

# GETTING TO KNOW A GOD YOU DO NOT BELIEVE IN: PANENTHEISM, EXTERNALISM, AND DIVINE HIDDENNESS

by *Harvey Cawdron* 

*Abstract.* J. L. Schellenberg's hiddenness argument is one of the key contemporary justifications for atheism and has prompted numerous responses from those defending the plausibility of belief in God. I will outline a recent counterargument from Michael C. Rea, who claims that relationships with God are far more widely available than Schellenberg assumes. However, I will suggest that it invites a response from proponents of the hiddenness argument because it leaves some nonbelievers unaccounted for. I will rectify this by suggesting that a model of panentheism in which God is embodied in the cosmos allows all, including all nonbelievers, to have a relationship with God. I will then claim that semantic externalism and externalism about beliefs can enable nonbelievers to get to know this God. I will then challenge the hiddenness argument by suggesting that these relationships can accommodate the key motivations behind Schellenberg's insistence on personal relationships without requiring subjects to recognize that they are in a relationship with God.

*Keywords:* divine embodiment; divine hiddenness; panentheism; personal relationships

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## INTRODUCTION

J. L. Schellenberg's divine hiddenness argument is one of the most potent arguments against the existence of a loving, personal God.<sup>1</sup> Numerous responses have been produced to defend the plausibility of belief in God. Michael C. Rea has provided an argument in which he shows that nonbelievers can have a relationship of some kind with God through God's presence in and communication through the external world. However, I will claim that Rea's model does not go far enough because it is unable to accommodate nonresistant nonbelievers that do not seek God. I will develop a response along similar lines using panentheism, the idea that

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the world is in some sense inside God even though God is more than the world.<sup>2</sup> Because of the context of this article, I will be working with a form of pantheism that is reconcilable with the form of theism that is the target of Schellenberg's argument: a perfectly loving God. To be more specific, I will use a variant of pantheism in which the universe is God's body, and will contrast it with a form of classical theism in which God is also embodied in the cosmos.

After outlining this model of pantheism, I will investigate its ability to undermine the hiddenness argument. I will begin by showing that the notion that God is embodied in the universe allows all persons to have a relationship with God, including all nonbelievers. I will then use semantic externalism and externalism about beliefs to argue that nonbelievers can get to know this God, and unwittingly have many true beliefs about him.<sup>3</sup> After this, I will challenge the hiddenness argument by investigating whether the relationship that nonbelievers have with God in this model accommodates the criteria for and motivations behind what Schellenberg calls a personal relationship. I will conclude that the pantheist model does this far more successfully than the classical theist one. I will then grapple with some potential objections to my argument.

#### THE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

In the hiddenness argument, Schellenberg claims that because God is perfectly loving, he desires a personal relationship with persons, and would be capable of having such a relationship with all those persons who are not resistant to such a possibility. This relationship would entail belief in God, and the fact that there are people in a state of nonresistant nonbelief means that God does not exist.<sup>4</sup> The full argument runs as follows:

- (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 (a personal relationship) with *S* at *t*.
- (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*.
- (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.
- (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.

- (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.
- (7) It is not the case that God exists.<sup>5</sup>

Key to Schellenberg's argument is the assumption that perfect love entails desire for a personal relationship. Schellenberg identifies the definition of love that construes love as desire for the good of the beloved and for union with the beloved as broadly in line with his emphasis on love being aimed at a personal relationship.<sup>6</sup> If Schellenberg is correct, the existence of nonresistant nonbelievers is difficult to explain. These people are open to having a personal relationship with God and yet have not been granted one. Surely, God's omnipotence means that he would be capable of establishing such a relationship with them and his perfect love entails his desire for one. Due to this, Schellenberg argues that there is no good explanation of why there are nonbelievers in such a state, meaning that their existence points to the conclusion that God does not exist.<sup>7</sup>

I shall not object to Schellenberg's assumption that divine love entails desire for a relationship of some kind, but I shall challenge his idea that this relationship must be personal.<sup>8</sup> For this, I will build on the work of Michael C. Rea. In *The Hiddenness of God*, Rea has responded to Schellenberg with a radical revision of how we think God interacts with us. The important insights Rea makes about how one can interact with God through the external world, even whilst in a state of nonresistant nonbelief, provide a useful foundation from which the significance of pantheism, which makes the external world part of God in the model used here, can be shown in relation to divine hiddenness.

