': 'Get over yourself', says his mate, 'and see the duck instead of the rabbit just once in a while'.

God may have unusual plans for deeply unlucky souls (if there are such people) who are born without any capacity for humility or the possibility to edge their disposition so to muster even a fleeting spark of Gumption or who are *entirely* unfortunate in circumstance. Such speculation is just for interest and does not form part of my case against non-resistant non-belief, for such luckless souls are obviously resistant even if not by their own fault if that is possible. The thought that they cannot be blameworthy for such resistance may be a conceptual or cognitive problem for theism, but not here.

In principle a person need only muster Gumption rarely or even once to initiate relationship with God, then it is up to God how to uniquely respond with each person. In Moser's phrase, God can 'bob and weave' on the threshold of each person's sensitivity to evidence for belief, so that an element of adventurous hopeful-acceptance must operate for engagement. God could have special reason for engaging with anyone lacking Gumption, such as those other categories of non-resistant non-believers. Relatedly we might wonder about the potential number of non-resistant non-believers in the secular west and suggest that most of them at least once in their lives will have prayed at moments of despair and yet seemingly think of themselves out of relationship with God. This becomes a question of subjective experience and how an agent is oriented in relation to God. Gumption initiates their unique way with Him, which is opened to them upon knocking on the door with Gumption.

There is much room for debate about religious experience which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I will only say that I trust that I am in a relationship with God and my prayers are heard, while His voice echoes in my conscience. The debate might center on construing what a conscious relationship with God could look like, which I suspect is indeterminable going by the testimony of the saints and a billion average Joes. I suppose transformative experience of God will most usually not comport with the sort of 'spectator evidence' that Moser equates with cognitive idolatry, when we seek or demand to know God as we expect, not as He is.

## Chapter Five Conclusion

My thesis of Originating Initiative will be further developed in coming chapters but the basic form of my response to Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness is now on the table. To the extent that the traditional understanding and interplay of positions in the free will debate as I have laid out is cogent, then my thesis is no small thing. If Strawson's basic argument implied by Schellenberg's free will objection is cogent, and my response regarding constitutive and circumstantial luck is sound, *then the exercise of Gumption demonstrates non-determined free will, which is not possible if God does not exist.*<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Note about future research (manuscript in preparation). If I am right that Gumption instantiates free will under God, then there may be scope for a parallel notion for free will in a Godless universe. If my take on the conceptual playing field is cogent, then taking a chance must essentially feature in free action for open futures. Instead of OI, for 'life hopes through open future', I substitute a notion of *broadened horizons* in place of Gumption, for taking a chance with worldly adventure. This would be fundamentally riskier than a situation

Chapter Six will consider the epistemology of Originating Initiative and argue for the rationality of hopeful-acceptance for conveying Gumption.

Chapter Seven will then further formulate OI by developing a case for motivation and warrant, arguing that a non-resistant non-believer *should* exercise Gumption.

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involving God, but the proposal might similarly operate in biting the bullet on the basic problem and involve overshooting our circumstantial luck for *open futures*. If a case can be made for this sort of broadened horizon free will, it will be conceptually remote from that traditional concern of control for moral responsibility, although it may satisfy another notional desideratum of free will as specified by Robert Kane in his classic work on libertarianism for 'life hopes and open futures'. (1996, Ch1).

## Chapter 6

### Hopeful-Acceptance

#### Introduction

I posit voluntary hopeful-acceptance, in the absence of theistic belief, as the cognitive-affective attitude capable of conveying Gumption for Originating Initiative (OI). The chapter distinguishes belief (an involuntary, evidence-responsive conviction) from acceptance (a pragmatic, volunteered commitment that guides action), and analyses hope, which I envisage in conjunction with acceptance.

Drawing on Alston (1996), acceptance is argued to be a truth-oriented yet voluntary policy that can rationally underwrite religious practice amid doubt; lived examples will illustrate how acceptance can guide action when belief is weak. McKaughan's (2013) models of faith and the prevalence of doubt show how *hopeful-acceptance* avoids the 'logic of belief' worry, permitting practical commitment without doxastic confidence. From the wider conceptual vicinity, Bishop's *doxastic venture* model and framework-principles (echoing Putnam (1975) about science) explains why acting on evidentially undecidable options can still be rational; Buchak's account of practical rationality (enough evidence, low expected reversals, and costs of delay) helps locate Gumption as a permissible, sometimes preferable, risk.

The chapter then surveys the philosophy of hope, including a brief history of ideas through to the contemporary debate around the 'Standard Account', which analyses hope as some combination of desire along with belief in possibility. I focus on two alternative approaches, firstly Segal & Textor (2015) who treat hope as a primitive mental state with distinctive motivational force and secondly Blöser (2019), who treats hope as an irreducible concept exhibiting family-resemblance across cases with multifarious realizations and not necessarily requiring belief or desire.

The upshot is modest but pivotal: hope need not presuppose belief and can coherently conjoin with volunteered acceptance to motivate Gumption. Thus, for a non-resistant non-believer who judges that "God might exist," then *hopeful-acceptance* is a practically rational cognitive attitude—setting the stage for Chapter Seven's argument that non-resistant non-believers ought to rally the Gumption for OI, else I claim they are resistant.

A short introduction will basically contour the notions of belief and acceptance that have been at work in preceding chapters. Specifying those basics will set up the following more detailed sections ranging over historical accounts and the rationality or justification of hope and acceptance.

## Introduction.

### What is belief?

Philosophers, at least in the anglophone analytic tradition, typically use the term ‘belief’ differently and less vaguely than is conventional in everyday life. To believe a proposition in the way meant by philosophers is simply to take a proposition to be true, while the ordinary English use can also mean taking a positive stance ranging over various levels of confidence about the truth of a proposition. The folk may use ‘belief’ in different contexts either after reflection or not. Saying further what folk can mean by ‘belief’ would be a substantial exercise and is not my concern.

Schellenberg uses ‘belief’ in the context of his argument as holding a propositional attitude that takes the proposition ‘God exists’ to be true. That propositional attitude consists in the mental state of taking the proposition ‘God exists’ to truly describe reality. There are many cognitive attitudes other than belief that a person may have regarding the proposition ‘God exists’, such as *hope* or *desire* or *doubt* that it is true.<sup>97</sup>

### Degrees of belief or credence.

I will pass remark on the notion of credence to anticipate a comparison to levels of acceptance that will be explored later. Belief *credence* may be thought of in terms of subjective confidence levels pertaining to a belief. The level of confidence in a believed proposition usually translates into the extent an agent is willing to act on that proposition, with greater and lesser credence equating to greater and lesser willingness to act. Willingness to act will also be informed by what is at stake, so that a person may be more willing to act on low credence perhaps when much is at stake or with little to lose. Credence is often represented on a scale between 0 and 1, whereby 1 is certainty of truth, 0.5 means the proposition is regarded just as likely true or false, and 0 indicates definite falsity of the proposition.

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<sup>97</sup> This basic definition of belief will suffice for us. There are numerous sorts of theory about the nature and features of a belief state. A good encyclopaedia article is Schwitzgebel 2024.

The quantitative grading of credence is only truly informative when the levels of evidence and ignorance can be quantified with some precision. This is possible in clearly delineated situations where all relevant variables are identified and measurable. For all other cases, I question the cogency of using a scale to express confidence; it functions more as a shorthand convention, like a doctor's asking about pain on a scale from 1-10. For example, it seems strange to assign an exact credence of 0.3 or 0.7 to the proposition that God exists, as the variables informing such a proposition are not quantitatively gradable for specification. The debate over whether belief and credence are distinct or independent attitudes, and which is more fundamental, is a significant one in the literature. Later analysis will explore how acceptance may relate to credence.

### Belief and Acceptance.

As will be clear from previous chapters, the most distinctive difference between belief and acceptance is that acceptance of a proposition can be volunteered for motivating action within a practical context. The nature of acceptance is pragmatic and more about commitment and behaviour compared to the belief, which is an epistemic inner state of conviction. The notion of acceptance I propose is inspired by Williams Alston's (1996) influential view that religious faith can be identified with a form of acceptance rather than belief. Acceptance recruits *practical rationality* compared to belief, which should be *epistemically rational*. This is consistent with my earlier contentions that Gumption is arational or nonrational, and *not* irrational.

Before discussing how acceptance may operate in the context of Gumption, I take the propositional attitude of acceptance to be quite pervasive in everyday life. Here are three examples:

One. A scientist may accept a proposition for motivating their research even when supporting evidence is indecisive.

Two. Before climbing a ladder, one will check its stability for confidence that it will stand one's weight. Such checks usually do not rule out the possibility that the ladder will fall. Nevertheless, at some point enquiry will cease, and the climber accepts that it will be stable. In a situation with high stakes, such acceptance may happen with low confidence in the ladder, say when a person is trapped in a burning house and timely action is crucial. The rescuer senses instability in the ladder but ceases their checking by tentatively accepting within that practical context and going for the rescue.

Three. A man loves his wife who is pregnant. While he is confident that he is the father, he has some reason to wonder because of the couple's situation around the time of conception. He decides that any

doubt is best not entertained for being unhelpful in all sorts of ways, so he pragmatically accepts that he is the dad.

Acceptance and belief differ in their orientation toward truth and doubt, because of practical commitment. Belief is usually based on evidence or perceived truth and tied to cognitive conviction, and not dependent on deliberate practical choice. Belief in God's existence because of a compelling argument like the cosmological proof or from a conviction that the Bible is true or from a compelling religious experience is distinct from accepting for pragmatic purposes that God exists. Intelligent people vary in their capacity for assenting to belief from the same evidence. My case for the free will of Originating Initiative (OI) in Chapter Five springs from the voluntary nature of acceptance, compared to the *involuntary* nature of Schellenberg's belief requirement which on its own renders the agent unfree to chance initiating relationship.<sup>98</sup>

### Hope.

Hope is more difficult to define than 'belief' or 'acceptance'.

While there are evidential and rational norms around belief and acceptance, hope is not governed by such norms. There may be debate whether hope tout court can be irrational, but the hope element for conveying Gumption will not offend the practical rationality of acceptance which partners hope. There is a raft of philosophical literature on the rationality of hope, largely extending from what is called the Standard Account (of hope).<sup>99</sup> The usual approach analyses hope in terms of something like a wish or desire for a state of affairs along with a belief about the possibility of that state of affairs.

It will be helpful and interesting to briefly survey the history of philosophical thinking about hope, which culminates with the Standard Account approach. I use that study as springboard for thinking about the hope element of Gumption with help from a recent theory by Segal & Textor (2015), and Blöser (2019).

### A Note About Epistemic and Practical Rationality.

We will see that acceptance is partly governed or constrained through practical rationality for directing action. This is unlike epistemic rationality for justifying belief from evidence, while hope can be

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<sup>98</sup> I acknowledged that God may have all sorts of 'purposes' whereby free choice for engagement with Gumption is not in play.

<sup>99</sup> See Blöser and Stahl (2022, section 3) for an excellent encyclopaedic review.

legitimately motivated by non-rational variables. I have characterised Gumption underscored by hopeful-acceptance including a sort of humble chance as motivated by the idea that God will value our humble venture for *freely* initiating relationship with Him.

Recall from Chapter Three I considered Schellenberg's (2016) curious claim that his argument will go through with a modified premise that instead refers to, "non-resistantly being in a cognitive condition, in relation to the proposition that God exists, that is incompatible with then being able to participate in a personal relationship with God just by trying should one seek to do so." (p24). That cognitive condition we are told could be a non-believing hope or faith and his claim is that a modified argument could incorporate those (see also Schellenberg 2021). My thesis for OI is conscious of his proposal for a modified premise. The attitude of hopeful-acceptance may be volunteered by a non-resistant non-believer, in relation to the proposition that God probably exists or even that God might exist, sufficient for initiating relationship. The aspect of voluntariness renders the non-resistant aspect of the conjunct incoherent or at least unclear for operating in a way Schellenberg would require for a modified argument to go through, and the onus is on Schellenberg to make clear what a non-resistant non-hopeful acceptance would be. The phrase strikes me as an oxymoron on its face, but otherwise it may be an oxymoron if my case through this and the next chapter is correct, that never exercising Gumption equates to being resistant.

Howard-Snyder (2013) suggests what he calls 'acceptance states' that must be governed by some norms of rationality for Schellenberg plausibly to claim that someone could non-resistantly *not* hold those states by *rationality withholding them*. Hopeful-acceptance is partly grounded or motivated by non-rational variables and so rational withholding of them is off cue.

We now have an introduction to belief, hope, and acceptance, for development in later sections. Before I come to that, I first extend comments made in Chapters Three and Four and discuss related themes from the literature that help set the scene and resonate with my thesis.

### Conceptual Vicinity for OI.

Bishop (2002) articulates a way of thinking about religious faith that he calls the 'doxastic venture model' and he takes the work of William James to be a good example (whose ideas will feature in Chapter Seven helping my case for the value of Gumption). Bishop introduces 'the framework principle' in the religious sphere for underwriting the concept that faith "involves believing beyond what is rationally justifiable."

