Abstract: In recent years philosophers of religion have paid a good deal of attention to a relatively new atheistic argument that’s been called the argument from hiddenness or reasonable nonbelief. Roughly, the argument states that if God existed he would provide evidence for his existence that rationally requires all of us to believe he exists. Since there are those for whom unbelief is reasonable, the argument goes, God does not exist. Michael J. Murray, by contrast, argues that in general God needs to limit the evidence he provides for his existence in order to prevent coerced actions on the part of human beings. Further, God will need to provide some individuals with even less divine evidence if he is to keep them from performing coerced actions. I construct an argument based on Murray’s and examine what a proponent of the argument needs to show if it is to be successful.

That “God exists” is not universally believed is the basis for a recently formulated piece of natural atheology: the argument from divine hiddenness (or reasonable nonbelief). The argument will be presented below, followed by a brief explication of a defense of premise (2) that is similar to that of the argument’s main proponent. I’ll then examine Michael J. Murray’s response to the argument (mainly aimed at (2)), suggesting that it is incomplete. Lastly, I’ll explore what needs to be shown if an argument against (2) based on Murray’s response is to be successful.

Developed originally by J. L. Schellenberg, the argument is as follows:

(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) No perfectly loving God exists.
(5) There is no God.¹

Seeing as its initial plausibility isn’t quite clear, premise (2) would naturally be called into question. Why think it’s true? Well, Schellenberg’s defense of it is fairly detailed and cannot be reproduced here. But consider the following statement of his as giving some idea as to why he thinks (2) is true:

For only the best human love could serve as an analogy of Divine love, and human love at its best clearly involves reciprocity and mutuality. If I love you and so seek your well-being, I wish to make available to you all the resources at my disposal for overcoming difficulties in your life. But then I must also make it possible for you to draw on me personally—to let you benefit from my listening to your problems, from my encouragement, from my spending time together with you, and so on. In other words, I wish to make available to you the resources of an intimate personal relationship with me.²

“Yes, of course!” most theists will be inclined to say. God, who is perfect in love, seeks such a relationship with human beings. The theist might also say that God does everything in his power to actualize these relationships. But these relationships would seem to require of human beings, among other things, belief in God. If this is so, a defender of (2) would claim, God would provide each of us with evidence sufficient for belief in him (call this evidence probabilifying, to follow Schellenberg). But it doesn’t follow, of course, from God’s providing probabilifying evidence to all that there would be no nonbelief of any kind. Some, seeing from the evidence provided that God existed and wished to be in relationship with them, would refuse the invitation to relationship. And some of those people, perhaps not wanting to reject God face to face, so to speak, might do so indirectly by deceiving themselves about the quality of the evidence God had

² Ibid., 18 (emphasis in original).
provided for himself, in order to eventually come to believe he doesn’t exist. From these considerations we get (2).

How might a theist respond? Perhaps, the theist might claim, there are other states of affairs (apart from a subject’s refusal) that prevent God from bringing about the relationships with human beings he desires. Specifically, there may be one that would prevent, on the human side, the reciprocity Shellenberg mentions. Michael J. Murray argues that God, by presenting us with a revelation of himself, would serve to coerce many folks into a personal relationship with God by “providing overpowering incentives which would make choosing the good ineluctable for us,” thereby preventing true reciprocity. But how could a probabilifying revelation from God be coercive to people? To answer this question with any precision, we first need to attend to the conditions associated with coerced acts.

Acts can be coerced in at least two ways: via offerings or threats. Murray’s focus is on the latter. An act is coerced by a threat “when a desire is induced by a threat, which desire is sufficiently compelling that it renders every other course of action except [the coerced act] ineligible.” At least three conditions are relevant in describing what make desires induced by threats sufficiently compelling: threat strength, threat imminence, and threat indifference.

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3 Michael J. Murray, “Deus Absconditus,” in Divine Hiddenness: New Essays, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63. If one thinks that a given action could still be free, despite its being coerced, we might just add to the concept of reciprocity that it requires morally-significant action and that coerced acts, even if they can be free, are not morally-significant.

4 One might object that God’s revealing himself or providing evidence of himself to a person would seem to be better construed as an offer rather than a threat. Perhaps in most cases it would be; but it need not be so in all. Consider Richard Swinburne (as quoted by Schellenberg) in this light: “Knowing that there was a God, men would know that their most secret thoughts and actions were known to God; and knowing that he was just, they would expect for their bad actions and thoughts whatever punishment was just” (Schellenberg, Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason, 117). Thus, in thinking this, some might end up turning to God for the main purpose of avoiding the threat of punishment.

