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Belief in God and Affective States: A Free-Will Response to the Hiddenness Argument¹

Vera v Boga in afektivna stanja: odgovor svobodne volje na argument skritosti

Abstract: The paper offers a new version of a free-will defence to Schellenberg's hiddenness argument. Previous defences were accused of absolutizing human freedom and not showing how a cognitive state concerning divine existence could limit the moral freedom of people. The paper addresses these issues by referring to Aquinas' and Pruss' idea that there could be evidence favouring God that results in a cognitive state of certainty accompanied by the affective states that deprive people of moral freedom. A relationship with God founded on this evidence would not be personal. Therefore, God is justified in holding such a piece of evidence back (for at least a period of time).

Keywords: the hiddenness argument, free-will defence, cognitive freedom, moral freedom, the dominant option

Povzetek: Članek ponuja novo različico zagovora svobodne volje proti Schellenbergovemu argumentu skritosti. Prejšnjim zagovorom so očitali absolutizacijo človeške svobode in pa to, da ne pokažejo zares, kako lahko kognitivna stanja, povezana z božjim obstojem, omejujejo moralno svobodo ljudi. Članek obravnava omenjena vprašanja s sklicevanjem na idejo Tomaža Akvinskega in Prussa o dokazu za obstoj Boga. To vodi v kognitivno stanje gotovosti, ki ga spremljajo afektivna stanja, kar pa ljudem jemlje moralno svobodo. Odnos z Bogom, utemeljen na takšnem dokazu, ne bi bil oseben. Zato lahko Bog takšen dokaz upravičeno zadrži (vsaj za določen čas).

Ključne besede: argument skritosti, zagovor svobodne volje, kognitivna svoboda, moralna svoboda, prevladujoča izbira

The hiddenness argument formulated by John L. Schellenberg concentrates on the problem of the existence of non-resistant non-believers or, to put it differently, of

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the weak epistemic position of theism. The Canadian philosopher claims that there is something inconsistent in accepting both: (1) the claim that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God exists (that is, a God whose one of the aims would be to enter into personal relationships with creatures capable of an aware and loving response for the sake of their goodness and happiness), as well as (2) the common-sense remark that among non-believers are those who honestly search for God, who entertain in such endeavours their intellectual powers, but they either still remain a sceptic when it comes to God's existence, or they straightforwardly reject it. Schellenberg argues that in a world governed by a benevolent and omnipotent God, there would be only one group of non-believers: those invoking Schellenberg's metaphor who intentionally close their eyes to avoid seeing the light of evidence speaking in favour of theism. In other words, if theism is true, it cannot be in a weak epistemic position.

In what follows, I shall present an original free-will defence of theism that is inspired by the concept of affective states. I shall begin with analysing Schellenberg's expectations of God, which I shall encapsulate in the concept of evidence T. In my opinion, only religious experience (evidence RE) fulfils the requirements of evidence T, so I shall ask if there are any reasons for which God does not universally grace us with such experiences? I will argue that there is indeed a justifying reason for that, namely our moral freedom. At the end of the paper, I will address some of the possible objections to my proposal.

1. Conditions of a Personal Relationship with God

Since a benevolent and omnipotent Creator would care for the well-being of His self-conscious creatures and would be aware that they achieve their fulfilment in a personal relationship with Him, He would at least be open to a personal relationship with any finite person who has the capacities needed for such a relationship (Schellenberg 2015, 40). However, since in order to participate in a relationship with another person, one has to be certain that the person in question exists, the belief in God appears to be the necessary condition of a personal relationship between man and God. It means that 'being open to a personal relationship' includes delivering finite persons evidence that would not have to automatically produce a theistic belief (because in order to remain free, a man has to be able to reject it), but on the other hand evidence that would generally be and at all times available and would render a belief in God highly probable (1993, 28). Let us call such evidence – evidence T (as evidence for theism). If such evidence existed, then all non-belief would result only from epistemic or moral drawbacks such as negligence in evidence acquisition, indifference for investigation procedures, moral pride, and so on, and would be resistant. On the other hand, we know that in the actual world it is not the case that every atheist or agnostic is cognitively stubborn. There are non-resistant atheists or agnostics among us, those who are both epistemically as well as morally virtuous (or at least those who are not more corrupt and misguided than theists).