(p471) Bishop argues that such 'venturesome believing' is coherent and ethically sound, and he presents qualifying conditions that such belief be epistemically rational.

Bishop takes a central objection that belief cannot be permitted on a *passional* basis, whereby assent is not based on evidence. This objection is consistent with the idea that belief cannot be volunteered which is the received view in philosophy and my position in the preceding chapters. He thinks religious belief and practice are not constrained by this objection because *framework principles* apply. Bishop's aim is to show how James' doxastic venture model is preferable to Richard Swinburne's view that faith is commitment to act on the *assumption* that God exists and is trustworthy. I will not comment on his deliberation about that matter but draw out some of the gist as it may pertain to my case for hopeful-acceptance.

An example of a framework principle of theism would be applying claims in the Bible to one's life *because one takes these claims to be inspired by God*. The whole edifice of theism somewhat depends on this framework principle. The principle cannot be decided by evidence alone, and Bishop argues that *reasonable* acceptance of such a principle is a genuine option. Hilary Putnam (1975) may have coined the term 'framework principle' in application to the natural sciences. Two examples of framework principles he proposes are the principle of induction and the laws of classical logic.

Bishop claims there is no rational basis for applying levels of credence to framing principles because if one rationally *acts* on them with non-negligible confidence, then there is nothing to confound the adoption of a high confidence:

...if one does assume  $p$  true in practice, one may reasonably do so with *any* non-negligible degree of purely subjective confidence. A fortiori, therefore, one may reasonably do so with a degree of purely subjective confidence near enough to 1. (p484)

He says this can happen while the agent has the "appropriate passional resources" (ibid), and his proposal is that non-rational resources partly enable practice, for evidentially undecidable options. On my account for OI, Gumption conveys that attendant non-rational resource in the form of hope.

Bishop's point is echoed by philosophers of science since Putnam, such as Murphy (1990) and van Fraassen (2002). Both argue that the progress of science has involved reliance on high order framing principles that are not grounded by evidence, much like religious faith propositions. Van Fraassen only mentions the religious context incidentally, but Murphy more explicitly defends the practical rationality of faith involving such principles.

Buchak (2017) finds the claims of van Fraassen and Murphy regarding framing principles to resonate with both William James and Aquinas. Buchak draws an overarching implication from all of them such that the conclusions we may draw from truth-directed reasons must be supported by framework principles because every observer or enquirer after truth must be *located* somewhere in relation to religious or cultural traditions and world views. While that location may be to some extent intentional, “it could be a historical accident, a matter of passion or emotion, or a conscious move from a different starting point.” (p55). Buchak claims there will be nothing epistemically objectionable about a particular starting point (though it can be judged prudentially and morally), and these factors can provide warrant for justified religious belief.

Another aspect of the practical rationality of accepting propositions not fully supported by evidence is where there is some imperative to act. Whether in religious or mundane contexts, there are situations when taking the risk of acting (such as OI) is superior to waiting or seeking more evidence before acting. Buchak (2012) identifies three conditions for practically rational action: firstly, the agent has enough evidence to give her some confidence in a proposition. Secondly, she thinks it unlikely that future evidence will tell against the proposition and thirdly, postponing action is costly (or she is risk averse). If Buchak is correct and these conditions are met for our non-resistant non-believer, then Gumption is practically rational.

However, Buchak’s account may not support my case for claiming that Gumption is *warranted, even when the agent may have low confidence* in the proposition that God exists but accepts that God *might* exist. If I attempted to configure OI to conform with Buchak’s conditions, for situations of low confidence (compared to higher confidence), I would emphasise costly postponement for outweighing that low confidence. Chapter Seven will argue that OI can be supported by belief in the proposition that God *might* exist, and that our non-resistant non-believer have enough confidence in *that* proposition for judging Gumption to be practically rational.

Before we get to the sections on Hope and Acceptance, it is fitting to comment on what we may take to be three adjacent notions.

### Faith, Reason and Doubt.

McKaughan (2013) informs this section about faith, reason, and the notion of doubt, for priming the following sections on hope and acceptance. McKaughan targets three conceptions of faith that are plausibly consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition, that he calls “faith as belief-plus, trusting

acceptance, and hopeful affirmation.” (p101). I consider aspects of his thesis that are pertinent for thinking about Gumption.

A general difference between the belief conception and the other two involving hope and trust is the aspect of doubt featuring within the case for their justification or rationality such that:

while the person of faith has a stake in the truth of the content (e.g., that God exists), practical as well as epistemic considerations can legitimately figure in normative appraisals. Trust and hope can be appropriate in situations of recognized risk, need not involve self-deception, and are compatible with the idea that one’s purely epistemic opinions should be responsive only to evidence. (ibid)

The voluntary choice to accept that God exists in conjunction with hope can be made while harbouring doubt.<sup>100</sup> It is hopeful-acceptance of the proposition that God exists that I prescribe as a genuine (if tentative) option for the non-resistant non-believer for activating Gumption, while the purely epistemic (aside from pragmatic) element of that attitude could be the belief that ‘God might exist’, because one may take there to be rational evidence of that. My claim here may invite an objection from what McKaughan calls the ‘logic of belief’ argument, which is a commonly touted objection or worry about religious faith.

The logic of belief argument is that faith in God is justified only if belief that God exists is justified. If Gumption involves hoping in God’s existence, then the logic of belief argument could be applied by claiming that the following statement appears incoherent or absurd: ‘I hope God is listening and responds to my Gumption, while I do not believe He exists’. McKaughan develops a response which seeks to dissolve the appearance of incoherence with alternative understandings of what faith can be. I will analyse and borrow aspects from his response only as far as it concerns the practical rationality or justification of hopeful-acceptance for OI.

Models of faith requiring propositional belief *that* God exists, such as Plantinga’s, like Schellenberg’s understanding for his argument from hiddenness, do not embrace the phenomenon of *doubt* experienced by theists. My personal faith involves doubt. Plantinga (in agreement with Calvin) presumably would not accept that I have faith in the proper sense because it does not equate to “firm

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<sup>100</sup> Alvin Plantinga (2000) develops a widely discussed example of a *belief-based* account, whereby theistic beliefs are not inferred from evidence or argument but are immediately grounded in religious experience in a comparable way to perceptual beliefs being directly justified by experience, such as ‘there is a table’. Plantinga might respond to the hiddenness argument by contending that a non-resistant non-believer lacked the sense capacity to properly learn about the world, or something along those lines.

and certain knowledge" (2000, p244). Note, the 'plus' aspect denotes a commitment to live a certain way such as worshipping God and observing His law.<sup>101</sup> It is well acknowledged in some traditions that doubt over extended periods may be experienced by deeply committed religious people. Remember I surveyed the phenomenon of 'divine silence' in Chapter One, with saintly examples like Mother Teresa and John of the Cross, with the latter considered by Catholics one of the greatest exemplars of living faith. A biblical example occurs in the Gospel of Mark, when the father of a boy possessed during an encounter with Jesus pleads, "*help my unbelief!*" (9:24) when Jesus encourages faith in Him.

McKaughan is surely right to assert that an adequate model of faith must take seriously the fact that doubt is prevalent amongst the faithful, which is consistent with all I say in connection with non-resistant non-belief through Chapters Two and Three. This carries over to qualify Gumption as enabling OI through hope and acceptance.<sup>102</sup>

## Acceptance.

There are a range of ways to think that action based on acceptance without belief may be rational and/or justified. I take inspiration from William Alston's influential article in 1996 covering the distinction between belief and acceptance pertaining to cognition for religious faith. Alston surveys the range of meaning that 'to believe' is taken to have. The main differences he suggests between belief and acceptance mostly boil down to pragmatic considerations. Alston provides examples intended to illustrate accepting a proposition when action or a 'policy' is to be chosen while one does not *firmly* believe that proposition (p10, much like my earlier examples with the ladder). Acceptance shores up a decision or policy for action, when belief is too weak to stimulate that action either by inference, or from its operating as a premise. Further, unlike belief which is a felt disposition regarding the truth of a proposition, one may *volunteer* acceptance of a proposition where timeliness is a factor. Alston also argues that doubt can reasonably be part of authentic and proper Christian faith, including a survey of biblical sources that reveal acceptance to be a valid ground for faith, and compatible with the official Creeds of the Church. All this is consistent with my proposal about the cognitive attitude of acceptance for Gumption, such that belief is not necessary.

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<sup>101</sup> Belief on its own is inadequate for relationship. The devil believes that God exists.

<sup>102</sup> While Belief-plus models may not require certainty, they require higher confidence in the proposition than confidence in the proposition being untrue (credence above 0.5) or highest confidence in the proposition compared to competing possibilities (McKaughan 2013, Fn 1). In any case this is unlike hope for Gumption, which need not be constituted by any logical equivalence with quantitative notions of credence or confidence.

Vahid (2008) argues that Alston's notion of acceptance is simply a species of belief and that his understanding of religious faith in terms of acceptance is no advance on the notion of *degrees* of belief. I take Curtis (2025)<sup>103</sup> to probe a similar idea when he queries whether acceptance is effectively just some *credence* of belief. In the same vein, Lennertz (2022) claims that some decisions involving belief credence mean the agent must adopt some level of acceptance when deciding to act, "...acceptance-like attitudes...play a central role at the intersection of our epistemic and practical lives." (p226). The difference I contend is that credence or degrees of belief cannot be volunteered for prompting action, which otherwise may happen *in spite of* lacking belief, but while volunteering acceptance. While a person may identify with some level of credence in a proposition, it cannot be volunteered, unlike the potentially attendant but separate attitude of acceptance.

While acceptance that God exists and is listening, may be a temporary cognitive attitude for Gumption, Alston posits that *acceptance* is a valid policy of attitude for committed Christians regarding doctrines to which they attach some doubt with the live possibility they may be false. Curtis (2024) also queries whether acceptance is just *pretending* to believe. The difference is that the agent is making a deliberate choice to practically accept the proposition as being true, while an actor or pretender does not do so. McKaughan (2013) makes a directly related point while qualifying Alston's understanding of acceptance as a *truth-oriented* attitude by way of a choice or decision to regard something as true:

...by an act of deliberate choice, ...while perhaps lacking the spontaneous feeling of confidence enjoyed by the believer, the accepter can be as fully involved in the form of life, and not just on an 'as if' basis. This is not a matter of resolving to act as if the doctrines are true, while not really taking seriously the idea that they are true. To accept the doctrines is to accept them as true. Since Jesus was resurrected is true if and only if Jesus was resurrected, I can't accept the latter without at least being committed to accepting the former. (Alston 1996, p18)

I connect *hope* with acceptance for Gumption in the next section. McKaughan claims that acceptance of a proposition *can be* on purely epistemic grounds, alongside practical considerations (which will not inform belief in that proposition). He illustrates this difference between acceptance and belief with an example from Frankish (2004):

Suppose I believe that the gun in my desk drawer is unloaded. And suppose I am now offered a small sum of money for taking the weapon, aiming it at the head of a loved one, and pulling

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<sup>103</sup> References to Curtis are personal correspondence or conversation with Dr. Benjamin Curtis at Nottingham Trent University.

the trigger. In deciding whether to accept this offer, I might, quite reasonably, refrain from relying on the proposition that the gun is unloaded. (p134)

The belief that the weapon is unloaded will not inform action and one may accept that the weapon is loaded without believing it so. The cautious choice not to act combines belief, desire, and risk aversion. Here are three more examples of belief and acceptance coming apart (two of which are adapted from my earlier examples).

Suppose my neighbour last week told me that his ladder is broken and needs replacing. Today I exit my house and witness his place on fire and screaming from upstairs. I may believe that the ladder will not support a rescue, which I ignore as a premise for deciding not to act and accept in the moment that it will do the job and go for the rescue. This somewhat incautious choice combines desire and belief with risk tolerance.

Suppose my wife had an affair last year. Important aspects of my family life depend on me choosing to trust her again, so I *accept* the proposition that she will be faithful in the future, while I do not have good reason to *believe* that.

McKaughan cites the example of a rescue team jointly deciding to continue searching for trapped miners (let us presume after an extended period of failed tries). He supposes for the search, that they are accepting the proposition that some workers are still alive in case it is true that they are, while they might quite confidently believe they are not.

Opening the context a little, Robert Audi (2008, p93) proposes a model of faith involving doubt, including two conditions that faith must satisfy for being rational, which I contend can be satisfied by Gumption. Firstly, a positive judgement or evaluation of the proposition. Secondly, a cognitive commitment to *accept* (or trust) a proposition as true via non-epistemic practical considerations including goals and values, even though such considerations might not be a guide to the truth of the proposition. Audi claims that faith with those further non-epistemic elements, “can be rational even if theistic beliefs with the same content should turn out not to be.” (1991, p213) This could happen when an individual’s beliefs that are grounded in experience may be justified, while the belief content itself is untrue. The justification while fallible is relative to the person’s experiential context. There are all sorts of ways a person could be negligent in how they understand their experience, which could disqualify their belief from being justified, such as perhaps if a person believed the proposition that God exists only because of a dream they had. According to Audi, practical rationality is in this sense not an absolute but is individualized.

