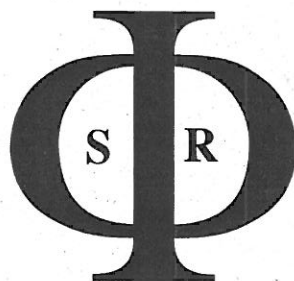


SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW



*The Journal of
The Southwestern Philosophical Society*

Volume 22, Number 2

July, 2006

On "A Molinist-Style Response to Schellenberg" by Michael Thune

J.P. McBrayer
University of Missouri-Columbia

In this short commentary I will explicate the major argument in Michael Thune's paper "A Molinist-Style Response to Schellenberg" and offer some clarifications and initial criticisms. Before getting to Thune, it's important to be clear about the basic argument to which he is responding. John Schellenberg (1993) has been an ardent defender of what he's termed the argument from divine hiddenness. The basic complaint is that the existence of people who reasonably fail to believe provides *pro tanto* evidence against the existence of God. This is because a loving God would want everyone to have a relationship with Him and therefore would do whatever was necessary in order to ensure that all capable beings were in a position to enter into such a relationship. And since belief in God's existence is a necessary condition for entering into a relationship with him, God would ensure that everyone believes that He exists. If the evidence for and against God's existence is counterbalanced *before* considering the problem of divine hiddenness, then this new evidence is enough to tip the scales towards atheism. Schellenberg formulates the argument as follows (1993, p. 83):

- (1) If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
- (2) If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable nonbelief does not occur.
- (3) Reasonable nonbelief occurs.
- (4) So, no perfectly loving God exists (from 2,3).
- (5) So, there is no God (from 1,4).

Before getting to Thune's central criticism of Schellenberg's argument, I want to clarify a basic confusion engendered in Thune's reduction of Schellenberg's argument to "the core argument":

As stated, Schellenberg's conclusion ("There is no God") is misleading – since it gives the implication that the argument, if sound, establishes atheism. But this is not the case, since Schellenberg's argument would not rule out the existence of an impersonal or non-maximally-great God....

Schellenberg announces that “*all* who espouse a form of theism are rationally committed to the truth of the claim that God, if he exists, is perfectly loving” – but takes “theism” to refer to the perfectly loving God of the Western monotheistic traditions. (Thune, p. 2 manuscript)

Thune suggests that we eliminate premise (1) from the argument leaving us only with the conclusion that (4) no perfectly loving God exists. Thus he treats what he considers the “core argument” without dealing with the extended conclusion for atheism generally.

This is a mistake because it betrays a (widespread) confusion about the terms ‘theism’ and ‘atheism’. Thune misunderstands Schellenberg’s target. The argument is *not* designed to show that there is no Aristotelian un-moved mover or no “higher power” whatsoever. Schellenberg’s target is much more narrow. The following distinctions are rarely made but almost always helpful in getting clear on the scope of theistic/atheistic arguments:

God_{narrow} – the immaterial spirit of classical Western theology.

God_{wide} – some higher divine power.

Theism_{narrow} – the view that the classical God of Western theology exists

Theism_{wide} – the view that some higher power exists.

Atheism_{narrow} – the view that the classical God of Western theology does **not** exist.

Atheism_{wide} – the view that no higher power of any sort exists.

Thune thinks that Schellenberg is arguing against theism_w. But Schellenberg’s argument is only against theism_n. Schellenberg is not himself an atheist_w.¹ The problem of divine hiddenness shows only that God_n does not exist, and therefore theism_n is false.

With that clarification, let’s get down to business. Thune’s thesis is that the argument from divine hiddenness is not an example of monotonic reasoning. The argument is merely evidential rather than *a priori*. The general strategy of this sort of response is to tell some logically possible story in which the antecedent of the conditional premise of the respective argument is logically compatible with the falsity of the consequent. This shows that the conditional is not *necessarily* true. In the argument from divine hiddenness, the conditional premise that’s at issue is premise (2): if God exists, then reasonable nonbelief does not occur. So in order to show

that this conditional is not necessarily true, Thune tells a logically possible story in which God exists and yet reasonable nonbelief occurs. What is that story?