The most vital question with regard to the hiddenness argument reads as follows: »Is evidence T metaphysically possible?« If evidence T was metaphysically impossible, insisting that not delivering evidence T speaks against God's existence would not form a case favouring atheism (1993, 44).

Schellenberg claims that, since God is omnipotent, there:

I. Could be delivered an evidence T that would:

a) be generally and at all times available.

According to Schellenberg's demands, there cannot be a time t when a non-resistant person is in a non-belief state in relation to the theistic proposition (2015, 57). It would amount to allowing a non-resistant state of nonbelief for a certain amount of time, even if limited. Evidence T has to be always there, it should be noticeable if a person turns his or her attention to it.

b) render theism true.

One of the most important features of evidence T is that it has to be apparent. Schellenberg is aware of the fact that there are philosophers who think that we can achieve knowledge of God, but what he points out as characteristic of the arguments they invoke is that they are rebuttable, as the long-lasting debates around these arguments confirm. They are not apparent in the sense that they do not produce a consensus among non-resistant researchers in relation to the question of God. Evidence T would have to be different in this regard.

Schellenberg also claims that:

II. We do not encounter evidence T in the actual world.

Theses (I) and (II) make theism challenging to defend. If one could think of evidence that would be generally available and would render theism probable, then one can raise a question: why does God let innocent in this regard people remain in the darkness of doubt or even in rejection of His existence? Schellenberg answers from the atheistic point of view: the fact that there is no evidence T in the actual world means that there is an obstacle God could eliminate in order to ensure that every finite person is in a position to participate in a personal relationship with Him, that He apparently did not eliminate. It could speak against his omnipotence (maybe He cannot do whatever is metaphysically possible?) or benevolence (maybe He does not care after all about participating in personal relationships with us?). Either way, theism that proclaims the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God has something legitimate to explain.

2. Religious Experience

In order to defend it, we should look more carefully at the question of whether God is justified in not delivering to us evidence T. What could be the example of evidence T? Schellenberg is not clear on this point since he shifts his position with

the passage of time. In his earlier works, he emphasized the importance of the inward experience of God; nowadays, his position is less exclusive in this regard, but generally, he mentions religious experience as a candidate for evidence T. He argues that the coveted evidence T could be a non-sensory, intense, and apparent experience of God's forgiving, comforting, and guiding presence in a background awareness, so it does not have to be (and one can suspect that it could not be) intrusive to anyone's experience (let us call this type of evidence – evidence RE).

Evidence RE includes God's constant presence in one's awareness (even if not explicit) and a person's switching to the divine presence instantly when he or she reaches the appropriate stage of development of capacities enabling the person to explicitly grasp the divine presence (1993, 48–49). In this sense, one can state that evidence RE is at all times available. Moreover, because the experience of the divine presence would be available to all human beings, evidence RE would be generally available (in other words, it fulfils requirement (a)).

Schellenberg also defends the thesis that evidence RE described as such would render theism highly probable (it fulfils the requirement (b)). He grounds his conviction on features of the experience of the divine presence. According to him, it would be:

- intense, so that one would not mistakenly overlook it in one's consciousness;
- apparent – it would reinforce the theistic beliefs formed in other ways. For example, it would be an experience of consolation in the time of suffering, an experience of affirmation in the moment of doubts with regard to the source of the divine presence experience, it would be an experience of encouragement in moments of making important life decisions, etc.;
- universal – Schellenberg thinks that the uniformity of its descriptions coming from people every time and everywhere would also reinforce the strength of evidence RE.

More importantly, he thinks that such evidence is metaphysically possible:

»The state of affairs I have described seems clearly possible: its description seems perfectly coherent. Indeed, it could be the case that all human beings with a capacity for a personal relationship with God become aware of God's presence« (1993, 51).