Extending this idea to our non-resistant non-believer for exercising Gumption is not straightforward. A believer may be justified through religious experience or by trusting in testimony. I contend there is certainly enough background context for our secular westerner to believe that God might exist for acceptingly taking a chance, especially while there is so much at stake. However, if a non-believer is most influenced by arguments and experience which they take to imply that God does *not* exist, they can still be practically rational in chancing Gumption because there is multivarious context in the secular west for them to sometime chance Gumption. *Never* taking a chance to experience what half of the world trust to be the highest good, is resistant. My case for these claims is developed in the next chapter.

The practical rationality I claim for Gumption where the non-resistor only believes that God *might* exist, involves taking a chance that any part of the abundance of testimony (and/or arguments) for God's existence are true. My devious younger brother is in the habit of fibbing for his own amusement and one day he exclaimed loudly from the back seat while I was driving at night, "Watch out there's a badger in the road!" I suddenly applied the brake. I accepted and acted on his claim while believing it probably untrue. One would certainly be resistant not to take a chance with Gumption by hopefully accepting that God exists while there is infinitely more at stake and with evidential indicators vastly more impressive than those offered by my little brother.

To summarise, acceptance functions as a volunteered cognitive attitude that can guide action when belief is absent, weak, or uncertain. Drawing from Alston's account, acceptance may be adopted pragmatically, as when one commits to act on a proposition without the felt disposition of believing it. This makes acceptance distinct from degrees of belief or credence, which cannot be chosen at will to prompt action. The literature reveals persistent debate: some contend that acceptance is reducible to belief in disguise, while others emphasise its role in decision-making where belief and action diverge. McKaughan and Audi strengthen the view that acceptance is a truth-oriented stance grounded in deliberate choice, even amid doubt. These views support the conceptual work I require of acceptance for Gumption which can be temporary or situational, allowing an agent to commit in practice without the confidence belief requires. For non-resistant non-believers, such acceptance provides a rational policy for Gumption, given the weight of testimony, tradition, and lived possibility. In this respect, acceptance offers a bridge between cognitive hesitancy and practical commitment. The next section will consider the affective and motivational role of hope.

## Hope.

As a cradle Catholic I have hoped in God most of my life. Upon coming to research the concept of hope I was quite surprised and not a little unsettled at the range of issues that might inform the notion. The topic is interesting enough that I will begin by widening the purview beyond what is most relevant for my thesis, while not wandering far. I found the broader view to be generally instructive and warranting a brief sojourn through the intellectual history of the notion of hope.<sup>104</sup>

An overarching query has motivated much of the philosophical wondering about hope. The question is whether hope contributes to motivation for action or reasoning about action independent of *desire*, that we might expect to prompt that motivation or reasoning. If not, then the suspicion or worry is that hope may serve to warp rational agency, because the desire element may encourage irrational bias or other sort of unjustified impetus. Most theories of hope resonate with the aforementioned ‘standard account’ which combines uncertainty of belief with desire for a situation or a thing. I will begin with a brief historical survey since Descartes before I analyse the contemporary standard account.

### Hope since Descartes.

Descartes considers hope to be a sort of weak confidence about a good outcome that is likely but not certain. The uncertain element is the cause of anxiety which always accompanies hope. Descartes (1649) thinks hope may be rational, as does Hobbes (1651) who considers hope to be a complex passion by way of pleasure of thought. That pleasure is derived from a person’s appetite for the obtaining of a thing or situation. Descartes and Hobbes are on the same lines about hope insofar as they both think it is rational.

Spinoza’s (1677) metaphysic has everything happening by necessity, so unsurprisingly he thinks that hope is irrational because the attitude is out of sync with the correct view of the world which should have no room for hope. It seems that the desire driving hope according to Spinoza is understandable insofar as the agent does not know whether the desire is realistic. Under this regimen, *prima facie* there is conceptual room to judge hope to be a rational rather than irrational.

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<sup>104</sup> I draw mostly here from Blöser and Stahl (2022).

Hume (1738) categorises hope as a passion, configured by his approach for understanding psychology. It is passion as an emotion or feeling, caused or produced by a person considering a possibility thought to be neither certain nor impossible, but somewhere in between. Thoughts pertaining to the probability of an event are produced by the mind imagining contrary possibilities that conduce joy or sadness.

Kant's (1785) understanding of hope is connected to his concept of the 'Categorical Imperative'. That imperative is a universal moral law that applies to all rational beings, regardless of their desires or goals, and which points to the existence of a highest possible good. According to Kant, we must believe in the highest possible good because it follows, or is prescribed by the universal law, which means we must believe in God and the eternal nature of the soul. Hope in the existence of God in this case is not simply an attitude of mind where there is insufficient evidence about whether God exists but is justified because pure practical reason makes it necessary to assume that the eternal soul is possible.

I have found Kierkegaard (1847) to resonate most with the understanding of hope that I might have described as my untutored intuition before coming to research the notion, and he is mostly interested in hope in relation to religious faith. However, my philosophically untutored understanding of hope was quite surprised at Kierkegaard's idea that hope in the eternal necessarily transcends understanding. I take his idea to be connected to my earlier thought about credence; that a quantitative probability may only correctly describe a situation where evidence can be quantified, unlike in relation to the transcendent where the notion of probability loses traction.

Implicitly echoing Kant, Kierkegaard defines hope in connection with the prospect of the good: "To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is to hope, which cannot be any temporal expectancy but is an eternal hope." ([1847] 1995, p249). Hope by being directed to the good, is directed at the eternal; such is the highest good.

John Stuart Mill (1870) takes a similar line to William James. Mill understands James to argue that hope can rationally be allowed to influence choice, so it may come into play in deciding in favour of an action when evidence has insufficient bearing. In the context of discussing immortality, Mill sounds very much like James does on religious faith, "to anyone who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope." (p210) Here we understand hope as including a desire for an object or outcome. One cannot hope for something that one does not in any way wish for.

This snapshot of early modern history on thinking about hope leads us into the current 'standard account' of hope, around which most contemporary philosophical debate occurs. Before I come to that,

I will offer brief comment on another thinker who explicitly considers hope in a religious context who has influenced my thinking after reading some time years ago.

In thinking about hope as it pertains to hopeful-acceptance for Gumption, I am steered by my own sense of religious hope. Gabriel Marcel (1952) writing somewhat in the spirit of Kierkegaard, promoted the idea of hope without a determinate object in contrast to propositional 'hope that p'. While I hope that God exists, the target of my hope to that extent is largely mysterious because one cannot imagine too much about God. However, that hope is bound up with hope that the Gospel is true, which is determinate. It may be said that my hope overall is indeterminate in the technical sense. Marcel uses the phrase 'absolute hope' regarding God's existence, as a "response of the creature to the infinite Being to whom it is conscious of owing everything that it has." (1952, p41).

Ratcliffe (2013) is a follower of Marcel in this approach and thinks about hope as a sort of pre-intending, as "a kind of general orientation or sense of how things are with the world, in the context of which intentional states of the kind "I hope that p" are possible." (p602). I include these remarks from Marcel and Ratcliffe only as suggestive allusions for describing my intuition about religious hope and to give a flavour of the approach. It would be a substantial exercise to analyse their accounts with sufficient philosophical scrutiny, which I will not attempt. Now to the contemporary analytical topic of hope.

### The Standard Account.

Philosophical debate often centres on whether hope reduces to a desire for p, in addition to a belief about the possibility of p, or whether hope consists of something else instead of or in addition to desire and belief. There are two main sorts of objection to the standard account in the literature which challenge whether desire and belief convey sufficient conditions for hope.

The first sort is called the 'despair objection', described by a situation where two people have the *same* level of desire and the *same* estimated probability about something, yet while one of them hopes the other despairs. Say for an event, while one person hopes for it to happen, the other despairs that it will not happen.<sup>105</sup>

The other sort is the 'substantial hope objection'. This line of objection holds that while the standard account including desire and belief about possibility may be minimally correct in defining what hope is, it fails to capture some extra aspect that is present in cases of more *substantial* hope, such that serve

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<sup>105</sup> see Meirav (2009).

to motivate a person under tough conditions even while that person estimates a low probability for what is hoped.

These objections drive attempts to either revise the standard account or motivate the idea that hope cannot be defined only in terms of desire and belief and is therefore not reducible to them. My comments earlier about probability not being conducive or appropriate for thinking about God are partly why I am inclined to look at alternative approaches to the standard account for capturing a sense of hope for supporting OI.

Various attempts have been made which append some third element to belief and desire. I will briefly survey the main attempts below. That approach resembles the attempt to append some third element to justified and true belief for the analysis of knowledge, which has famously been through many unsuccessful iterations since Gettier disturbed the traditional understanding of knowledge in 1963. Perhaps pessimistically (because not guided by principle), I expect that approach will also be unsuccessful for hope.

Instead, I am encouraged to consider two more recent theories which cover fundamentally different perspectives on hope while pointing to problems with the standard account. The first contends that hope is a primitive mental state. The second view objects to that and treats hope as an irreducible concept. Perhaps there is scope that I hitch my wagon for Gumption to either.

Before we get to those, it will be instructive to consider hope on a psychological level, for its motivating force to action in the absence of belief, even when the odds are slim, which might describe a non-resistant non-believer under the context of OI. There is a well cited example of this coined by Jordan (2006).

A castaway builds a bonfire hoping to catch the attention of any ship or plane that might be passing nearby. Even with no evidence that a plane or ship is nearby, he still gathers driftwood and lights a fire, enhancing the possibility of rescue. The castaway's reasoning is pragmatic. The benefit associated with fire building exceeds that of not building, and, clearly, no one questions the wisdom of the action. (p1)

Obviously, there are situations where one might hope for an outcome, while its being *unwise* to act in accordance with that outcome. An atheist friend once challenged me that his hope to win the lottery is just a wish, and that he would not act as if he would win, and so why is my religious hope any different? Why should my religious hope alone incline me to be a Christian? He was seemingly pushing for distinction between wishing and hoping, with the implication that hope could be like a wish and need not convey a commitment to act. Clearly the situations are different to the extent that I perceive the

evidence and reason for God and Christ, to be of an altogether different kind to the reason we have for the lottery. Thousands of years of tradition, practice and wisdom involving innumerable good and genius people does not compare in any meaningful sense whatsoever to the wish to win the lottery. Has my friend attended less diligently (or from his perspective, more discerningly) to the world or am I perhaps more disposed than he to be hopeful of the transcendent? All that OI requires is taking a chance with Gumption, and if one cannot muster any hope for taking that chance, then one is resistant and not comported with nr-nb. I take the case for hope that I hold up in Chapter Seven to be persuasive for anyone humbly seeking, and it can be volunteered as a component of tentative acceptance that God exists. The voluntariness of hope independent of that component of acceptance is a live question.

McKaughan (2013) considers that hope is not voluntary if it consists in desires and belief that in turn are involuntary. We have seen that belief is not voluntary, but it seems that desires perhaps are an attribute that a person appears on the scene with as it were, by that circumstantial luck of Chapter Five. I will be adopting the line that hope does not only consist of belief and desire. But I am also conjoining hope to acceptance in hopeful-acceptance for Gumption. In support of his own theory of faith, McKaughan takes a deflationary view about hope grounding religious commitment on its own, while contending that it may be a component of the cognitive attitude that makes up faith.

It appears to me that hope is driven by emotion as well as cognition and is better identified as an affective attitude instead of a cognitive one. Issues considered below will bear on this question. The model of faith that McKaughan (2013) develops, presents an implicit partial overlap with hopeful-acceptance, by combining “a hope-that God exists with an accompanying set of affective and behavioural commitments characteristic of trust-in God.” (p114). A simplistic mapping might have hopeful-(voluntary)acceptance in place of trust, for motivating the behavioural commitment of Gumption for OI.

Now let us now consider those two more recent theories I have mentioned. Segal and Textor are instructive for covering objections to the standard account, and they contend that hope is a primitive mental state. Blöser accepts their critique of the standard account but objects to their theory, and analyses hope as an irreducible concept.

#### Hope as a Primitive Mental State - Segal and Textor.

Segal and Textor (2015) criticise attempts around the standard account which define hope in psychological terms of belief and desire plus something else, and contend that hope is a primitive

mental state, with a nature that can be understood by specifying its functional characteristics with links to belief, desire, intention and action.

Segal and Textor are generally pessimistic about analytic definitions of mental state concepts in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions and perceive this to be broadly dawning on most philosophers, which resonates with my earlier remark about the long-running incidence of failures to reductively analyse knowledge. “Philosophers of mind have, by and large, abandoned the project of giving reductive definitions of mental states.” (p207). I will briefly review their argument.

They use a series of examples that persuasively show how hope does not consist in belief and desire. One that I will embellish has a couple of mountain climbers on a particularly challenging ascent, and they pause to assess their progress while still quite some distance from the summit. The wind is blowing hard and both women are tired. They agree that there is about a fifty-fifty chance of success. They verbalise their feelings with raised voices against an increasingly loud draft, to and froing in expression of roughly equal desires to reach the top and then to be relaxing with a beer at base camp. In terms of their beliefs about their situation and their desires for either outcome, the choice whether to push or resign hangs in the balance with the same beliefs and desires as each other. They do not toss a coin because Sally has lost her bottle and is likely to descend, while Sylvana hopes for the summit and will probably go for it. Hope breaks the deadlock.