Rea argues that experiences of the presence of God are much more widely available than is assumed in the hiddenness argument. He suggests that experiences of God's presence require people to make cognitive contributions to purely natural stimuli, like when one interprets the sound of thunder as God's voice. If one is able to make the relevant cognitive contributions, one can experience the presence of, or communication from, God.<sup>9</sup>

For Rea, all divine encounters have natural stimuli, and whether they are experienced as divine depends on the cognitive states of the subject.<sup>10</sup> Experiences of the presence of God require the cultivation of a skill, one that can be cultivated intentionally or developed naturally through liturgical practice, the acquisition of religious faith, and other such things.<sup>11</sup> Although these experiences can involve communication with God, Rea claims that they do not require special causal contact with God when special causal contact is understood in the following way:

I take it that someone's experience involves special causal contact with God if, and only if, God or some supernatural phenomenon involving God or God's activity is either the immediate stimulus for their experience or in some other way its direct cause, so that the occurrence of the experience, its character, its content, or some combination of these can be adequately explained only by reference to God or the occurrence of some supernatural phenomenon. (Rea 2018, 107)

The experiences that Rea is focusing on are mundane and do not require reference to God or some supernatural phenomenon in their explanation. Awareness of God's presence merely requires one to view one's circumstances through "a certain kind of theistic lens," making such experiences widely and readily available to people who possess the requisite lens and try to have such experiences. Rea assumes that God would wish for all people to experience as much of his love and presence as is possible given things like their background cognition and psychological profile, implying that God is constantly communicating with people.<sup>12</sup> Subjects can experience the presence of God and communicate with him simply by trying.<sup>13</sup> This contradicts the idea that God has neglected certain persons by ceasing to communicate with them, as he has not ceased communication with them at all.<sup>14</sup>

Rea also suggests that some nonbelievers can have a relationship with God.<sup>15</sup> Subjects that have some concept that applies to God, like "the creator of the universe," and try to seek him are able to enter into a relationship with God just by doing this, as God will do things like guide them on their journey.<sup>16</sup> All one has to do is be open to a relationship with God, and either desire to find God (or a concept that applies to God) or perform actions one thinks contribute toward this goal of seeking God (or a concept that applies to God).<sup>17</sup> This holds even if the seekers do not actually believe that God exists.

Rea's model is significant because it shows that experiences of God are much more widely available than proponents of the hiddenness argument presuppose. Furthermore, it is able to establish some form of relationship between God and many nonbelievers that does not require their belief in his existence, only their desire to seek some minimal concept that applies to God. In guiding nonbelievers on their journey, God also positively contributes to this relationship. This is an important step toward undermining Schellenberg's argument, as it shows that nonbelievers are not deprived of a relationship with God.

However, Rea's model does not go far enough. It would cover many cases of nonresistant nonbelief, but not all. It seems evident that many nonbelievers, even if nonresistant to belief in God, would not try to seek him. One also cannot blame them for this, as it seems perfectly rational for one to refrain from seeking something that one does not believe exists, even if one is not resisting belief in its existence. For example, it seems

conceivable that there are people open to the possibility that aliens exist who also do not believe they exist or have any desire to try and find evidence for or against this theory. With regard to divine hiddenness, a distinction between these types of nonresistant nonbelievers is needed:

*Seeking nonresistant non-believers:* X is a seeking nonresistant non-believer iff X is in a state of nonresistant non-belief with regards to the proposition that God exists and is actively seeking God, or a concept that applies to God.