5 Murray, “Deus Absconditus,” 70.
Threat strength is the degree to which the consequence promised by the threatener for not bringing about the conditions required by the threatener is negative. If I’m promised an insult if I don’t hand over my wallet to a stranger, I’ll be comfortable keeping my money. If I’m told I’ll be shot if I don’t hand over my money, I’ll be sure to comply. But it’s not hard to see that this isn’t the only factor relevant in threat-motivated coerced acts. In addition to sufficient threat strength, threat imminence must also be high for a threat-induced act to be coercive. Threat imminence is “the degree to which the threatened believes the consequences of the threat will be successfully carried out if the terms of the threat are not met.” You tell me that if I don’t pick up your dry-cleaning, you’ll get me fired from my job. Noting that you’re much lower on the totem poll of employment at the firm we work for, that you’re generally considered untrustworthy at work, and that your rate of success in extortion attempts is notoriously low, I won’t bother doing your chore. It’s highly unlikely you’ll pull off anything that would get me fired; threat imminence is low. Another example: I am confronted by a well-known burglar on the street. Holding a gun to my head, he demands my cash and valuables. Since I know he’s shot 95 percent of the people who’ve failed to submit in situations like these, threat imminence is very high and, combined with the enormous threat strength, will serve to render my action of handing my possessions over coerced.

But there is more than one type of threat imminence. The above Murray calls probabilistic and there are two others. Temporal imminence, as the name suggests, consists in the amount of time between when the conditions of the threat are not met and when the threat is carried out. Thus, temporal imminence is low when “the threatened understands that there will be a significant lapse between the time that he fails to meet the
conditions of the threat and the time that the threat is carried out…” This makes the “desire induced by the threat…less compelling than when the consequences [would] follow immediately upon the failure to meet the conditions.”7 If we’re threatened with receiving a powerful electric shock immediately if we don’t hand over the money in our pockets, we won’t, says Murray, hesitate to do so. If instead, however, through some sort of delayed-cattle prod, we were to receive this same shock a few years later, we might just be fine with keeping our money.

Lastly, epistemic imminence is relevant. This is the “degree to which the disutility of the threatened consequence is epistemically forceful to the threatened.”8 For example, I know that intake of excessive amounts of sugar day after day could lead to diabetes. But when my close friend, whom I know consistently ingests excessive quantities of sugar, develops the condition, I will be sure to watch my sugar intake and monitor my triglyceride levels more closely, at least for a while; epistemic imminence in this case is high.

Along with strength and the different sorts of imminence, the level of threat indifference is also applicable in describing acts coerced by threats. To illustrate the concept, Murray asks us to consider an escape attempt by two prisoners: they may have identical levels of threat strength (they both risk getting shot) threat imminence (both think they have a 50-50 chance of success [probabilistic]; the threat, if it’s carried out, will be immediate in both cases [temporal]; and they’ve both seen the same exact escape attempts in their time in prison [epistemic]). Nevertheless, the current state of affairs may serve to coerce one of them to refrain from an escape attempt and not the other. Threat

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., (emphasis in original).
indifference is postulated to explain the difference in susceptibility to coercion in this case. Threat indifference might be thought of as “the degree to which one finds pleasure in taking the risks posed by failing to abide by conditions of a threat” or “a sense of indifference to one’s own well-being in the face of a threat.”

These distinctions, claims Murray, serve to show that there are many ways that God, in wanting to preserve morally-significant freedom among humans, will not reveal himself to us. Specifically, God’s general revelation (revelation which all have access to) will have to be minimal. Why? “…God must tailor the degree of general revelation to the individual most likely to be compelled by a threat, namely, the least [threat-indifferent] individual.” So, if in a given society there exist any number of individuals with low threat indifference, God will not, among those people, provide extravagant public displays of evidence for his existence.

But, as Murray admits, this observation does not suffice to undermine the argument from hiddenness. Says Murray, “At most, the argument I give above shows that we should not expect grand public theophanies to be common. But that does not prevent God from making his existence known to creatures by way of private religious experience.” We might concede that Murray’s account of coercion, if accurate, has shown that a given person can “handle” only so much evidence for God’s existence before they are coerced into a relationship with God. But since threat-indifference and, hence, susceptibility to coercion, varies from person to person, God might, in seeking

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9 Ibid., 72.
10 Michael J. Murray, “Coercion and the Hiddenness of God,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), 34. The ‘wantonness of the threatened’ is, in this paper of Murray’s, the third condition relevant in describing acts coerced via threats and is contained in the original passage. However, given that this third factor is replaced with ‘threat indifference’ in his more recent essay and that he retains his point about God’s general revelation as part of his case, the above replacement does not seem inappropriate.
relationship, provide each person with the specific amount of personal or experiential evidence they are able to receive without being coerced. And Murray has given no reason to think this evidence could not be probabilifying.