They claim that hope is valuable for us as a motivating force beyond the functioning of belief and desire.

Hope stands in for belief when one believes that the chances of success in one’s endeavour are slim. This is what makes hope valuable for us. It allows us to act in situations where we do not believe our action will succeed or even believe that there is a very good chance that they might fail. If hope were just a belief/desire pair it would be difficult to see how it could play that role for us. (p210)

Some approaches deny the distinctively motivating force of hope by employing the notions of confidence and deliberation as part of belief and desire, which Segal and Textor (S&T) persuasively refute in principle. I will not present an account of the iterations through which philosophers have laboured on this project.<sup>106</sup> I will briefly outline three prominent proposals they consider for defining hope with another mental state in conjunction with belief and desire. Those being firstly, ‘Dedication of mental energy’, secondly, ‘Cognitive resolve’, and thirdly, ‘Readiness to offer a justificatory rationale’.

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<sup>106</sup> A good starting point is Blöser and Stahl (2022), sections 3 and 5.

Bovens (1999) proposes the dedication of mental energy as the additional constitutive element of hope along with belief and desire. Bovens thinks the difference between Sylvana and Sally on the mountain would be that the motivated hopeful climber succeeds in *imagining* arrival at the summit. S&T draw on Gilbert Ryle's 'The Concept of Mind' (1949) to claim that imagining the future occurrence is only a manifestation of desire, "if one desires that p, one's attention will, *ceteris paribus*, be directed to reasons for p, information about p etc." (p215) Further, while hope is a dispositional state that may be manifested by imagining, they provide examples showing both that one may hope that p, without mentally imagining p, and that mental imaging is not sufficient for hope. (p216-7)

Pettit (2004) has an account of hope that appends cognitive resolve to belief and desire. For Pettit, *resolving to act* as if one's hopes will happen while one does not believe they will happen is defining of hope. Pettit's proposal fails to chime at all with a pre-tutored intuition about what hope is or with what the folk call 'hope'. One routinely may hope in an outcome without acting as if it will come about.

S&T sympathise with a distinction Pettit draws between 'substantial' hope and 'trivial' hope, concerning himself only with the former sort which is hope that guards against loss of heart. They object that cognitive resolve to guard against loss of heart is different to hope. Consider again Sylvana and Sally on the mountain. While Sally is encouraged to adopt resolve for reaching the summit before ploughing on, yet she can remain *unhopeful* of success by just gritting her teeth and willing herself forward. S&T show with similar examples how hope is different from will or resolve.

Martin (2014) presents a book length thesis contending that hope for an outcome means treating feelings or plans or imaginings as *justified*. Martin analyses hope with the same tripartite approach by adding a third element to belief and desire as follows: Given an estimated probability of an event or outcome to which an agent is attracted, the agent stands,

ready to offer a certain justificatory rationale for certain activities related to the outcome. These hopeful activities are: turning one's attention and thoughts – especially by constructing fantasies – to the outcome; feeling a positive sense of anticipation– feeling "hopeful" – about it, and relying on it in one's plans – though only with a back-up plan. The justificatory rationale includes appealing to the probability one assigns to the outcome, as "good enough" to license these activities, along with treating one's attraction and the outcome's attractive features as reasons to engage in them. (p69)

The third element amounts to the agent *licensing* a plan or action. While two people may assign the same probability to an outcome, they may differ in their response to that assignment. Back on the mountain, while Sylvana might estimate less than a fifty percent chance of summiting and yet she sees

the challenge as worth taking, while Sally takes the same probability to be cause for resignation. Martin conceptualises the difference as Sylvana licensing the climb while Sally does not.

My suspicion here is that ‘licensing’ is being used as a synonym or stand-in for ‘hoping’ and therefore amounts to a specification without insight. Perhaps relatedly, S&T propose a possible understanding to be that if Sylvana’s response to the estimated probability is what licenses the climb, then that “implicitly relies on the notion of hope.” (p220). For this reason, they suspect Martin’s analysis of hope to be circular. However, for sake of argument they do not press the point and instead develop a critique which assumes licensing to be independent of hope. That further critique is instructive, including the two following objections.

There are clear examples of an agent hoping for an outcome without standing ready to justify their hope. Here is one of mine. Years ago, I found myself racing a mountain bike down an obstacle strewn hill in a forest, while wearing completely inappropriate shoes worn to a party on the previous night (having forgotten to pack my trainers). I was determined to stay ahead and beat my smug friend upon taking the lead out of the traps, while he was only a few feet behind me all the way down. I had the advantage because of the difficulty of overtaking, even though he was the more experienced rider and the bookies favourite at the outset. While I rode with the hope of winning, my attention was always purely focused on the coming moments, so that I could not focus any attention or thought on a possible eventual victory. The idea of being able to justify my hope of winning while I rode is out of the question. S&T claim that me being justified might be a question for a philosopher or psychologist, but that I could be rational in refusing to entertain or even take an interest in the justificatory status of my hope while in such a situation.

More generally S&T claim that Martin’s view of hope involves the phenomenon of “excessive reflectiveness.” (p221). While riding, I was to some degree *animated* by hope in my precarious hurtling, but such animation being justified is an altogether different thing. Martin broaches the scenario of a young child being animated by the hope that Father Christmas will bring him presents, while he is neither ready nor able to justify dedicating his attention to finding them on Christmas day. Martin categorises the child’s attitude as not being proper hope, while being “developmentally continuous” (2014, p71) with hope. S&T balk at the prospect of there being any independent reason to infer that the kid does not really hope, and they dismiss Martin’s taxonomic thesis as poor by being either stipulative or question-begging. Now to their positive thesis that hope is a primitive mental state.

S&T suspect the effort of defining hope or any mental state concept, or of providing necessary and sufficient conditions for the instantiation of such states, is misguided, if only because it has never been

successful. Their fundamental change of approach explains hope as a primitive mental state that works in conjunction with, not as a component of, belief and desire.

For instance, as I earlier pictured the difference between willpower and hope had by each climber, that while both attributes are similar for spurring the ascent, neither can be understood in terms of the other. While both are distinct from belief and desire, their strength may affect action in conjunction with belief and desire.

S&T offer a general characterisation of that aspect of hope:

suppose G is a possible desirable outcome of an attempted action A. Then, keeping fixed the subjective value of G and subjective likelihood of G, given A, the extent of a subject's motivation for doing A depends on the extent to which he hopes that if A, then G. (p222)

I am persuaded that they are correct in taking this characterisation to suggest that hope as a distinct mental state cooperates with other mental states in causing action and understanding hope is to understand how it functions within a package of mental states.

Applying this suggestion to the women on the mountain. Sylvana puts low odds on reaching the summit, so she has insufficient reason to climb. However, her hope combines with that belief about slim odds and her desire for reaching the top, so to provide sufficient reason and will for continuing the climb. S&T claim she will be motivated to climb with the goal of summiting, without her *expecting* to summit, only if she hopes that by climbing, she will manage to summit. Sylvana's attempting the climb in light of her belief of slender odds is explained by her intention to summit and the hope of success, but not by the expectation of it.

This situation on the mountain would appear to nicely translate into our picturing a non-resistant non-believer coming upon reason for hope (in the form of the gospel or other information) so to motivate voluntary acceptance of the proposition that God exists for prompting Gumption.

S&T's account of hope may support my proposal of hopeful-acceptance at least as far as it could function for OI by motivating an act of Gumption. Now I move to another alternative approach which may help me consider how hope could operate for Gumption.

## Hope as an Irreducible Concept - Claudia Blöser.

In this last section I will now assess a fundamentally different approach by Blöser (2019) who goes a step further than S&T against the standard account of hope. Where S&T challenge the project of finding sufficient conditions including belief and desire, Blöser objects that belief and desire are not even necessary conditions for hope. Blöser suggests, “we should take seriously the fact that we hope in a great variety of ways and should question the search for elements that are common to all cases.” (p205). She takes a cue from the Wittgensteinian tradition for thinking that the relation among cases of hope be that of family resemblance, “i.e. are multiply realizable on the ontological level while falling under the non-definable concept of hope.” (ibid)

Blöser observes that S&T’s refutation of the standard account can never be ultimately successful because some new convincing proposal for a compound account might come along. She argues that belief and desire are unnecessary components of hope and undercuts any compound account in principle. She also objects separately to S&T’s specific characterisation of hope that it always drives motivation, before arguing positively for her thesis that the concept of hope is irreducible. I will not trace the iterations she makes in connection with the tripartite analysis of the standard account, or with yet more iterative examples aimed at showing a heavy burden of proof on S&T for hope being a primitive mental state in all cases, but I will home in on the most interesting or purportedly decisive ideas as far as hope could operate as a component of Gumption.

If belief is not necessary for hope, then at a first pass it may seem odd that a person might act without belief in the possibility of the thing which is hoped for, especially when either stakes or risk are high. Blöser thinks this reflects the inclination to judge *mere* hope without belief to be irrational, because reasonable caution requires some handle on the probability of success presumably involving some level of belief in the thing hoped for. For instance, Sylvana may be thought irrational if she continued the ascent merely hoping for success and without any justified belief about the likelihood of it.<sup>107</sup> Blöser insists Sylvana’s climbing may be solely based on hope and that even while she may be entertaining belief of success and believing it neither possible nor impossible, it is not necessary that she believe.

Blöser analyses the standard conjunction of desire and hope in an analogous way, with supporting apparatus by a preeminent philosopher of the last generation, Donald Davidson. A central element of

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<sup>107</sup> The relevant risk and stake in play for Gumption that I profiled in Chapter Five are nuanced unlike simpler contexts like the mountain and may block or at least complicate that inclination for judging Gumption to be irrational without belief. Regardless, let us follow Blöser’s analysis.

the standard account is that the hoped for situation or object is thought to be good or attractive in some way, and that *desire* is the expression of that attitude. Blöser proposes two alternatives to that standard view.

Davidson (1963) takes there to be a variety of mental phenomena that can be categorised as ‘pro-attitudes’ such as “desires, wantings, urges, promptings,” (p686). And “emotions, sentiments, moods, motives, passions and hungers.” (p689). He contends that pro-attitudes may be mentioned in answer to the question, “why did you do it?” (ibid). Smith (1987) follows Davidson’s use of the term and proposes *desire* as a paradigmatic member of the class of pro-attitude, and separately listing hope within the class. Blöser proposes that hope could be a pro-attitude of its own kind, *sui generis*, “in its own right, just like desiring, wishing, valuing.” (2019, p210)

Blöser claims that hope is equally adequate a reason as desire for answering a ‘why did you do it?’ question, such that I could adequately reply to the question, ‘Why did you race down the hill?’, with, ‘Because I hoped to win’. She claims that this view explains why hope can be separate from desire while we could use them interchangeably if we are only expressing a pro-attitude towards the win. However sometimes differences between the concepts will distinguish an attitude. For example, we might “wish” for the impossible, but we cannot hope for it. It is noteworthy that Blöser does not offer an example of hope coming apart from desire, and without an example, I worry that Davidson’s scheme of pro-attitudes as Blöser implements it for hope may equate to stipulated taxonomy. It is not clear how hope is an irreducible concept if it is a distinct pro-attitude.

Now let us consider the second alternative idea that Blöser suggests for supporting her contention that hope is an irreducible concept distinct from desire, and against the central element of the standard account that posits desire as a necessary condition for hope.

Pro-attitudes are usually of interest to philosophers for their capacity to incline a person to action for making a situation materialise or to achieve something. Blöser refers to those attitudes as the “narrow” (p210) conception of pro-attitudes. She makes much over a situation in the literature, such that a “widespread” (ibid) account of desire equates it with the disposition to act, while insisting that hope does not necessary link with action. She cites Smith (1987) as an example of an influential account that posits desire as *simply the disposition to act*, while in a footnote she admits that other accounts contend that desire is an “evaluative representation of the object as good, [and] it is harder to make the argument that hope may exist without desire [in those cases].” (ibid). A way hope does not necessarily link with action is when it is directed at past or future events which are outside the scope of the person’s power. My earlier reflection about my attitude to the Gospel could be an instance of that. In this case

hope is not a pro-attitude in the narrow sense. Her simple point is that on the former 'widespread' account of desire, hope can exist without it.

Blöser is convincing (as was S&T) that one can hope without belief, but her case for hope and desire not necessarily occurring together must be caveated. Firstly, while one might categorise desire and hope as distinct pro-attitudes, but that may merely be a matter of classification unless we can point to a concrete example showing how they may differ, and one is left wondering if their concrete instances are distinct. Secondly, if an account which characterises desire as evaluative representation is correct, then Blöser's case (which relies on desire only consisting of disposition to act) is indecisive and her claim to have refuted all compound accounts is premature at best.