*Non-seeking nonresistant non-believers:* X is a non-seeking nonresistant non-believer iff X is in a state of nonresistant non-belief with regards to the proposition that God exists and is not actively seeking God, or a concept that applies to God.

Rea's model allows those in a state of seeking nonresistant nonbelief to be in a relationship with God but does not accommodate nonseeking nonresistant nonbelievers. This is a problem. Schellenberg can reasonably reply that God has neglected nonseeking nonresistant nonbelievers and has not provided them with anything strong enough to entice them to seek him or cultivate the skills required to experience him through mundane encounters.<sup>18</sup> To rectify this, I am going to argue that in a particular model of panentheism, all, including all nonbelievers, are in a relationship with God that can accommodate many of the criteria and motivations for personal relationships.

#### CLASSICAL THEISM, PANENTHEISM, AND DIVINE EMBODIMENT

In this section of the article, I will introduce panentheism and outline the differences between it and its main rivals, classical theism and pantheism. I will then outline variants of classical theism and panentheism in which God is embodied in the universe. In later sections, I shall show the advantages that the panentheist version has when challenging the hiddenness argument.

Panentheism is located in-between pantheism and classical theism on a scale with God's immanence on one side and transcendence on the other.<sup>19</sup> Classical theism is more on the transcendence side because it posits that God is present to but ontologically distinct from the world.<sup>20</sup> On the immanence side, we have pantheism, in which everything is God.<sup>21</sup> In pantheism, divinity is everywhere in the universe and God is the only substance that exists, and everything is a mode or manifestation of God.<sup>22</sup> In panentheism, the world is part of God, meaning that God is immanent in the world. Furthermore, the suggestion that God is more than the world allows for transcendence, entailing that part of God extends beyond the universe.<sup>23</sup> In panentheism, unlike in pantheism, there is still a part of God that is hidden.

A God that is personal is a key assumption in the hiddenness argument. To be personal, we would need to be able to attribute agency, a mind, and a will to him.<sup>24</sup> When grappling with Schellenberg's argument, it is important that one accounts for this. Furthermore, although I shall challenge the emphasis placed on personal relationships in Schellenberg's argument, it is also essential that the model of God we are using here is one in which God is perfectly loving. I shall adhere to a concept of divine love that is broadly in line with Schellenberg's own thoughts on the matter in the sense that it entails desire for a relationship of some kind.

An issue with the pantheism movement as a whole is a lack of clarity regarding what the term "pantheism" actually means. There is no clearly defined view of the relationship between God and the world among pantheists, and the word "in" is used in a variety of different ways when attempts are made to define how exactly the world is in God. This makes it difficult to demarcate pantheism from its rivals, like pantheism and classical theism.<sup>25</sup>

The claim that the world is of the divine substance is a core principle in most variants of pantheism, and at a first glance, this seems to differentiate it from classical theism as it is usually articulated.<sup>26</sup> The body analogy, which identifies the universe with the body of God and the part of God outside it with the mind, is a useful way of explaining the relationship between this substance and the part of God outside of the universe. It captures both the immanence and transcendence of God because although the body acts in the world, the body is an agent of the mind and is controlled by it.<sup>27</sup> I will use this form of pantheism to respond to the hiddenness argument, and my reasons for this will become clear in later sections.