3. Hick's and Swinburne's Defences of Theism

In what follows, I shall defend a simple claim. I shall argue that God has a justifying reason not to deliver evidence RE to finite persons that are non-resistant to a relationship with Him and this reason is His will to preserve the moral freedom of finite persons. It could be seen as a surprise because Schellenberg dismissed the so-called free-will responses that occurred in the philosophical literature on this

subject. For example, John Hick in *Faith and Knowledge* claimed that in order to protect moral freedom, a human being has to preserve cognitive freedom with regard to the existence of God, and this is why the created world is open to both interpretations: theistic as well as atheistic. If we had convincing pieces of evidence in favour of theism at our disposal, this would ruin our cognitive freedom and, in consequence, our autonomy (1988, 133–135). This, however, assumes that knowledge of God is of a special kind: according to Hick, the act of knowing God is at the same time the act of obedience: »I cannot know that such a being exists and be at the same time indifferent to him.« (1983, 48) Whereas normally, the growth of knowledge broadens the capacities of humankind (even if it limits the scope of what seems to be a rational choice), the knowledge of God would have shrunken it not only to the point that we would have had a limited range of sustainable positions in theology and philosophy (it seems that it would not have abolished our freedom just as any other truth we gain during the course of the development of our societies does not abolish our freedom) but also to a point where we would not have been autonomous subjects anymore capable of making free decisions and of free-thinking. It seems controversial, and as Schellenberg points out: »It is not at all clear that individual who came to believe would not be cognitively and morally free.« (1993, 109–110)

The other great theistic philosopher, Richard Swinburne, also argued that if we had a solid reason to believe in God, it would diminish our freedom. A person who knows that God exists also knows that He observes and judges every movement of His creatures, especially self-conscious and moral ones, and that in the end, He will make a decision about the final destiny of the latter. In Swinburne's view, under such circumstances, the belief in God would amount to knowledge about an omnipotent and judging God. The act of obedience to Him would not have been an act of will anymore but an act of prudence (which is an intellectual virtue): »The reasons for being good would be virtually irresistible.« (1979, 211)² Moreover, the temptation to do wrong would be almost non-existent. A believer that would act for prudential reasons would not exercise his or her freedom of choice and, as such, would not have been a free agent. To this argument, Schellenberg responds by raising doubts if having solid reasons to do *p* or not to do *q* makes desires not to do *p* or to do *q* go away (Schellenberg 1993, 119)? A student who has an exam the next day has a solid prudential reason to learn. It does not mean that his desire to do something else (i.e., watch TV) vanishes.

However, even if these specific Schellenberg's counterarguments would not work, he could still ask: is the free will of human beings more important than reaching the ultimate goal of communion with God? Moreover, he answers this hypothetical question:

»There is a tendency among some writers to value the giving of freedom and responsibility almost limitlessly /.../. But this is to forget that the con-

² Another free-will defence to the problem of hiddenness was developed by Michael Murray (2002), but since it is similar to Swinburne's hypothesis, I will not present it here.

text for all theistic talk about these matters must be the love of God, and that love not only grants freedom and responsibility, but desires personal relationships.« (199)

Is a free-will response a dead-end for theism? If it was, the consequences would by far exceed the debate around the hiddenness argument. It would turn out that one cannot use a free-will response in the debate about the problem of evil either. It would be because atheists would finally find evil or suffering (I assume that the divine hiddenness would be such an evil) to which the divine desire to protect the freedom of people would not be an answer.

I find the debate between Hick and Swinburne on the one hand and Schellenberg on the other unsatisfying. It is no wonder if one takes into account that both Hick, as well as Swinburne, had written their works before the hiddenness argument was formulated. One cannot possibly expect from the aforementioned theistic philosophers a detailed refutation of an argument they did not even know. Secondly, I think that there is a very valuable intuition by Hick when he insists that there is a need for *a priori* willingness on our part if our experience of God is to be compatible with our moral freedom. In my paper, I shall explore this intuition.