Blöser claims that hope can be realised in various ways and combine different mental states related by 'family resemblance'. Wittgenstein (1953) introduced the notion of family resemblance (§§65–71) to explain how some concepts are bound together by a web of overlapping similarities. Just as members of a family may resemble one another in different respects—such as eye colour, build, or mannerisms—without all sharing one common trait, so too terms like "game" are unified not by necessary and sufficient conditions but by intersecting patterns of use. In this way Blöser rejects the project of strictly defining hope and instead proposes how the meaning of 'hope' arises from the fluid and interconnected practice of its use.

Blöser rejects S&T's approach of positing the ontological nature of hope as a primitive mental state. Blöser's altogether different view is that hope is "...realized by complex mental states. [Meaning] that persons who hope may be in different mental states, where those cases all fall under the concept of hope." (p212).

Blöser aims to account for the fact as she sees it, that a person may hope in multifarious ways not to be identified with one kind of ontology because there is not an essential core of hoping common to all instances, save for saying that all hoping involves mental activity which is too general for defining hope or distinguishing it from other mental activities.

Blöser concedes that she cannot deliver (yet?) a full defence of the family resemblance thesis for hope, which would likely require account of some positive aspects of resemblance among instances of hope.

In a positive sense, the idea is that we can identify certain interesting features that some, though not all, cases share (although, strictly speaking, Wittgenstein's account seems to allow for instances which are *similar* to the others without sharing a single feature). (p213)

Blöser claims only to have secured the negative thesis, that hope does not exhibit a common core in all instances. Her thesis then only amounts to suggestion of a plausible alternative to the other approaches.

Without that positive account, I worry that Blöser's negative thesis leaves a concept of hope that is too vague. If mental states like hope, desire, and motivation are defined only by overlapping similarities with no single essence, then it becomes unclear what distinguishes legitimate concept membership from mere loose association. That could leave 'hope' serving more as a descriptive metaphor than as a reference to cognitive attitude. Perhaps that fits well with the understanding of hope as an affective attitude connected with emotion. The worry could be that, if the relation of family resemblance connecting different instances of hope allows that two cases do not share *any* common features, then the concept may not have a standard normative function and there be no clear way to rule out misapplications of the term.

That said, other phenomena that are *prima facie* (or obviously) better understood than hope such as knowledge, intelligence, and even the condition of life, bear no received definition accepted universally by experts. Philosophers will continue to attempt definitions and explanations of the notion of hope, as they do for many other phenomena that are somewhat taken for granted by most folk in everyday life.

I will here rest my research on hope and summarise this section before concluding the chapter. Hope has long provoked philosophical debate about whether it contributes positively to rational agency or distorts it. Early modern accounts framed it in terms of confidence (Descartes, Hobbes), passion (Hume), or metaphysical error (Spinoza), while Kant grounded hope in moral law and Kierkegaard linked it to the eternal good. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, and Marx dismissed it as desire or illusion, whereas Marcel and Ratcliffe later pictured it as an orientation beyond determinate objects. The contemporary "standard account" treats hope as desire plus belief in possibility, but objections—such as the "despair" and "substantial hope" cases—suggest something more is at work. Segal and Textor argue hope is a primitive mental state that motivates action where belief and desire fall short, while Blöser instead contends hope is irreducible, realised in varied ways without a fixed essence. Across these accounts, hope emerges as a distinctive, affective attitude that can break deadlock, sustain agency, and orient a person beyond what evidence alone warrants. For my purposes, this makes hope a fitting partner to acceptance, grounding the stance of hopeful-acceptance as the motivational condition for Gumption.

Now to conclude this chapter.

## Conclusion of Chapter Six.

This chapter has proposed hopeful-acceptance as the cognitive-affective attitude that can coherently underwrite Gumption for Originating Initiative. Distinguishing it from belief, hopeful-acceptance is a volunteered stance that permits genuine commitment. I have drawn on Alston to show that acceptance can function as a (practically) rational, truth-oriented policy even amid doubt, and on McKaughan, Bishop, and Buchak to frame its practical rationality in contexts of risk and undecidability. The survey of hope—from its early modern treatments to Segal and Textor’s primitive state model and Blöser’s family resemblance approach—reinforces the claim that hope need not presuppose belief, and that it can supply motivational force where evidence is insufficient. Taken together, these considerations establish that hopeful-acceptance is rationally defensible. I contend that the disposition to hope for motivating Gumption will be acquired (even if only tentatively or occasionally), by any non-resistant secular westerner. In the next and final chapter, I develop the case for why such non-resistant non-believers *should* venture Gumption.

## Chapter 7

### More Gumption

"The stranger at the lodge is not apprehended by reason my son, but by life." Tolstoy

#### Introduction

This chapter argues for the independent warrant of Gumption for Originating Initiative (OI) developed in Chapter Five. My aim is to justify the exercise of Gumption regardless of uncertainty about God's existence, at least for the non-resistant non-believer, and to suggest that any agent has reason to choose it. The chapter unfolds in two parts.

Section One further situates Gumption in relation to other philosophers before I lay out why a complete lack of Gumption implies resistance. Blaise Pascal wagers on eternal reward and James defends acceptance as a live option amid underdetermined evidence, and I argue that Gumption has intrinsic value for well-being even if God does not exist. Hopeful-acceptance (Chapter Six) was argued to be the cognitive-affective attitude through which Gumption is volunteered, without presupposing belief. Further reflection supports the case that Gumption is practically rational and life-enhancing. Importantly, a complete lack of Gumption appears incompatible with non-resistance: enduring refusal to risk any initiative amounts to resistance, since it is a passional decision to foreclose relationship with God.

Section Two considers Laurie Paul & Joshua Blanchard's (2021) thesis of transformative experience and its application to religious disagreement. Paul and Blanchard depict conversion as a "leap in the dark," risking radical and alien transformation. I argue that the risk of Gumption discussed in Chapter Five is not such a leap, and is better understood as gradual, revisable, and authentically navigable. Although transformative experiences raise the problem of self-disagreement, that is, whether post-conversion values can be judged from a pre-conversion standpoint, the risks are no greater than those of other important life commitments. On balance, Gumption offers goods that outweigh such risks, even under the working assumption that God may not exist.

The chapter's upshot is that Gumption is both rationally warranted and existentially beneficial, and that non-resistant non-belief without Gumption I suggest collapses into resistance.

## Section 1. Further Situating Gumption.

Originating Initiative as a response to the argument from divine hiddenness bears some resemblance to the ideas of Blaise Pascal and even more to William James. They will be helpful for further situating the notion of Gumption, and I draw on argument from James for showing that genuine non-resistance should call up Gumption.

Pascal's classic wager focuses on the potential payoff in heaven from belief if God exists. Jordan (2006) finds a variant of the wager in Pascal (1670), which he deems similar in numerous ways to the position of James (1896), with a premise that belief carries greater reward than non-belief, *independent of God's existence*. I follow a similar line for Gumption by aiming to show that it has value, independent of doubt about God's existence in the context of the ADH and independent of God's actual existence in the context of Transformative Choice Theory in the final section.

I aim to develop a case for the value of Gumption in terms of a person's well-being, while God's existence is in doubt, and in the later section on Transformative Choice, a supplementary claim about Gumption's value while entertaining the working assumption that God does not exist. Pascal is concerned with *inculcating a belief* in God, whereas I only need to motivate *warrant for exercising Gumption* with hopeful-acceptance. Pascal faces the problem of doxastic voluntarism, that belief cannot be volunteered from insufficient evidence, while James deploys acceptance of a hypothesis instead of belief. I draw on James's argumentative structure along with a little of his poetic flourish for dialectic support.

Gumption may face a less forceful analogue of Schellenberg's objection to Moser that I broached early in Chapter Five (whereby Moser allegedly begs the question by preloading the seeker with Christian prejudice), because I provide no account of Gumption anticipating theism or more specifically Christianity, only that perhaps as a mooted background for a Western agnostic or atheist non-resistant non-believer. As far as my thesis is challenged, the issue collapses to a general problem for all accounts regarding the ambiguity of religious experience.<sup>108</sup> I am here simply flagging my awareness, and the reader should remember that our target is Schellenberg's notional Western secular non-resistant non-believer discussed several times over previous chapters.

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<sup>108</sup> See McKim (2001 & 2008).

Under the supposition that God might not exist, warrant for Gumption must be based on benefits in this life aside from the rewards of heaven for which Pascal wagers. For example, James (1902) identifies psychological benefits from a sort of practical trust that God exists, which he summarises elegantly:

A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism...An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections. (p475)

An atheist might wonder how authentic these psychological states can be if their grounding involves a *doubt* operating with faith, or a sceptic might allege a sort of 'kidding-yourself-on'. I will not be analysing the epistemology of James' account, whether he relies on a working hypothesis or trust in God's existence, but I will shadow his ideas with my previous account of hopeful-acceptance.

Thinking about warrant for Gumption has prompted reflection about my own faith, particularly in terms of gauging and articulating my *experience* in relation to lacking propositional belief while accepting God's existence. One of my supervisors encouraged 'more of myself' in the thesis, and so to implement his advice, I will sometimes ruminate on the *authenticity* of my 'accepting-faith-involving-doubt', taken up in the first-person. While not essential to my argument, personal experience and the first-person register will be useful (or interesting) to pose here and there, along with a poetic quote or two.

Pascal's wager, in basic terms, is that one should try to inculcate belief because the benefit of eternal life is immense compared to any sacrifice or disadvantage from moral conformity. Gale (2016 Ch9) reports his ethical intuition to be against Pascal and in accord with an existentialist position; that one must live an *ethically authentic* life, and that taking up Pascal's recommendation for the ensuing reward would not be authentic for him (while he accepts that it could be for others).

The exercise of Gumption involving acceptance similarly calls up the question of ethical authenticity. This invites my introspection because I have found it jarring in the past, to be accused of engaging in good works for the sake of heaven. I have never consciously exercised good will *because* of possible reward in heaven. I wonder if my disposition would be different if I were certain of heaven, but generally to Gale's point I expect one would look to conform one's authentic identification if eternal reward were on the table, though I will not interrogate the amorphous notion of authenticity. I have found it jarring because I am *not motivated* to faith in God by the reward of heaven, and that partly drives my intuition about the value of faith and Gumption even if there is no God or we doubt Him.

Gale perceives Pascal's wager to be a stark challenge to the authenticity of a "free spirit" who would balk at the thought of becoming an active member of the Christian religion, because how they "must think, feel, and act would be anathema to them." (p302). Let us picture our non-resistant non-believer

as this ‘free spirit’. Whether Gale’s framing of Pascal’s wager is legitimate or not, the free spirit who exercises Gumption does not face the prospect of thinking, feeling, or acting in any way that might be alien or anathema to them. Seeking relationship with God through Gumption is not primarily like taking on a set of rules or signing up to a regime, nor is the general act of becoming Christian, which might more accurately be described as setting out to follow Christ and have one’s conscience formed by His example. While there is a challenge to grow in virtue as a Christian, that exercise is down the line from Gumption and the free spirit can maintain their ethical authenticity while seeing ‘how it goes’ with God. I will take up this idea again later in section two about transformative choice, but here I will claim that if a person rejects from the outset *any possibility of a morally changed outlook*, then whatever ‘being authentic’ could mean, such hubris and stubbornness may be categorised as resistant to belief (where moral revision may be consequent (see earlier ch4)), and is not a candidate for Gumption in the context of Schellenberg’s argument.

Perhaps I am constituted to underestimate this ethical pressure for self-change, having been raised to identify Christian ethics as defining what essential goodness is. Strohminger & Nicholls (2014) surveying cognitive science literature find that there are certain features of a person that constitute the concept of the self, and that persistence of one’s moral character is the most crucial feature determining of a *stable* concept of the self, compared to non-morally relevant aspects of character change, that cause only minor disturbance. This is reflected they say, in our most important judgements of people for friendship or associations being based on their moral character.

The phenomena of changing moral outlook complicates how we conceive non-resistant non-belief functioning in the abstract, which relates to our discussion of the risk or chance instigated with Gumption. Must we view a non-resistant non-believer as someone who is *undaunted* in their anticipation or imagination of what relationship with God will mean for their moral selves, or else categorise them as resistant? I have acknowledged in Chapter Five that there can or will be perceived risk of vulnerability around moral change, but it is hard to know what to say in general about how people will view this risk. For a stark example, let us picture someone who is pro-choice on abortion and feels a cognitive dissonance at the prospect of Gumption if they suspect it leading to a changed outlook in favour of pro-life. It is most plausible that this will coincide with resistance to Gumption, which is partly why Gumption involves risk. In the case of possible moral change, risk might amount to humble adventure, versus smugness or even hubris from categorically refusing any moral change in advance of further engaging any possibility of a changed outlook. Remember, my picture fundamentally involves volunteering for potential relationship, compared to Schellenberg’s picture of coming to belief involuntarily.

This question of moral outlook affecting one's disposition to change, might generate a wide range of concerns for my proposal, but note that Gumption is far less intimidating or demanding than Pascal's wager to engage a religious way of life. My personal relationship with God is not centred on morality in any straightforward sense, and even less so need be Gumption at the outset of potential relationship. This is not the venue to try and describe my relationship with God, but I will gesture in support of my earlier claim of not being morally motivated by heaven, by citing benefits in the here and now that outrun ethics by an order of magnitude. I quoted James speaking of 'lyrical enchantment' and his appeal to 'earnestness and heroism'. I derive such enchantment from a confident trust that my being relates to the summum bonum who grounds the universe in His eternal personhood or *Thou*, "who throws the last stone...who has the final word" (James, 1902 p25).