This discussion of embodiment can be made more nuanced using the five things that Richard Swinburne claims allow one to say that a particular body is one's body.<sup>28</sup> The first is that disturbances in this body cause sensations like pain and tingles. The second is that one feels the inside of this body: one feels things like an empty stomach. The third is that one can directly move parts of one's body. This is referred to as a basic action: an action one performs without having to perform another action to do it. Moving one's arm is a basic action, but to move a cup one has to go and grab it. The fourth is that one looks out at the world from where the body is: it is one's locus of perception in the world.<sup>29</sup> The fifth is that one's thoughts and feelings are affected nonrationally by things that occur in the body.<sup>30</sup>

Despite initial appearances, these five conditions are crucial for differentiating this form of pantheism from classical theism more conclusively. On its own, the claim that God is embodied in the cosmos is insufficient for distinguishing pantheism from classical theism. T. J. Mawson controversially argues that conditions three and four of Swinburne's are sufficient for embodiment.<sup>31</sup> He claims that not being reliant

on knowing what is occurring elsewhere to know what is happening in a piece of matter (knowing about it directly) and being able to act on the matter through a basic action (controlling it directly) are jointly sufficient for that matter to be part of one's body. He further claims that both of these are entailed by omnipresence, which would make the God of classical theism embodied in the cosmos.<sup>32</sup> I will label this model embodied classical theism.

How can one distinguish the pantheist version from Mawson's form of classical theism? The pantheist can affirm that all five conditions are fulfilled in the embodiment of the pantheist God. In claiming that conditions one, two and five apply to this God as well as three and four, one accepts that he is emotionally impacted by what happens in the external world, his body, and thus is affected by the way that subjects interact with the world. I will label this model embodied pantheism.<sup>33</sup>

The acceptance of all five conditions grants God both an active or self-expressive side to his being, and a more passive or receptive side.<sup>34</sup> Subjects can impact the external world, God's body, when interacting with it. God is receptive to the changes that subjects bring about in these interactions: they alter his body and thus impact his thoughts and feelings. For example, when one digs a hole or dumps something in the ocean, one is interacting with and impacting God's body, and this, due to conditions one, two, and five, also impacts God emotionally and nonrationally.

The self-expressive side of this God can be explained using the notion that God, due to his divine embodiment, is embodied perfectly. Human beings, as finite, have limited control over their physical bodies. God is perfectly embodied, and thus has perfect control over the way he is embodied and thus also of the way he is expressed in the configurations of the universe. He determines and sustains the laws of nature that bring regularity to the universe, and he generally upholds them even though he is not restricted to them.<sup>35</sup> God dictates the way that he is expressed in the universe.

This highlights the relationship between immanence and transcendence in this version of pantheism. God is passible and immanent because he is impacted by the way other beings interact with his body. However, God can also be said to determine and uphold the laws of nature, and thus is the decider of the impacts that different types of actions have on his body when subjects interact with it. Due to the emotional impact subjects can have on God through their interactions with the world, one gets a much greater degree of immanence in this form of pantheism than in embodied classical theism, but transcendence is still prominent in this model.<sup>36</sup>

This pantheist God can be deemed personal because, as the body analogy makes clear, he has a mind, a will, and agency in the world that he can use to enact his will. However, an immediate concern with the applicability of this view to discussions of divine hiddenness has to do

with the nature of other subjects. Subjects, like human beings, are of the same substance as the rest of the universe and are thus seemingly part of the divine body. Can this God be plausibly deemed loving toward the other?

In response, the pantheist can claim that with regard to God, only some of the conditions for embodiment apply to other subjects. One can perhaps insist that, due to his omnipotence, God would be capable of controlling their bodies in a basic action and, due to his omniscience, would have full knowledge of what occurs in their bodies and of the sensations they experience.

Despite this, these bodies belong to other subjects and are governed by other minds. If one assumes that these subjects have free will, then one can assert that subjects' bodies are not controlled by God apart from in exceptional circumstances, if at all. The pantheist can argue that God does not relate to their bodies in the same way that he does with the rest of the universe. God does not see the sensations or nonrational responses in the bodies of other subjects as his, and does not identify feelings inside of their bodies as his either. God's knowledge of his experiences of what happens in his body and the sensations it produces is knowledge *de se*, or of oneself, but his knowledge of the feelings and sensations of other subjects is knowledge of a thou. His interactions with other subjects are "I-Thou" in nature.