So Murray’s case against (2) is incomplete. But perhaps this strategy is not doomed to failure. We might propound the following argument, taken from considerations already in place, but extended to defeat (2):

(6) The existence of meaningful relationships (including divine-human relationships) requires true reciprocity of the parties involved.

(7) Coerced acts are not truly reciprocal.

(8) If one’s actions in a given relationship are coerced, the relationship is not meaningful (from (6) and (7)).

(9) God seeks meaningful relationships with human beings and seeks not those that are not meaningful.

(10) Reasonable nonbelievers, if they were to receive probabilifying evidence for God’s existence, would perform coerced actions in a relationship with God.

(11) Reasonable nonbelievers, if they were to receive probabilifying evidence for God’s existence, would be in a relationship with God that is not meaningful (from (8) and (10)).

(12) God would not provide probabilifying evidence for his existence to reasonable nonbelievers (from (9) and (11)).

(10) is the easiest to doubt. It requires us to hold, if we accept Murray’s account of coercion, that everyone who is in a state of reasonable nonbelief has low threat
indifference (TI), and is thus highly (or higher than most) susceptible to coercion. But is it true that reasonable unbelievers have low TI\(^{12}\)?

To answer this question, we’ll need to answer another: How do we go about finding out whether those in reasonable nonbelief have low TI? Well, consider again our conception of TI. Remember that Murray proposes it be described as “the degree to which one finds pleasure in taking the risks posed by failing to abide by conditions of a threat” or “a sense of indifference to one’s own well-being in the face of a threat.” An answer to this second question, then, could be found by rounding up a group of reasonable nonbelievers and asking them how they behave in certain potentially coercive situations. Do the same with a second group of folks, namely, those who aren’t reasonable unbelievers. If we find that each of the reasonable nonbelievers has significantly lower TI than everyone else, we would have evidence confirming (10) and, thus, for our argument against (2). If not, not. But another question immediately arises, namely, How do we make sure that our sample contains only reasonable unbelievers and not those who, say, have deceived themselves into nonbelief? Well, I think we could safely say that we had found such people if the people in question had not even had the opportunity to entertain the proposition “God exists.” And, further, I think it could safely

\(^{12}\) (10), on Murray’s account, would also imply that those who are in a relationship with God don’t have low TI (at least not as low as reasonable nonbelievers). One might conclude, then, that surely we have here a disconfirmation of the argument, since, out of the millions of folks who claim to be in relationship with God, at least some have TI that is lower than one of the millions of reasonable unbelievers. This is clearly a major concern for a proponent of the argument, but I’ll state here just two possible replies: 1) the arguer could deny that there really are people who are in a relationship with God and have low TI by proposing there to be few people in general who have such a relationship; this would narrow the field in hopes of weeding-out low TI believers; 2) deny that all reasonable nonbelievers have low TI and add that those who have almost no conception of the monotheistic God would require more evidence than those who have some idea of God and, therefore, would need much higher TI than normal in order to receive a divine revelation without being coerced; this would cover many reasonable unbelievers, mainly outside the West.
be said that we had a group of people who hadn’t considered “God exists” if we looked beyond the Western world to a place where monotheism has been scarce.

But notice that to conduct our survey we need not have current reasonable unbelievers. We need people who have at some time been in a position of reasonable nonbelief. So, presumably, if one has recently come to believe in God, but has been in reasonable nonbelief prior to coming to believe, and for quite some time, a word from them to discover their TI prior to believing would not be difficult to obtain. Further, such persons could report on their current TI for comparison. It turns out, then, that in trying to assess whether low TI corresponds with reasonable nonbelief and not with contrary states, we could very well have a sample of people who are all believers; this might well make the task easier.

But once more, let’s stipulate that TI contains other important characteristics. Murray states that it “appears to be a character trait that we, in some measure, freely cultivate.”\textsuperscript{13} If this is so, it is surely possible that one who has low TI raise it to a much higher level, high enough to receive probabilifying evidence of God’s existence. I suggest, however, that this is not something that can be done overnight. Continued bold action in threatening situations would, minimally, seem to be needed to boost TI. One must be put (or put oneself) in threatening situations. In the various circumstances one finds oneself in, it is required that one show an increase (however small) in valor each time when faced with a threat. Over time one’s TI will be raised.