4. Response to Necessity of a Moral Freedom

My general response to Schellenberg's claims is that while it is true that according to at least the Catholic tradition, a communion with God (a counterpart of what he describes as a personal relationship with God) is an ultimate and a supernatural human goal, so one cannot think of any greater good for a human being, it is also true that reaching it is conditioned by freedom of a human being. When one speaks of a personal relationship, one means a relationship of free agents, and a minimum condition that has to be fulfilled in order for a relationship to be between free agents is that at the roots of the relationship stands a free decision of its participants. In my opinion, Hick is right: if there was no such willingness at the beginning of a relationship with God on the part of a human being, then it would no longer be a personal relationship. If one is determined to be in a relationship with the other, then one is manipulated or forced into the relationship and hence is treated rather as an object than as a subject. Summing up, in order for a human to reach the ultimate goal of communion with God, a personal relationship with Him has to start as a free decision of a human.

On the other hand, I find it doubtful that the moral freedom one needs in order to make a free decision is conditioned by cognitive freedom. Hick and Swinburne seem to suggest that the mere knowledge that God exists somehow deprives us of freedom of choice. This observation is obviously not true. Many believers claim that they know that God exists (for example, those who think that the traditional proofs for God's existence render theism highly probable), and yet they do not lose their autonomy. They are, for example, still tempted at times to reject their

relation to God. Summing up, what I will try to preserve from the free-will defence of Hick and Swinburne is the conviction that at the beginning of a personal relationship with God, there has to be a willingness on the part of a human person. On the other hand, I agree with Schellenberg that the mere belief that God exists does not deprive one of such freedom.

The second element of my defence is the claim that there could be evidence that could deprive people of moral freedom. I will argue that evidence RE, as described by Schellenberg, is an example of such evidence. Therefore, God is justified in not delivering it to us. What I find lacking in Schellenberg's claims is the analysis if there are any cognitive states that are necessarily accompanied by the affective states that deprive people of moral freedom (let us call these cognitive states – states C). In what follows, I shall present my hypothesis in detail by referring to the teachings of Aquinas.

4.1 The Affective States

According to him, there are cognitive states (among others, a belief in God's existence) that generate affective states that have consequences for a spiritual life of a believer (Cross 2012, 179–180). The affective element is built, for example, in Aquinas' description of the earthly religious experiences, where he speaks extensively about such affective states as *gaudium* (joy from satisfying rational desire), *amor* which leads to ecstasy (that is, having *delectatio* in something external, strong attachment to the object of love) (*Summa Th.* II-II, q. 28), and *admiratio* (a fear which follows the knowledge of something that surpasses our powers) (*Summa Th.* II-II, q. 180, a. 3). Note that the aforementioned states do not make being in a state incompatible with the belief in God impossible, but also note that one does not refer here to non-sensory awareness of the divine presence but to feelings, memories, or emotions.

Both Aquinas as well as Schellenberg, agree that there is no non-sensory background awareness of the divine presence in the actual world. A beatific vision of God is, according to Aquinas, a divine gift that is not explainable by the cognitive powers of a human being. It belongs to the kind of C-states because it is also accompanied by the affective state of *delectatio* (delight) (*Summa Th.* I-II, q. 4, a. 1) or *fruitio* (delight of the good and rest in the good) (Lotz 1979, 70). What is important in the context of the current discussion is that, according to St. Thomas, in the state of the beatific vision, one does not have a freedom of choice: »The will of one who sees God's essence necessarily clings to God, because then we cannot help willing to be happy.« (*Summa Th.* I, q. 82, a. 2) Using a conceptual framework developed by Alexander Pruss, one can say that for a person having a cognitive state of seeing the divine essence, an option to do right always dominates over an option to do wrong (where option A dominates option B when in every fundamental evaluative respect A is at least as good as B and in some fundamental evaluative respect A is better than B. Option A is on balance better than option B when option A dominates option B, but there are some nonfundamental evaluative aspects when B is better than A). Because we are always in our actions

motivated by or attracted by a good, the fact that we encounter on balance better options is the only explanation for the fact that sometimes we make wrong or worse than the best possible decisions. On the other hand, a beatific vision dominates all the alternatives, which is why the blessed in heaven cannot commit a sin (Pruss 2016, 216–217). They are free if one conceives freedom as a unity of will and intellect, but they do not possess freedom of choice between right and wrong.