This means that the first and second of Swinburne's conditions, in the case of the bodies of other subjects, are not fulfilled by God in the same way that they are by the subjects themselves. God might have knowledge of the sensations they experience and of the feelings inside their bodies, but God does not see these as things that he is experiencing directly himself. It is knowledge of what is occurring in the bodies of others, not of what is happening in his own. Furthermore, condition five, that God would be affected nonrationally by things that occur in the body, would not be fulfilled in the same sense with other subjects' bodies either. He may be saddened by their experiences of sensations like pain, but this sadness would be indirect. Although he has knowledge of their experience of these sensations, the sadness would be a response to *their* pain, but it would not be pain that he perceives as his own. Other subjects can thus be plausibly deemed "other," making the claim that God desires both their good and union, or a relationship with them, coherent. Now that embodied pantheism has been outlined, I shall explain the advantages it has in the divine hiddenness debate.

#### THE ADVANTAGES OF DIVINE EMBODIMENT

In this section, I will note some advantages that the general notion of divine embodiment, applied to both forms of embodied theism, has in the divine hiddenness debate. First, I will claim that it allows all subjects

to have a relationship with God, and second, that nonbelievers can get to know this God if semantic externalism and externalism about beliefs is accepted.<sup>37</sup>

The key advantage that a model in which God is embodied in the cosmos has over Rea's is that one can establish some form of relationship between all subjects, including nonbelieving ones, and God. The relationship that the body and the self has is an intimate one, such that selves ordinarily do not see the body as other, but as a part of them.<sup>38</sup> When God is embodied in the cosmos, the external world is God, and thus subjects are constantly interacting with God regardless of whether they are aware of this or not. Subjects are in constant contact with God and are thus connected with him on some level. This establishes some form of relationship between God and all subjects regardless of belief. Divine embodiment does not just make a relationship with God easily attainable but establishes such a relationship in the lives of all subjects, including nonseeking nonresistant nonbelievers, through their interactions with the external world.

Now that we have established that all can have a relationship with a God that is embodied in the cosmos, I am going to argue that nonbelievers can also get to know this God. I will do this by assuming a widely accepted position in the philosophy of language and a near identical concept in philosophy of mind, namely semantic externalism and externalism about beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

Before this, however, I wish to note two types of predicates that persons are said to have. The first are M-predicates, those like "weighs 10 pounds" that people have in virtue of having material bodies. The second are P-predicates, like "is in pain," "is smiling," or "is going for a walk," which imply that the individuals that possess them are conscious (although not all of them ascribe states of consciousness to the individual in question).<sup>40</sup> P-predicates can also be identified by observers through bodily indicators like facial expressions. In embodied theisms, God, as a personal, embodied, conscious God, would have both M- and P-predicates.<sup>41</sup>

We can now turn to the discussion of externalism:

Semantic externalism 'is the thesis that the contents of intentional states (such as beliefs) and speech acts (such as assertions) are not determined by the way the subjects of those states or acts are internally.' (Yli-Vakkuri 2018, 81)<sup>42</sup>

This view owes its prominence to a famous thought experiment by Hilary Putnam. Putnam asks us to imagine a world identical to ours apart from the fact that the liquid its occupants consider to be water is not made from H<sub>2</sub>O, but a different compound called XYZ. What Oscar from Earth and his doppelganger from Twin Earth mean by water is different, and this would be the case even in the year 1750, before the chemical composition of water had been discovered. In this case, their psychological states

would be the same when they uttered the word “water,” as they would be unaware of what the liquid was made of. However, if we assume that meaning determines reference, and thus sameness in meaning implies sameness in reference, or difference in reference implies difference in meaning, the meaning of water for Oscar and his doppelganger is different, as Oscar is referring to H<sub>2</sub>O and his doppelganger to XYZ. The meaning of the term water is determined by what goes on in the world. It is not entirely in the head.<sup>43</sup>