With this in mind, consider the growth of the Christian theistic tradition in the developing world. Of Africa, for example, Philip Jenkins, historian and religion scholar, claims that “the number of Christians increased, staggeringly, from 10 million in 1900 to

\textsuperscript{13} Murray, “Deus Absconditus,” 80.
360 million by 2000.” Assuming this is at least a rough approximation of the truth, what should we say about it as it concerns present purposes? Given that this increase did not happen all at once and that conversions didn’t come to a complete halt in 2000, we have a sizable group to work with in our investigation. Also, the vast majority of recent converts, we should think, have a long history (perhaps their entire life prior to conversion) of reasonable nonbelief. If this is the case, their TI has been low for quite some time. So, in the time leading up to their belief in God (weeks? months?) there would have been a raising of TI in them to a level high enough to receive probabilifying evidence of God. If, then, one were to ask a recent convert about their life in the weeks and months prior to conversion, their story should contain at least hints of an increase in TI.

But further, remember that the more spectacular and evidentially compelling the data (that is, the greater the probabilistic imminence) in the case of a threat, the higher one’s TI must be to prevent coercion. Consider this fact in connection with what J. P. Moreland claims, seemingly following Jenkins:

A major factor in the current revival in the third world—by some estimates, up to 70 percent of it—is intimately connected to signs and wonders as expressions of the love of the Christian Father-God, the lordship of his Son, and the power of his Spirit and his Kingdom. A manifestation of the supernatural power of God through healings, demonic deliverances, and the prophetic are central to what is going on today.  

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15 J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 168. Moreland is himself no authority on these matters. It seems he’s relying on Jenkins for this information because the following
Assuming that this statement is not completely off the mark in describing the beliefs of many non-Western Christians, what the defender of our argument taken from Murray must say (given that the supernatural signs listed above constitute extravagant evidence [compared to, say, a feeling of God comforting one in a hard time]) is that for these people who received sufficient evidence for belief in God through putative supernatural events, their TI has risen *dramatically* prior to having these experiences.

Even if we might think it a thorny task to try to confirm instances and periods of TI raise in the life of one who’s received ‘ordinary’ evidence of God’s existence, it should be much less difficult to identify these changes in a recent convert who takes him or herself to have experienced the events mentioned above. I suggest, therefore, that this convert would have something like the following to say about their life leading up to their encounter with what they took to be supernatural occurrences: I remember that I often felt powerless in the face of potential danger, however insignificant it might be. But a few weeks prior to my experience and subsequent turning to God, I found myself in a lot of (some great, some small) potentially harmful situations. For instance, one day I was eating dinner at a neighbor’s house with a group of friends when an intruder burst in. Wielding a machete, the man demanded we give him our valuables. In collecting our items, he went around the table to each person, who tossed their goods into a bag. When the thief was near me, I, acting unusually brave for myself, tackled him and secured his weapon. All of us left the house that night unscathed, with all our belongings. Another example: I was helping out my community at a local building site for those in the area...
who had lost their homes to a recent natural disaster. The day before, my boss warned me that my salary would drop if I was late to work the next day. Naturally, I was compelled to leave right away. I stayed a few minutes longer, however, doing all I could for my village. In both of these situations I took a step out of my comfort zone. While both were small steps, they contributed to a part of who I am today, one who is more willing to risk harm to myself in the face of threats big and small, mostly out of concern for others.  

If we are to attribute low TI to all reasonable nonbelievers, which we must if (10) of our argument is to hold up, all those formerly in reasonable unbelief who now believe (especially those who’ve received the type and wealth of evidence mentioned above), will have a story to tell about the raising of their TI (of course, they will not make use of the concept of threat indifference to describe their experience). But do they have such things to say? Or could we look at their lives prior to conversion and spot for ourselves where and how TI level was raised? I’m unaware of any large-scale data on this, so it’s difficult to speak of significant numbers of cases that conform or don’t conform to the expectations of the defender of this argument; and it is up to them to provide this information. At the least, then, the proponent of the argument will have work to do.

\[16\] The two examples above of incidents that raised TI in this person were brought about by actions of theirs that were morally virtuous. However, there is no reason to think that TI, as Murray has it, cannot also be raised through morally trivial or morally wrong actions, however odd the latter may seem, considering that they’re being committed in order to attain the great good of being in relationship with God.