Let us briefly compare Schellenberg's allusion to a (non-moral) valuable atheist phenomena, which hint at, or clue us into a possible counter he might bring against warrant for Gumption. Schellenberg does not use the phrase 'existential', but I cannot think of a category or label under which we may compare my Jamesian like subliminal joy, because we are aiming at a kind of fundamentality (for want of a better word again!). Let us see with a quote from Schellenberg:

[passing to atheist disbelief]<sup>109</sup> We might see the natural world more for what it is, instead of thinking of it as a showpiece of Divine creativity... Viewing the spring green of trees and the undulating hills awash in sunset, we could say, "Yes, this is it," and truly enter into the experience of being this natural spark of consciousness, however briefly lit, recognizing that every moment counts—for itself. Accepting a humble place in the universe, ..., we would not only be less vulnerable to self-conceit, ... but might also...find ourselves more able to relax metaphysically, and so experience a deeper mental calm and emotional peace. (2007, p125)

Intuition at the level of the last few paragraphs is near ground level, or what philosophers call "analytically basic", because there is no deeper level of rationale or justification from which the intuitions may be inferred. The glory of nature *in its appearance is what it is* whether created by God or not. An impressive experience of the mountains available to an observer is unaffected by the truth of its design or accident; the scene does not care, as it were. A clue to the basicness is his phrasing, "*truly*" being in this natural moment, because 'truly' conveys no extra component; one would be no less 'truly' *being* in a *natural* moment of consciousness whether God caused the big bang or not. More surprising are the consequences he draws.

Schellenberg infers a likelihood of greater humility and less self-conceit from the fact of our loneliness in a thoroughly non-supernatural universe. I think the opposite, while I am reminded of Nietzsche's

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<sup>109</sup> While this is not posed for NR-NB, but rather in support of his thesis of Ultimism (see earlier Chapter Two), I take his ideas here can be fairly transposed for my purposes.

superman who must create his own values. There is arguably no objective value in a universe without God, whereby one could only be humble in relation to self-created values, implicating *hubris* rather than humility. I imagine his feeling as he stands gazing at the stars wondering about the ultimate nothingness that his existence will amount to, as more like *humiliation* at the prospect of ultimately meaningless values, rather than humility. I am not implying that humility is not possible in a godless universe, only that it is inapt in the context of ultimate meaning at this level of fundamentality – in a Godless universe.

Taking it as a term of art for gesturing at his emotional disposition, I cannot empathise at all with his being more able to “relax metaphysically”. I am ‘metaphysically-relaxed’ with hope that there is God. Compare my suffering metaphysical-*angst* on the scientific expectation that eventually *everything* is only exhausted photons in a limitless pitch-black void, *forever*.

Rescher (1990) develops a distinction between axiological and doxastic theism, concerning the rewards or the benefits of theistic belief aside from the question of God’s existence, and his ideas help inform my case for the independent warrant for Gumption. Rescher’s view accords with Swinburne’s proposal for why assumption of God’s existence may be necessary (or else our highest hope which he requires for meaningful existence is impossible and enjoying a meaningful life is essential, as discussed in Chapter Five). Rescher similarly thinks that only in hope can we orient our spirit to a hypothetical highest good or summum bonum, rooting our efforts for the good in the *objectively* noble. Only with our acceptance of the divine can we hope, or authentically desire, fundamental values independent of human convention.<sup>110</sup>

Developing this theme Rescher thinks we would desire God not because it makes our world more pleasant, but more *excellent*, inspiring us to be the best of ourselves (p23). This chimes with my earlier thought of not being ethical for the thought of reward in heaven, but more because acting in good conscience is a fundamental driver of relationship with God, whereby we strive to conform to the transcendent divine and be spiritually lifted to our maximally best selves, whence pauper or prince can be saints.

I mentioned earlier about Schellenberg’s intuition conflicting with mine at a very basic level, which is perhaps why his and my appeals are more poetic than argumentative. James thinks this situation characterises the history of philosophy, which is “to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments”. This is quoted in Kahane (2012), who is writing on the question of value in metaphysics, and reports that Fichte and Nietzsche thought much the same as James in this regard. I will respond to

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<sup>110</sup> This question about objective value is not clear cut in the philosophical literature (though it is the consensus philosophical view), with alternative views proposing objective values in nature. In any case, I take it my point about ultimacy is secure.

another quotation from Schellenberg to exemplify a clash from a different basic standpoint than the earlier notion of metaphysical anxiety:

If we really believed...that it is all up to us, and that the only beauty to be experienced is what is here right now and in the future..., might we not be moved actually to do something about suffering where we find it? Freed from metaphysical angst and transcendent aspirations, perhaps we would be more able to open ourselves to fellow travellers and the world during the short time we share,..., and then simply let it all go as our spark is extinguished, recognizing that we are making room for others to experience the marvel of consciousness —who will appear like a new crop of dandelions or butterflies in the spring, just as beautiful as those, now vanished, that we saw before. (2007 p125)

Our clash of temperaments here is stark. It is trivial to think of beauty only in present terms, compared to the categorically superior divine idea or archetype of Beauty with the being of God, represented across an infinity of beautiful particulars, gone and to be. Regarding his other point, I do not see at all why a “really-believing” atheist would be more motivated to attend to suffering. Life is *sanctified* under Christian theism and suffering is raised to a category transcendentally more significant than the fleeting sort found under a naturalist worldview.<sup>111</sup> Helpfully he tells us precisely that it is the ‘transcendent aspiration’ which he views as inferior motivation for attention to suffering. I take him to mean that the transcendent aspect may remove something like the *immediacy* of the suffering. On the contrary, theism situates suffering at a higher pitch, and with an order of magnitude that more loudly demands response.

Schellenberg wonders if the non-theist is likely to be more open to the world and others, but this seems obviously false under the Christian virtue of love of neighbour and enemy, conforming God’s love for all humanity. Regarding his remark about relinquishing the conscious spark, the theist will just as well make room for others as her spark is extinguished, for new generations to enjoy the *always* replenished beauty of existence. The theist can turn her gaze to God in the hope of eternal beautiful being, while the atheist is ultimately shadowed by the never ending vast dark nothingness to which the universe will eventually succumb.

*Everyone must adopt a stance*; there is not a null orientation. This concludes this section for further situating Gumption.

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<sup>111</sup> Schellenberg is here again writing in support of Ultimism (see earlier ch2), but I take his ideas to be fairly transposed for my purposes.

### The Incompatibility of Gumption and Non-Resistance.

I claim that non-resistant non-belief is incompatible with a complete lack of Gumption. If a person always lacks Gumption, then they are *resistant* in the sense laid out by the argument from divine hiddenness, and the theist is under no pressure to explain why people without Gumption have no relationship with a perfectly loving God (premised on God valuing the freedom of Originating Initiative developed in Chapter Five).<sup>112</sup> This section argues why a non-resistant non-believer must at some point exercise Gumption or else they are *not* non-resistant.

William James (1896) seeks to defend the rationality in some cases of religious belief in the absence of sufficient evidence for the truth. I take his ideas to exhibit structural analogue with Gumption and OI.

The agnostic non-resistant non-believer who is our notional target will have considered evidence for the existence of God and is unconvinced about whether God exists or not. She is faced with an option that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds: whether to take a chance with Gumption or not. If she decides to leave the question of potential experience unexplored, and never exercise Gumption, that is a "...passional decision, —just like deciding yes or no, —and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth." (ibid p24). Enduringly not exercising Gumption risks losing the truth.

Transposing James' idea, the sceptic is making a choice in her passive avoidance of Gumption. She is opting to risk missing what might be the truth. Gumption is the safer bet, or less risky we might say, than the situation James is considering, because what Gumption presents is much less committal than taking up a standing faith that God exists. James sees the sceptic to be, "backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field." (ibid p39). The parallel situation sees our agnostic never exercising Gumption, in contrast to her sometime Originating Initiative. Not exercising Gumption conveys a risk of losing out on the truth with a payoff greater than we can imagine, so it turns out that not exercising it is risky too. So, there is a risk either way. We cannot avoid risk, whatever way we decide.

To encourage our non-resistant non-believer *against* Gumption is parallel to James' scenario of *scepticism* being encouraged as an epistemic duty until sufficient evidence is found for God, "to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true." (ibid, p40). If God does exist while evidence is still insufficient, then scepticism could license no Gumption and missing out on one's sole chance of relating to God, and James' phrasing here is close to my definition

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<sup>112</sup> There may be independent pressure from other arguments around the problem of evil.

of Gumption: "...that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passionate need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right." (ibid).

I find poetic inspiration from a contemporary of James, regarding why a non-resistant agnostic should have Gumption:

If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God..., no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken... We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. ...What must we do? 'Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.<sup>113</sup>

James holds that belief<sup>114</sup> in God is intellectually available while evidence renders the hypothesis of His existence indeterminate. Jordan (2006 p176) reads James as a defeasible evidentialist, encouraging action howsoever the evidence dictates and so placing enough credence in the hypothesis of God to warrant acceptance.

James' position need not be fully consistent with originating-initiative, but some comparison will help picture why I claim that a non-resistant person cannot resist Gumption. James is talking in the context of embarking on a religious life which is *prima facie* a much heavier duty than my proscription for Gumption, which he would view as a comparably lightweight risk, because Gumption could range over a spectrum of attitudinal strength at the lower end being a tentative foot in the water. James builds a conception of a *genuine* option being one that is momentous in the sense that it is unavoidably pressing, which to some degree in our hiddenness context may be transposed as Gumption being *inevitable* for a non-resistant non-believer.<sup>115</sup>

We might derive an objection from Schellenberg about warrant for Gumption, from one he raises about a relationship with God based on acceptance that He exists, when evidence for belief is insufficient. If the acceptance-based relationship is justified for its pragmatic benefits, Schellenberg finds no reasons for thinking "...that a perfectly loving God would rest content with it." (2007, p209). Leaving aside that

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<sup>113</sup> Abridged from a quotation of Fitz James Stephen, spoken by James at the close of his famous lecture in 1896.

<sup>114</sup> James does not develop a technical contrast between *belief* and *acceptance* in the way I have done. For him, belief is already broader than mere assent to evidence—it includes a volitional, practical, and emotional dimension.

<sup>115</sup> I am brushing over and ignoring some distinctions James makes in his work. People persuaded by James' wager will assent to its presuppositions and premises which we have not surveyed. I previously argued that our Western agnostic who is a non-resistant non-believer necessarily must exercise Gumption, otherwise they cannot freely or authentically initiate relationship voluntarily, as I premised will be valued by God.

the potential consequences from Gumption that I characterised earlier outrun mundane ‘pragmatic benefits’, Schellenberg says that *accepting* the proposition God exists instead of belief cannot support a “fuller” sort of relationship for to “...consciously experience the presence of God and to respond gratefully thereto and be comforted by God or feel forgiven, and the like,...” (ibid).

Schellenberg here seems to equate *fuller* relationship, with ‘conscious experience of the presence of God’, as if only propositional belief like the belief that ‘this is my hand’ could support a relationship. As we saw in Chapter Six, *accepting* God’s existence is to practically hold with hope that ‘God exists’ is true, which may be comparable to accepting that one’s spouse is faithful. That is not a propositional belief *that* she is faithful, yet the attitude is sufficient to support a fully loving relationship. This is not to deny an anticipation of the beatific vision of God in the hereafter being of a different order of intensity. The less intense relationship on hopeful-acceptance in the here and now communicates comfort and forgiveness and much more for me.

This is intriguing and prompts potentially open-ended consideration because it implicates the massive subject of religious experience which I have earlier specified as being outside the scope of this thesis. However, a few remarks will indicate the contours of a response. One wonders what Schellenberg would count as fully consciously experiencing God’s presence or His effects. Sometimes doubting one’s relationship with God is consistent with hopeful-acceptance, partly because experiencing God is unlike normal sensing or interacting with people. Trust in God develops from the fruit that follows experience of forgiveness and gratitude, such as purpose and joy. My trust does not rule out all possibility that my psychology could occur naturally in a Godless world, or that the gospel is untrue, however the ‘fullness’ of my relationship with Him occurs within a rich inner landscape of connection unlike the sure experience of mother or friend standing before me.<sup>116</sup> I might gesture at the experience for an atheist who pressed me to articulate how it feels, as involving a *sui generis* awareness of being.

While I will concede that phenomenal experience will be affected by the cognitive attitude to which it is coupled, whether belief, acceptance, knowledge or doubt,<sup>117</sup> in light of my earlier comment on the difference between religious experience compared to the concrete world with mother or friend, it is not obvious that any experience must be “fuller” than another. Compare that one will not become

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<sup>116</sup> In terms of the evidential context, Alvin Plantinga’s thesis for un-inferred (basic) belief of God and Thomas Aquinas’ sense for the divine are consistent with all my claims. The interested reader will learn from Michael Rea (2018) who is inspired by that tradition and offers a clear and engaging account while abreast of the state of the art on the topic of religious experience.