Katalin Farkas extends this argument. She claims that when Oscar says that “water quenches thirst,” it is true if and only if H<sub>2</sub>O quenches thirst. When his doppelganger makes the same claim, it is true only if XYZ quenches thirst. If we assume that content determines truth-conditions, the truth-conditions, and thus the content, of each statement is different in this case.<sup>44</sup>

This argument has been applied to mental contents like beliefs. Beliefs also have truth-conditions as well as content (what is believed) to determine those truth-conditions. Thus, if one assumes that Oscar is expressing a belief he has when he claims that “water quenches thirst,” the previous argument applies to beliefs as well.<sup>45</sup> Externalism about beliefs is the thesis that “the content of a belief is not determined by the way the subject of the belief is internally” (Yli-Vakkuri 2018, 82).<sup>46</sup>

Now, let us change the example so that it serves our purposes. I will replace the Twin Earth example with the Twin Universe example. We have Martin, who is in a divine universe in which God is embodied in the cosmos, and his doppelganger, located in a universe that is almost identical, the only difference being that it is not divine. Both refer to their own individual universes as “the cosmos.” When they refer to “the cosmos” they refer to different things: Martin to a divine universe, or God, and his doppelganger to one that is not divine.

Their beliefs about particular things within their respective universes also differ. Their beliefs, such as that “the ocean is blue,” differ in their content.<sup>47</sup> The content of Martin’s beliefs about the external world differ from his doppelganger’s because his beliefs are about God. Martin’s belief that “the ocean is blue” is only true if the part of God he is referring to is indeed blue, but his doppelganger’s parallel belief does not refer to God at all.

Let us now assume that Martin is a nonbeliever and believes that the universe is not divine. Are the contents of his beliefs about the external world now the same as that of his doppelganger’s? No, because (externalism withstanding) the way the world is has an impact on Martin’s beliefs. The contents of his beliefs about his universe are still about God.

This has significant implications for this debate. It means that nonbelieving subjects, like Martin, can have lots of true beliefs about God, such as the belief that the ocean, a part of God’s body, is blue, without believing

that God exists. Nonbelievers can get to know God through interacting with his body. Beliefs about things like the color of the ocean are about M-predicates possessed by God through his body.

Believers, in recognizing that God is conscious, would be more able to learn about God's P-predicates. But nonbelievers can still learn about God's P-predicates in embodied classical theism and panentheism. Let us take Rea's example of thunder. One could hear the thunder and say that "the universe is speaking to us," and this claim implies that the universe is conscious.<sup>48</sup> Given externalism, this applies to God. In both forms of embodied theism, nonbelievers can learn about God's M- and P-predicates. Nonbelievers can get to know a God they do not believe in.

However, there is a problem that we must overcome. If we assume that Martin believes that the cosmos exists, as he almost certainly would, things get more complicated. Since the content of this belief is about God, we can infer from this that Martin holds the belief that God exists. This seems inconsistent with the idea that Martin is a nonbeliever.

Can we still claim that Martin is a nonbeliever? It seems that we can. Let us return to the water example. If asked whether water exists, Oscar would say yes. But imagine that Oscar is alive at the time that scientists were able to analyze the chemical compound that constitutes water. A scientist tells Oscar that water is made of H<sub>2</sub>O. Oscar, being skeptical about science, refuses to believe that H<sub>2</sub>O exists. This entails that Oscar has two contradictory beliefs: a true one that water exists and a false one that it does not. However, he is not aware that his beliefs are contradictory, as he does not think that water is H<sub>2</sub>O.

We can say the same about Martin. Martin believes that the cosmos exists, but he does not think the same about God. He thus rightly believes that God exists due to his belief in the existence of the cosmos, and wrongly believes that God does not exist. However, he is not aware that God is the cosmos, so does not see these beliefs as contradictory. There is still a strong sense in which Martin is in a state of "nonbelief" with regard to the proposition that God exists, as he is aware of his belief that God does not exist, but is unaware that his belief in the existence of the cosmos commits him to the contrary.