4.2 Belief in God as a Dominant Option

As Schellenberg rightly points out, evidence RE does not have to be synonymous with the beatific vision, but one could nevertheless speculate if evidence RE would not also present itself as a dominant option for a human being? Experiencing affective states of being loved, accepted, consoled, emotionally supported, having a purpose in life, and most of all, »a quiet sense of God’s existence« (Schellenberg 2015, 67); the things that Schellenberg himself describes as an effect of God’s presence in the background awareness could be such that no one would be tempted to reject it. Even if not intrusive or overwhelming, God’s presence in the background awareness could be as dominant as the beatific vision; at least, it seems plausible. One has to take into account that the divine presence in the background experience would not only mean a personal interaction, the feeling of protection and acceptance, companionship, getting friendly guidelines and indications in relation to most important life decisions. One gets a feeling that under such description the figure of God reminds, as Paul Moser once complained, »a doting grandparent or a celestial Santa Claus« (Moser 2013, 38). Only because of this specific way of depicting God one could believe that once having an experience of His presence, one would be able so to speak to escape its charms. The experience of the divine presence should, although vaguely but at the same time, truthfully reflect God’s nature if it supposes to trigger a personal relationship with a finite person. Otherwise, God would play a role that would amount to luring someone into a relationship. Even if it was successful, it would shatter its personal character. It means that an experience of the divine presence would probably include not only the experience of His charity and love, but also of His glory, majesty, magnificence, splendour, omniscience and omnipotence, and this combination would most probably be so attractive (even if these features would be a distant reflection of the real divine attributions and would be experienced in the background awareness) that it would be virtually impossible to reject it.

4.3 Moral Freedom as a Justifying Reason for Divine Hiddenness

What one benefits from using Aquinas’ theory is a possible explanation of why God does not provide evidence RE, and why it is possible to imagine both (a) that evidence RE is metaphysically possible as well as (b) that an all-loving and all-powerful God would be justified in not giving it to us. Evidence RE would probably not only result in the universal belief in God but also in affective states that would make a relationship with God a dominant option for a human being. God, as omnibenevo-

lent, desires personal relationships with other persons. A personal aspect of such a relationship assumes that one at least should be able to decide if one wants to enter into it or not, but if it would present itself as a dominant option, then one would be forced into it, and that would shatter a personal character of the relationship. It would be then impossible to reach the ultimate goal of a human being. If an all-loving and omnipotent God desires personal relationships with human beings, He should not deliver evidence RE and, in this sense, remain hidden.

Notice that it does not mean that God has a reason to suspend evidence of His existence that results in C-states constantly. It is just because in the definition of evidence T is built the requirement that it should be available at all times, that it makes it inconsistent with the divine respect for human freedom of choice and His desire to relate to us personally. Notice also that I am not claiming here that the reason for the lack of freedom of choice if evidence RE would be available, would be the lack of cognitive freedom. ‚The blame‘ is on affective states that make a choice to do wrong (in this context, the rejection of the relationship with God) impossible. My main point here is that even if there is a difference between seeing God’s essence and a background experience of the divine presence, still the latter could present itself in such a way that it would be perceived as a dominant option.

5. Objections: The Analogy Argument and Absolutization of Freedom

I would like to quickly address one possible counterargument, which is often called the analogy argument. Schellenberg often uses a comparison between God – The Father and our earthly parents. He writes, among others:

»Discussions of human interaction, including interaction between mothers and their children, do represent the primary context in which such concepts as those of ‚closeness‘, ‚care‘, and ‚love‘ are used and acquire their meaning. What, then, could justify the supposition that God’s closeness, caring, and loving would not be like those of ideal mother /.../? The question is rhetorical.« (2004, 33–34)

Although there are authors who respond to the hiddenness argument by invoking the traditions of the negative theology, and who would be very defiant in drawing conclusions from the fact that we call God our loving Father and would deny any similarity between the personhood of humans and God (Rea 2015; 2018, 42–62; Pouivet 2018), in my opinion following the steps of apophatism is not a promising option for a theist.