<sup>117</sup> Cognitive phenomenology is a matter of debate (see Bayne 2011). My allowing that there is such a thing only strengthens Schellenberg’s claim. If there is not such a thing, then it is not obvious that religious experience will be “fuller” with belief rather than acceptance.

doubtful of the external world upon introduction to arguments for general scepticism or seriously entertain the non-existence of other minds after theoretical tutoring about their uncertainty.

Gerber (2009) writing in the context of Pascal's wager would counsel an agnostic to *resist* Gumption. Pascal proposed that a non-believer *behave* like a believer in the attempt to inculcate belief, such as going to Mass. (Remember I have not prescribed behaving like a believer for Gumption if that is understood to mean only acting like a believer. I have gestured at the various ways that Gumption might be embodied such as prayer, liturgy, pilgrimage, or acts of selfless service. While of course behaviour is a component of these, one cannot only be going through the motions mimicking a believer but will also choose hopeful-acceptance for conveying the act). Gerber thinks we must be agnostic on the issue of how God might judge such behaviour in case He viewed it as pretending, which may partly connect with Schellenberg's idea that God might not be satisfied with a relationship based on acceptance rather than belief. With all I have said about free will in Chapter Five and given that belief is involuntary while evidence may be insufficient, why might God be dissatisfied with a person exercising Gumption to see how it goes with God? After all, the attitude of 'seeing how it goes' is what one should expect of a partner, dynamically responding to the relationship as ups and downs come and go familiar to almost all adults. Such 'seeing how it goes' with God takes place over a lifetime of 'ups and downs' including joy, penitence, virtue cultivation, self-questioning, and so on.

Gerber is more concerned with experience being disconnected with truth, and the possibility of corrupting his soul by self-deceptively believing in God only because he *desires* that God exists, because "[f]or a philosopher, that's a kind of damnation in this life". (p 31) This idea seems counter to my notion that warrant for Gumption can be independent of the question of God's existence. The atheist in his uncertainty without Gumption is more like damned *in this life* even if God does not exist, by missing out on those sublime enhancements to life alluded to earlier. In that light the agnostic philosopher who suffers disinclination and never takes a chance on religious adventure is unjustifiably resistant. The upcoming section on transformative choice will range over this sort of disagreement with Gerber.

In the next section, I locate Gumption under the purview of Paul & Blanchard to the extent they think transformative choices are incommensurable with or cannot be analysed by decision theory. They view such choices as non-standardly rational. My future research may investigate how *actions* falling under Gumption might be epistemically and or practically rational, inspired by McKaughan who we read in Chapter Five characterises a sort of 'action-centred' faith (without belief) including a willingness to risk. An approach in the same vicinity that I also covered which may also be helpful for future research is the notion of belief-less assuming which Howard-Snyder (2013) argues could involve an attitude toward God's existence whereby the agnostic could not resist experiencing God. Although if 'assuming' is

governed by rational norms, the proposal may face an analogue of the hiddenness argument citing ‘non-resistant non-assuming’ as we saw overlooked by Weidner in Chapter One. In any case, I may gain insight for articulating the consequences of Gumption.

This completes the discussion for further situating Gumption and its incompatibility with non-resistance. The second half of this chapter discusses Transformative Choice Theory which I deem offers a supplementary opportunity to think about Originating Initiative and Gumption aside from purely the ADH.

## Section 2. Transformative Choice Theory. Paul & Blanchard’s Paranoia.

Laurie Paul prompted a new wave of interest in transformative choice with her widely cited thesis “Transformative Experience” (2014). Her and Blanchard (2021) write about transformative choice in the context of religious disagreement, and their ideas offer insightful perspective for further situating Gumption.

Paul (2014) presents two distinctive sorts of transformative experience. *Epistemic* transformative experience and *personal* transformative experience. The epistemically transformative are those in which one learns something new that is not imaginatively or otherwise accessible before having the experience. Examples include a colour-blind person seeing blue for the first time or a previously deaf person encountering music for the first time. Roughly, any sense modality being activated in a new enough way that was unimaginable before the event.<sup>118</sup>

Personally transformative experiences (usually involving the epistemic sort) are those which bring a substantially new point of view, carrying a revision of one’s values or core preferences which inaugurate a new mode of *experiencing of being yourself*, and which is irreversible to the extent that one cannot revert to holding those prior values and being yourself *as if* you had not gone through personal transformation. Examples of this purportedly include becoming a parent or religious conversion or perhaps a significant career change that shifts one’s orientation or worldview.

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<sup>118</sup> We can avoid technical considerations arising from this characterisation. The interested reader should consult Maille (2020) for review of ideas and arguments around the topic, stemming from Frank Jackson’s famous Knowledge Argument (1982).

Paul observes that we cannot standardly rationalise or authentically decide whether to try a personally transformative experience because we are cut off from knowing what the experience will be like and how it will change us.<sup>119</sup> We cannot be rationally guided to choose because we cannot anticipate what it will be like and we cannot authentically choose because we may hold different values after the experience, which will cut us off from authentically taking our pre-choice perspective, so that we can no longer judge the outcome or our success purely from the previous perspective for judging if our previous authentic estimation paid off.

A clear example of personally transformative experience which Paul focuses on is the decision whether to become a parent. A person cannot know in advance what it will be like, however much her peers might tell her that ‘your world changes with a new priority of utmost importance, and the feeling is like nothing else with such intense love, and you will not regret it.’ After becoming a mother, she cannot empathise with her pre-parent self to authentically assess her choice from that perspective because she effectively is a new person, so her post-experience self cannot evaluate if her choice satisfied her outlook when choosing. Brain changes and new hormone profiles will put that subjective assessment forever out-of-bounds.<sup>120</sup>

Paul & Blanchard (2021) apply this phenomenon for thinking about the problem of religious disagreement between atheist and theist. They claim that the atheist cannot be rationally informed about the values she will hold if she converts because she *must* go through the experience before she can possibly know that. There is a gamble on the table for the atheist about who she will become, which may inform an aspect of the risk I connect with Gumption. Paul & Blanchard (P&B) characterise the sort of gamble by contrasting the choice of studying philosophy or theology with the choice of going to the cinema or not. The only gamble about going to the pictures is whether one will enjoy themselves, because afterwards one will be just like the person who bought the ticket. This likely will not be so with the choice for serious study of philosophy or theology, because one may become a different sort of person. The agent cannot project herself forward in time for assessing the value of the experience or explicitly anticipate the values she will come to hold after a personally transformative experience: “So, if you want to gain this new information, and you aren’t willing to rely solely on the testimony of others, you have to, in a sense, take a leap in the dark.” (ibid p130)

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<sup>119</sup> A cottage industry in the literature focuses on Paul’s rationality thesis under the lens of decision theory. A good introduction to that topic is by Pettigrew (2020). I will avoid technicalities here as far as I can while taking up Paul’s application of her ideas to religious disagreement (2021).

<sup>120</sup> This is the usual way things go, and I am ignoring unusual pathologies and complications.

P&B phrase their concern or target phenomena as, 'becoming a religious person'. We will see how they frame this, which I think does not aptly resemble how things go in real life. My scheme for OI through Gumption is more subtle and realistic than what they describe as 'becoming a religious person', which I will apply to put their ideas in a different light. Gumption is not like a leap in the dark as they will characterise the transition from atheism to becoming a religious person. This semantic gap between their paper and mine provides opportunity for thinking about the *phenomena* of Gumption.

P&B's emphasis follows the observation that the epistemological literature on peer disagreement narrowly focuses on belief conflict and misses the more pressing and thoroughgoing problem of conflicting *ways of being a person*.

...asking the question "What should I believe?" is really part of asking the question, "Who shall I become?" Becoming religious or irreligious is becoming a different kind of person, a person with a radically different set of lived experiences, values, and beliefs. (p 131)

We may take P&B to be effectively raising the stakes on the risk of Gumption to us *in this life*, which speaks to my case of warrant for Gumption in the face of uncertainty about God. In other words, the risk of a convert getting it wrong, because in coming to religious belief one does not transition from atheism to bare-theism as *only* a belief state. Rather, one will transition in their values and practices by embarking on a new way of being and seeing the world.<sup>121</sup> I argue that the risk is more transparent, and the stake less than they picture.

P&B picture a discussion about faith by imagining a "sufficiently representative" (ibid) interaction between a believer and atheist. They quote Pascal for imagining what relationship with God is like (in concordance with originating-initiative beyond rational reflection), with the believer exulting "in the rich satisfaction of his faith, in the communal life, traditions, and revelations which attend the experience... [while his] ...faith is a matter of a total and all-encompassing re-orientation of his life." (ibid). To my mind this image is over descriptive and will be misleading in the ears of an atheist. We are in the subjective realm again and while P&B are well read and not intending to mislead or unfairly bias the argument, their imagination is not well serving. In my experience, Christian reports of their relating to God vary extensively enough to support my claim that her phrasing is insufficiently representative and crucially misleading for a sceptic.

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<sup>121</sup> My claim in chapters 4 and 5 against Schellenberg is implicitly supported here by Paul, that a normal person would not choose to reject God if they propositionally believed He existed (against his claim that sufficient evidence would not undermine a person's free choice of relating to God).

The phrase ‘total and all encompassing’ is off the mark and I expect scary to a non-believer. It connotes an overly thoroughgoing change of mind in terms of becoming somebody else compared to the usually very gradual process that it really is. While at one extreme you may hear from enthusiastic evangelical converts who edge into that sort of phrasing, I expect most of them would report a big part of their way of being to be unchanged. I could delve into peer reviewed psychological literature to properly discover the variety of experience here, but I can simply use my point of view to report how my relationship with God may not aptly described as ‘all-encompassing’, at least not in any simplistic or straightforward sense that is implied by Pascal’s description above. Reflecting on this now, in some sense it is all-encompassing or kind of noumenally present as background when one attends to the thought, but it is not like an ever presence or encompassing to the point of not feeling fully autonomous in ones thinking or being. This must read vague. All I must plausibly claim for objecting to P&B is that the sceptic is not helped to imagine what it is like by such simply potent, blunt description.

P&B set up the different stances taken by believer and sceptic. The former is only able to conceive of relationship with God as incommensurably good for himself (with which I concur and empathise), while the sceptic has no religious experience and desires none. Moreover, the sceptic is not depressed by his perspective, and his lack of belief in the afterlife “imbues the world with a distinctive value, a kind of preciousness that it would not otherwise have.” (p 133). This resembles Schellenberg’s sentiment which I contrasted with my own earlier in this chapter.

P&B specify that both disputants are rational and so they ascend to second order beliefs for confronting their disagreement as follows: The sceptic unbegrudgingly concludes that his opponent suffers delusion for the sake of *psychological comfort* in contrast to his own clear thinking. The believer judges the sceptic epistemically closed off and unreceptive to God, and P&B cite Moser’s idea (we saw earlier) to characterise the sceptic from the believer’s perspective, as inattentive to evidence that is only ‘purposely available’. The believer pictures the sceptic devoid of attitude and/or character for the sort of relationship valued by God, being purposely unmotivated for the openness required for relations with God. These epistemic divisions are familiar to us and roughly range over the finer distinctions of our previous chapters for positioning OI through Gumption.

Such broad grained distinctions set the stage for an unrealistic and biased presentation of the sort of transition required of the sceptic for openness to relationship. P&B think that for the sceptic to adequately evaluate the case for and against, he must:

... develop an openness to the possibility of total, unmitigated submission to the will of another—God. [This] involves religious practice and radical transformation of character. Only

under these conditions can he expect to detect evidence that would be relevant to his assessment, should there be any. (p132)

Under this description their suggestion that the sceptic cannot necessarily be called closed-minded for refusing submission, is fair. The sceptic will be very intimidated about the prospect of religious experience of conversion that would suddenly transform his outlook and personal commitments. On the face of it the sceptic is bound to resist experience that he anticipates loading him with “alien perspectives and preferences” (ibid). I imagine the prospect of ‘unmitigated submission’ would scare almost everyone. The phrase insinuates an absolute or unqualified giving-over of oneself, when actually just a measure of humility will fit the bill. ‘Unmitigated submission’ does not chime with how relationship feels to me or how traditional teaching understands God working in our lives to help our maximal realisation as *unique persons*.

P&B find support from a type of religious experience they call instantaneous conversion, as described by William James whereby, “a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new.”<sup>122</sup> While such conversions may *unusually* occur, using such an example does not conform with their further description of a sceptic, carefully “*deciding to potentially undergo* such an experience” (p133, my emphasis), but more likely come about as James says, “amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses.” (ibid). In any case, sudden conversions are certainly atypical. Conversion is understood by the church to normally take a lifetime, baptized infant or not. P&B do not completely skew the picture by focusing on what is a limiting case for unhelpfully dramatizing the sceptic’s perspective for religious experience, because they also quote empirical research showing that transformative conversions are usually *gradual* (ibid), which resonates with how we might expect lasting change to come about, with thought and action progressing in stages.