This unawareness can be explained by the fact that Martin's understanding of the cosmos is mistaken. This can be shown using the water example. If one were to ask Oscar, now skeptical about science, whether water is made from H<sub>2</sub>O, he would say no and would be wrong. His understanding of water is mistaken, in particular his belief that it is not made from H<sub>2</sub>O. Martin is similarly mistaken in thinking that the cosmos is not fundamentally divine. His understanding of the universe he resides in is wrong.

Another example will help. Imagine that Martin and his doppelgänger traded places, so Martin was now in the twin universe. Apart from its

lack of divinity, everything about this universe is identical to Martin's, so Martin thinks the twin universe is his universe. He believes that "this is the cosmos." He would be wrong, as he would be referring to his cosmos, and his cosmos is divine, and this universe is not.<sup>49</sup> We can still make sense of the claim that Martin is a "nonbeliever" by noting mistakes in the understanding he has of his universe.

This significantly adds to the advantages of divine embodiment. If externalism is adopted, it can be claimed that "nonbelievers" have many true beliefs about God in having true beliefs about the external world. They can have true beliefs about his M- and P-predicates in embodied theisms. When God is embodied in the cosmos, nonbelievers have a relationship with God through their interactions with the external world and can get to know this God.

#### EMBODIED THEISMS AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

We have now established that all subjects can have a relationship with a God embodied in the cosmos and that nonbelievers can get to know him if externalism is accepted. In this section, I will outline the advantages that embodied panentheism has when challenging the hiddenness argument. To do this, I will target premise 2 of Schellenberg's argument, which, to reiterate, claims:

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*.

To rebut this premise, I will explore the extent to which the kind of relationship nonbelievers can have with God in embodied panentheism resembles a personal relationship. I will ultimately conclude that this cannot be a personal relationship if one accepts Schellenberg's definition due to his insistence that one must recognize that one is in the relationship. However, I will argue that other important factors in Schellenberg's definition, as well as some key reasons for the importance he places on such relationships, can be accounted for, showing that such recognition is not logically required in embodied panentheism.

To reiterate, Schellenberg claims that a personal relationship is a positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship. A quote of his provides an indication of why he thinks this: "But the one who loves desires to come close to the object of love. The one who loves desires to share herself in personal relationship, and is of this disposition so long as love persists" (Schellenberg 2016, 18).

As previously mentioned, Schellenberg's understanding of perfect love entails that God would be open to a personal relationship with persons instead of acting benevolently from a distance. Schellenberg seems to imply

that one needs to have awareness of the object of one's love in order to desire to share oneself in a personal relationship with this object. Here, we get Schellenberg's first criterion, that the relationship must be conscious. To be in a conscious relationship, one must recognize that one is in the relationship.<sup>50</sup> This rules out the idea that nonbelievers can be in a personal relationship with God in this model as they evidently would not recognize that they are in this relationship when interacting with the external world.

His second criterion is that the relationship must be reciprocal. In embodied panentheism, there is constant interaction between God and subjects, even when subjects are unaware that they are interacting with God. Both subjects and God are affected by subjects' interactions with the external world. This is enough to deem the relationship reciprocal. Embodied classical theism does not share this advantage. It is Swinburne's first, second, and fifth conditions that allow this God to be emotionally and nonrationally impacted by the way that other subjects interact with his body.<sup>51</sup> Embodied classical theism, in claiming that God is not embodied in the way these conditions suggest, is unable to claim that other subjects emotionally impact God through their interactions with his body, and thus cannot uphold Schellenberg's reciprocal criterion in the case of nonbelievers' interactions with the external world.