Schellenberg is ultimately right: since one subscribes to the Christian revelation, one expects from God closeness, care, and love in a way similar to how they are usually experienced in everyday life. It is not, however, to admit that one uses the notion of a person or a father in an unambiguous way with regard to God.

Schellenberg would agree with it since he used the term ‚analogical‘ to describe his argument. It probably refers to the scholastic theory of *analogia entis*, which Augustine encapsulated in the Latin formula *Deus semper maior*, and which allows positive knowledge of God under the condition that one remembers that with every similarity, however great, comes even greater dissimilarity (Raczyński-Rożek 2019, 756).

What is this greater dissimilarity between earthly parents and heavenly one in the context of the current debate? In my opinion, it consists in the fact that however loving, caring and close to their descendant’s parents can be, a personal relationship with parents would never appear as a dominant option to them, maybe with the exception of small children. Nevertheless, a grown-up person, independent of how wrong and ungrateful such a deed would be, can reject personal relationships with his or her parents. The mere presence of loving and caring parents does not endanger the freedom of choice of their children. As I suggested, we have reasons to suspect that it would be different if God was present in our lives in the form of evidence RE. Because of this difference, one cannot conclude that since loving parents would do anything in their power to be present in the life of their children, the absence of evidence RE speaks against the existence or benevolence of God.

I would also emphasize that the presented hypothesis does not fall into the trap of absolutization of moral freedom. According to it, preserving moral freedom is not the good in itself in comparison to which other goods, such as the well-being of people and their happiness, fade away. God suspends (at least temporarily) evidence that would render His existence apparent not because freedom of choice is the good in itself but because it is a necessary element of happiness of the finite persons that consists in participating in personal relationships with Him. It does not mean that He remains hidden in every possible meaning of the term. There are mystics who experience the divine presence, there are other pieces of evidence that could result in the cognitive certainty that He exists, but without accompanying affective states that could hinder the moral freedom of a person. Theists could mention a great variety of signs and pieces of evidence that indicate divine transcendence. Granted, these pieces of evidence are not apparent and as such, they do not constitute a solid epistemic position of theism. Otherwise, we would not have currently such large numbers of reasonable atheists and agnostics. However, if the solid epistemic position of theism would prevent us from reaching the ultimate goal of our lives, then being open to personal relationships with finite persons on God’s part means delivering us the evidence we currently have at our disposal.

6. Conclusions

What are the results of the above defence? As one remembers, I ascribed to Schellenberg two claims:

I. Evidence T could be delivered.

II. We do not encounter evidence T in the actual world.

I agree with both of them, but I disagree with Schellenberg in his contention that (I) and (II) together render theism inconsistent. In my opinion, God is justified in not giving to the finite persons evidence T, because by delivering it, He would abolish the moral freedom of finite persons: He would evince Himself in such a fashion that a relationship with Him would appear as a dominant option for them. It would be a critical obstacle for reaching by them their ultimate goal - a personal relationship with the Creator. Since God is justified in not delivering evidence T, we start to understand why God governs non-resistant nonbelievers in the world. God may have only two alternatives: either He abolishes human moral freedom and puts theism in a strong epistemic position, or He allows a weak epistemic position of theism and consequently the existence of non-resistant nonbelievers. However, human moral freedom is preserved, and consequently, a possibility that people would reach their ultimate goal. The second alternative seems to be more commendable, especially if the last trend in Christian eschatology, that says that God's mercy does not exclude nonbelievers from the beatific vision, reflects the truth.

Schellenberg is right when he claims that evidence T is metaphysically possible, he is also right in insisting that God should do everything in His power to eliminate obstacles that block us from being in a position to relate to God personally. Nevertheless, since the path to a personal relationship with God does not lead through evidence T, he is wrong when he suspects that two claims (I) and (II) are incompatible with the belief in God. Hence, theism can defend itself from the hiddenness argument.

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