Thune relies on the resources of Molinism in order to construct a logically possible scenario in which both God and reasonable nonbelievers exist.² Molinism is a view first espoused by Louis de Molina that attempts to reconcile God’s foreknowledge with genuine (libertarian) freedom. A rough sketch of the view is as follows. Being omniscient, God has middle knowledge. This is knowledge of all counterfactual conditionals which is not *natural* knowledge (i.e. that of possibilities and necessities) nor *actual* knowledge (i.e. that of free action or what is actual) but something in between the two (“middle” knowledge). For example, there are numerous conditionals that describe what various persons would *freely* do in various counterfactual circumstances. Consider: if I were presented with \$1,000 from my department, I would freely accept it. These conditionals are called counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. Having middle knowledge, God knows all of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, and this allows him to instantiate certain antecedent conditions that will result in desired consequences without denying persons genuine (libertarian) free choice. Thune argues that it is possible that God knew some relevant counterfactual of creaturely freedom and this explains why that person was never provided with evidence sufficient for reasonable theistic belief.

Before looking at the details of Thune’s suggestion, I should note that at this point his complaint seems to be against a straw man. The overall strategy is to show that premise (2) is not necessarily true. But for the argument to go through, the premise need only be contingently true. Schellenberg clearly differentiates the *logical* problem of evil from the *evidential* problem of evil. He writes that there is “a logical argument showing the existence of such evils to be incompatible with the existence of God, [and] an empirical argument showing that their existence renders his unlikely” (1993, p.6). While Thune is right that if divine hiddenness is a logical problem of evil, then Schellenberg must show that premise (2) is necessarily true, Schellenberg denies that his argument is of the logical sort:

While it seems to me [Schellenberg]...that it would be rash to suppose that the claim that (2) is necessarily true can *easily* be shown false, I will not seek to defend it. It will be more convenient for our purposes to concentrate on the question whether (2) is true....Accordingly, the problem of reasonable nonbelief, as I develop it, must be viewed as a special instance of the *empirical* problem of evil. (1993, pp.8-9, emphasis mine)

So since Thune doesn't offer a reason to think that the argument is invalid, that a premise is false or that we have no reason to think that a premise is true, he fails to undermine the argument from divine hiddenness.³

Let's grant for the remainder of these comments that the argument from divine hiddenness really is a version of the logical problem of evil. In other words, premise (2) is a necessary truth. How does molinism undermine this premise? Though I think he conflates the two in his paper, Thune offers two very different suggestions. First, is what I'll call the desire account: "anyone who would not freely **desire** a salvific relationship with God is not provided with evidence" (Thune, p. 4 manuscript). The account is as follows: for any capable subject S, if S would never desire a personal relationship with God, then S isn't given sufficient evidence for God's existence. And since God knows all of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, he knows for any given person whether or not they would ever desire a personal relationship with him. For those who would never form such a desire, God just doesn't bother to provide sufficient evidence of his existence.

I'd like to raise two concerns with this account. First, isn't a belief sometimes a necessary condition for a desire? Despite enjoying horseback riding, I don't really desire to ride on a unicorn, and this is (in part) because I don't believe that any of them exist. Likewise, it seems that some people would form the desire to have a relationship with God once they believed that He existed. Second, what of Schellenberg's challenge that some reasonable non-believers *do* desire a relationship with God? This is an empirical claim that Schellenberg defends by appealing to familiar examples of people who are genuinely seeking evidence of God's existence and hungering after a relationship with him despite their current unbelief. Thune's response seems to be either to deny that there are such believers⁴ or to abandon the desire account altogether for the response that I'll consider next.

The second account of how Molinism might show that premise (2) is possibly false is the response account. On this account, Thune quotes Laura Garcia: "if the belief is unlikely to occasion the desired **response**... God may not provide additional evidence for that person" (Thune, p. 5 manuscript). The account is as follows: for any capable subject S, if S would not respond to God in the proper way, then S isn't given sufficient evidence for God's existence. The response Thune has in mind is a choice to enter into a personal relationship with God. Later he re-formulates the response account as follows: "if no amount of evidence short of robbing someone's freedom would convince them to choose to enter into that self-denying relationship with God, God might choose not to provide that person with

evidence" (Thune, p. 6 manuscript).