P&B present the sceptic not unsettled by reading philosophy and talking with his theist friend but:

He fears that, ... going so far as to experimentally engage in religious practice and open his mind up to total submission to God, it might change ... his character and values in a way that, from his current perspective, he cannot sanction. (p134).

This reads as an implicit direct challenge to Gumption if we take the inability of *sanctioning* the risk as counsel not to take it. I playfully titled this section ‘Paul & Blanchard’s Paranoia’ for diagnosing their attitude here. We have seen the epistemic distinctions P&B employ as less fine grained than ours, perhaps suited for describing the sceptic instead of the non-resistant non-believer who interests us.

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<sup>122</sup> William James 1902 (2004, Lecture 10, p162).

P&B portray religious activity as the sceptic exposing himself to potential delusion, after which his character and values may become unrecognisable or alien to his previous self. While perchance this scenario is possible, perhaps as James thinks amid tremendous emotional excitement, it is exceptionally unlikely and an average mature adult would be unreasonable to fear sudden change of personality.<sup>123</sup> So my claim is that staging the agent as exposing himself to becoming someone new who is alien to their previous self, is reliant on the limiting case. A person will most usually advance by stages whereby *he can* empathise with his earlier self, at least with nearby self-stages.

P&B claim that the sceptic cannot sanction risk of conversion because he cannot take post-experience perspective to justify the pre-experience choice that was grounded in values that he can no longer see in the same way. They contend that once we have the conversion experience, then we are “very naturally and easily moved to faith” (ibid). Excepting sudden conversions, faith organically develops over time as one’s experience feeds a worldview, harmonizing heart and mind. Faith may also recede. The sceptic (or non-resistor) could choose to cease praying and return to their old outlook or perhaps to ‘slow down’ their practice. A faith journey is multi-faceted and as distinctly numerable as there are people. Paul is not helped by envisioning a milestone in binary terms, as simply coming to belief, when faith most usually occurs on a varying scale of hopeful trust or acceptance.

If the sceptic could anticipate the transition to belief being like a switch as P&B see it, as may happen with some people (even though sudden and lasting conversion is surpassingly rare), then there may be a logical imposition for sanctioning the risk as they claim. P&B’s argument or scenario should find limited purchase with the sceptic, to the extent that Gumption is very unfairly anticipated as allowing himself “to potentially transform into a radically alien self.” (ibid). It is more realistically modelled as the sceptic authentically taking small risks, which can be evaluated on the way from an imaginative standpoint prior to the experience. There may be a change in standpoint as a faith journey progresses that blocks a pure judgement from the original perspective, but such change need not to be alienating.

Perhaps the limiting case of sudden conversion may be analogous to becoming a parent, but not fully, because a convert may revert to atheism while a parent is always a parent. While the convert may not be able to fully assess first-person evidence as if she had not had the experience, she will be able to empathise with her earlier self-stage. My response has been that the self-stages of conversion are gradual, and faith’s progression will not be binary like P&B picture it. Their rejoinder could be that however small the steps are, one’s first-person orientation to the evidence, albeit little changed,

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<sup>123</sup> One very famous exception was Paul of Tarsus, whose wisdom was vindicated. (Falling under my clause in Chapter Five, that God may in some cases render Gumption irrelevant or superfluous).

establishes a small block for fully imagining previous selves. This may be correct, but I am tempted to see such transitions as the usual fare of life, across all sort of encounters, like foreign travel, falling in love, being merry on drink. If that is right, it would seem P&B's paranoia transfers or applies to all sorts of adventure featuring in a good life.<sup>124</sup>

We have P&B's core thesis on the table and my framing and limited objection to it in relation to Gumption. They think the believer is in a mirror position to the sceptic and will be unable to sanction the risk of losing belief, repulsed by the sceptic's forlorn existence. This is interesting because I can stage this as a first-person thought experiment. To some extent they must be right that I cannot inhabit the cognitive perspective of my atheist counterpart. However, most of my cognitive awareness across all waking hours does not include God, and I take it that during those times in that way I cognitively resemble my atheist counterpart. I would add though, the thought of never visiting with God even seldomly is a supremely lonely thought indeed. Perhaps losing faith would happen in stages, allowing one to empathise with one's previous self. There is extreme asymmetry comparing the transition of a nonbeliever to gaining the hope of eternal beauty, truth, and goodness, to the theist who is losing it. This is just a side reflection, that I will leave as food (or famine) for thought.

My inability (or the impossibility) of imagining my faithless self, mirroring the non-believer's inability to imagine having faith, is the problem of peer disagreement with oneself that concerns P&B. This is unlike coming to learn new information which changes one's mind, "but instead come to see the world—that is, the same old facts—in a new light." (p136). P&B claim this situation essentially resembles the classic scenario in Paul's (2014) book of becoming a parent, "it's remarkably difficult to imaginatively re-inhabit what your world was like before, and you can't (accurately) imaginatively inhabit the new world with your child before you have them." (p82). The standard assumption, she tells us, is that "from the inside, conversion necessarily looks like an advancement" (ibid). The convert cannot judge the epistemic and personal transformation from a neutral perspective because she cannot take the inside perspective of both her pre and post self and so cannot judge if she has "advanced [or] regressed". She calls this the 'problem of transformative self-disagreement'. Given what I have said about religious conversion, and the agent's ability to take stock of her change across time, I am not persuaded that parenthood is parallel to conversion, and not least because parenthood is irreversible while the convert may revert to atheism. In any case, if the truth of P&B's thesis is limited to there being no neutral standpoint for the agent to judge her change, it may be nothing more than an interesting epistemic point about self-disagreement.

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<sup>124</sup> Not least an adventure with Christ in the greatest story ever told.

P&B connect the significance of the problem of self-disagreement to Daniel Garber's treatment of Pascal's wager (2009), which circles back to my case of the warrant for Gumption if God does not exist. Gerber sees Pascal's advice to practice religion as if God exists, as an inquiry for revealing God's existence if He exists, but which may bring about belief even if He does not. Gerber sees the obvious risk of religious practice in the case one comes to believe a falsehood. Gumption as religious adventure or practice for relating to God carries a similar risk: that the non-resistor may develop a hopeful-acceptance in a non-existent reality. The practical lesson I take is that while we cannot be certain of God's existence, and there is an epistemic possibility (that for all we know) God might not exist, one is well advised and practically rational to take the risk of being wrong at the end of the day, because the benefits far outweigh the negatives. There is enormous potential for discussion of this topic.

Now to conclude this chapter before a general conclusion to the dissertation.

### Conclusion of Chapter Seven.

This chapter has argued that Gumption possesses independent warrant, offering a rational and existentially beneficial stance even under uncertainty about God's existence. By situating Gumption alongside Pascal and James, I have shown that it avoids the pitfalls of wagering, while resonating with James' position by sustaining courage, vitality, and authentic orientation to the highest good. Against Paul and Blanchard, I have contended that Gumption is not a reckless "leap in the dark" but a gradual, revisable, and navigable stance, whose risks are no greater than those faced in other valuable transformative life commitments. Indeed, a refusal of Gumption appears like a collapse into resistance, for to foreclose any risk of religious initiative is itself a passionate decision. The upshot is that non-resistant non-belief must involve some measure of Gumption if it is to remain genuinely non-resistant, and that such Gumption encourages well-being, including ethical and psychological, that outweigh doubt about the existence of God.

A general conclusion to the dissertation follows now.

## General Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to evaluate J. L. Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, with special attention to his concepts of perfect love, openness, and non-resistant non-belief. I have examined both the structure of the argument and the plausibility of its key components, before assessing a specific type of Theist response in the literature and then advancing my own novel thesis of a freewill justification for hiddenness which I call 'Originating Initiative'. Less distinctively novel than the free will justification, is the warrant of an attitude of hopeful-acceptance for conveying Originating Initiative. While the idea of hopeful-acceptance draws on the wisdom of Willam James and Howard-Snyder, the way I have proposed it in conjunction with Originating Initiative is novel, not least by not begging prior sympathy for Theism as Schellenberg alleges against other responses.

What follows is a summative statement of how the chapters together develop this project.

I began in Chapter One with a profile of adjacent topics from the philosophy of religion, providing the necessary backdrop so that our target topic of divine hiddenness could be approached with clarity. By situating Schellenberg's argument in relation to neighbouring debates, the distinctiveness of the problem could be made explicit, and its boundaries carefully set.

Chapter Two analysed Schellenberg's concepts of perfect love and divine openness. To summarise the wide-ranging nuance of that discussion, I argued that both concepts might be called naïve in relation to classical and traditional understandings of love and benevolence. Love, for instance, in the Christian tradition and orthodox doctrine, is understood as *willing the good of a person*, which may not always be served by the kind of openness Schellenberg envisages, which more closely resembles the unqualified availability of a mother for her child. The problem, I suggested, stems from Schellenberg's method of conceptually constraining how love and openness will necessarily operate, producing an artificially narrow interpretation of how relationship with God could plausibly unfold.

With Chapter Three, attention turned to clarifying the conceptual stakes of non-resistant non-belief and to questioning Schellenberg's alleged necessity of propositional belief 'that God exists' for divine relationship. I broached several cogent worries about Schellenberg's understanding and application of non-resistant non-belief and argued that *de dicto* belief is unnecessary for sustaining relationship with God. Taken together with the previous chapter, the analysis established both the architecture of Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness and the contested nature of its core concepts.

Chapter Four then reviewed the theist explanations for why God might allow non-resistant non-belief by appealing to goods that could be temporarily more valuable or important than conscious relationship

with God. My concentration in this chapter was not on cataloguing every proposed explanation, but on those goods potentially applicable to non-resistant atheists and agnostics in the secular West. In doing so, the groundwork was laid for the free-will-based response that constitutes the distinctive contribution of this dissertation: the thesis of Originating Initiative.

In Chapter Five I proposed my thesis of Originating Initiative. To the extent that the traditional understanding and interplay of positions in the free will debate, as I have laid them out, are cogent, my thesis is significant and novel. If Strawson's basic argument is compelling (which Schellenberg effectively adopts against greater goods), and if my response regarding constitutive and circumstantial luck is sound, then the exercise of Gumption constitutes an occasion of non-determined free will for relating to God.

Chapter Six developed the relevant epistemological considerations connected to the attitude of hopeful-acceptance for conveying Gumption. Unlike belief, hopeful-acceptance is volunteered, yet it permits genuine commitment. Drawing on Alston, I argued that acceptance can function as a rational, truth-oriented policy even under doubt. With analysis of McKaughan, Bishop, and Buchak, I framed its practical rationality in contexts of risk and undecidability. A survey of hope from its early modern treatments to Segal and Textor's primitive state model and Blöser's family resemblance approach, reinforced the point that hope need not presuppose belief, yet it can supply motivational force where evidence is insufficient. Taken together, these considerations established that hopeful-acceptance is both rationally defensible and existentially significant.

Finally, Chapter Seven argued for the warrant of Gumption, offering a rational and existentially beneficial stance under uncertainty about God's existence. By situating Gumption alongside Pascal and James, I showed that it avoids the pitfalls of wagering, while resonating with James' call to embrace live options that are underdetermined evidence. Gumption sustains an orientation to the highest good. Against Paul and Blanchard, I contended that Gumption is not a reckless "leap in the dark" but a gradual, revisable, and navigable stance, whose risks are no greater than those faced in other transformative life commitments that a good life will encounter. Indeed, to refuse Gumption is itself to adopt a passional stance: it amounts to foreclosing religious initiative. The upshot is that genuine non-resistant non-belief must involve some measure of Gumption. I pressed a stronger supplemental claim on the warrant for Gumption in the context of transformative choice theory, namely that its exercise may provide existential, ethical, and psychological goods that outweigh its risks, even if God does not exist.

The chapters taken together show that Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness is not decisive. The concepts of love, openness, and non-resistant non-belief on which it relies are contestable. Greater goods and Originating Initiative provide a very plausible theist explanation of hiddenness. Hopeful-

acceptance is a rational attitude for initiating a relationship with God. My proposal is not simply a defensive manoeuvre but a constructive contribution: to reconceive the stance of the non-resistant non-believer as involving the possibility of Gumption. The exercise of Gumption for the freely willed approach to God both undercuts Schellenberg's claim that divine hiddenness is incompatible with perfect love and positively supports the rationality and existential fruitfulness of humbly taking a chance on Christian religious adventure.

### Note on Future Research

For the academic journal *Synergy*, I am preparing a standalone version of Chapter Five as a free will argument for relating to God under the context of Strawson's basic problem.

I am also thinking about a notion resembling OI for a thesis of free will outside of the philosophy of religion, namely, '*broadened horizons*', whereby taking a chance on worldly adventure essentially features in free action for an open future. This is fundamentally different to Gumption because the notion of risk will be very different while God is not involved. If a case can be made for broadened horizons, it will be conceptually remote from that traditional concern of control for moral responsibility. I intend it to under write another notional desideratum of free will identified by Robert Kane in his classic work on Libertarianism; '*Life Hopes and Open Futures*'. (Kane, 1996, Ch1).

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