I have two concerns with this account as well. First, why think that the only good thing produced by a belief in God is a personal relationship with him? Perhaps universal belief would have lots of other good benefits, e.g. it might make people more moral ('cause God is upstairs with thunderbolts and they know it), it might make evangelism easier ('cause everyone would already believe in God), etc. This means that even if God knew that someone might not respond to Him by entering into a relationship with him, God might have other good reasons for giving the person sufficient evidence. And since he's a perfect being, he would act to secure those other good things. Second, why wouldn't God provide folks with evidence even if he knew that they wouldn't respond? Normally we don't do things that we know are inefficacious because it costs us time, resources, etc. But there is (putatively) no extra cost to an infinite God to just give these folks some special revelation, etc., so why wouldn't he just do it? What reason could he have to not do it?

Let me close by offering one reason to think that God *would* provide sufficient evidence of his existence even to those he knew would not desire a relationship or respond in the proper way. In other words, I'm offering a reason to think that Molinism can't account for the possibility that (2) is false. The central point is one that is mentioned briefly at the end of Thune's presentation: God will putatively punish the non-believers even though their nonbelief is reasonable (i.e. non-culpable). In other words—granting plausible assumptions about the falsity of doxastic voluntarism—God's punishing folks not just for things they didn't do but things they couldn't do! This seems an obvious breach of justice. I offer the following thought experiment. I instruct my 10 year-old son to clean his room as soon as he gets home from school. However, at lunchtime I pick him up from school, take him home, and punish him for not cleaning his room. I do this because I know the following counterfactual of creaturely freedom: if my son had gotten home from school, he would have freely refrained from cleaning his room. But my behavior in this scenario is not morally permissible. It would be unjust of me to punish my son even granting the knowledge of the relevant counterfactual. But if so, how is this situation any different from God's punishing people for their non-belief when he doesn't give them sufficient evidence of his existence?

I'll close with a brief suggestion as to how Thune can avoid the justice problem. Perhaps he can argue that God doesn't punish people for unbelief. Instead, people are punished only for actions that they can control. So, for example, if their unbelief is due to some vicious character that they were

responsible for forming, then they would be punished for this latter action (and thus punished *indirectly* for not believing in God). In this case, those responsible for their unbelief will be punished and those not responsible for their unbelief with not. Thus even if God withholds evidence from a set of persons, only those within the set that would not have believed because of factors under their own control will be punished, and so God isn't punishing people for what they never had an opportunity to do.

References

Michael Thune, "A Molinist-Style Response to Shellenberg," *Southwest Philosophy Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 33-42.

Henry, fdjsakl. (2001) "Does Reasonable Nonbelief Exist?" *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 18, number 2, pp. 75-92.

Lehe, Robert. (2004) "A Response to the Argument from the Reasonableness of Nonbelief" *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 21, number 2, pp. 159-174.

Schellenberg, John. (1993) *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

----- (2002) "What the Hiddenness of god Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion," *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Howard-Snyder and Moser, eds. (London: Cambridge University Press) pp. 33-61.

----- (2004) "Breaking Down the Walls that Divide: Virtue and Warrant, Belief and Nonbelief," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 21, number 2, pp. 195-213.

----- (2005) "On Reasonable Nonbelief and Perfect Love: Replies to Henry and Lehe," *Faith and Philosophy*, volume 22, number 3, pp. 330-342.

Notes

¹ John mentioned this in a presentation that he gave at the University of Colorado on October 21, 2004.

² "Molinist theists can tell a logically possible story in which a perfectly loving God exists along with some reasonable nonbelief" (Thune, p. 3 manuscript).

³ Post conference footnote: Thune mentioned in his presentation of his paper that he had heard via Bill Rowe that Schellenberg has recently flirted with the notion that premise (2) was a necessary truth. If so, this would indeed make the argument from divine hiddenness a version of the logical problem of evil. And if Schellenberg were to pursue this strategy, Thune's response may be a useful way to block this strengthening of the argument. I am only pointing out that the stronger version that Thune attacks here is not defended by anyone in the contemporary literature.

⁴ Thune writes that "it is possible that the deepest desire of their [the unbeliever's] heart is not for the kind of self-emptying relationship that God desires" (p. 6 manuscript).