The third criterion is that the relationship must be positively meaningful. A relationship with God can be positively meaningful even when one is unaware that one is interacting with God. This point has precedent in the literature on divine hiddenness. Paul K. Moser argues that it is entirely conceivable that one can hear God's voice in one's conscience without realizing that it is God's voice. William J. Wainwright makes a similar argument, suggesting that a nonbeliever, in responding to the good she sees, might be responding to God without being aware that it is God.<sup>52</sup>

Say that one adheres to what one's conscience tells one to do and performs some good deeds.<sup>53</sup> This does not require recognition of God's or even another person's presence and is positively meaningful. There also seems to be no reason why a nonbeliever cannot have positively meaningful interactions with God through the external world in embodied theisms. Say that a nonbeliever is enjoying a beautiful sunset or is in awe of the view he witnesses from the top of a mountain. Or, to take this a step further, the beauty of the ocean could prompt a nonbeliever to live an environmentally sustainable life. This is also positively meaningful. These examples show that the external world itself can make the relationship positively meaningful, meaning that this criterion is fulfilled by both forms of embodied theism.

Embodied panentheism can fulfil two criterions, and embodied classical theism only one. Embodied classical theism's inability to account for the reciprocal nature of such relationships between God and nonbelievers makes it less suitable as a solution to the hiddenness argument. However,

there is still one criterion that embodied pantheism has trouble with: that the relationship must be conscious.

To rectify this, we must investigate whether the motivations behind Schellenberg's insistence on such relationships can be accounted for in the relationships nonbelievers have with God in embodied pantheism. In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, Schellenberg justifies his argument by noting that one cannot express particular attitudes such as love, obedience, gratitude, and so on, toward God without belief in his existence, as this would be logically impossible.<sup>54</sup>

Despite its *prima facie* plausibility, in this model of pantheism this point does not hold, so long as externalism is true. Imagine that a nonbeliever comes to feel gratitude for what they are provided by the universe, whether that be food, experiences, or anything else it may grant. They might even love the universe because of this. As shown in the previous section, the content of their beliefs or the referent of their expressions here would be God, suggesting that "nonbelievers" can cultivate or verbally express attitudes of gratitude, love and the like toward God without "belief" in his existence. Perhaps certain attitudes, like obedience, would be more difficult to account for. But there are examples of people who, admittedly, are particularly superstitious, and make certain life decisions based on events that occur in the external world, suggesting that the cultivation or expression of such an attitude is possible without "belief" in God.

Other key motivations can also be accounted for. One of the reasons why Schellenberg sees a desire for personal relationships as a nonnegotiable entailment of divine love is due to the deep sharing that they allow, such that one desires to share oneself in a personal relationship.<sup>55</sup> What exactly Schellenberg means by deep sharing is unclear, but there is a sense in which there is a form of deep sharing between nonbelievers and God through their interactions with the external world in embodied pantheism. Both are emotionally impacting one another through these interactions. This sharing is made particularly clear by the special interactions that people have with particular places. There are certain places that people are particularly fond of (a family home, for example), such that they see them as special and desire to return there in the future. This somewhat resembles the desire people have for a relationship with another person. The interactions that people have with parts of the external world can be extremely positive. They might not realize that the emotional impact is mutual or shared, but this is an entailment of embodied pantheism.

There are other reasons for Schellenberg's insistence on personal relationships that require attention as well. He says that explicit recognition that one is in such a relationship with God will improve one morally and will allow God to facilitate self-giving love within oneself. These benefits are labeled ethical benefits and are related to the improvement of one's

moral character. A different set of benefits, experiential benefits, enhance the quality of one's inner life through emotions like joy. Both one's well-being and one's moral character would be improved in a personal relationship with God.<sup>56</sup>

Embodied panentheism makes experiential and ethical benefits available to nonbelievers. It allows God to influence believers and nonbelievers alike during their interactions with the external world, giving God the ability to bestow ethical and experiential benefits through such interactions. This can be shown through my previous example in which the beauty of the ocean led some subjects to be more considerate of the environment, as it makes it clear that the enhancement of a subject's moral character and well-being through their interactions with the external world does not require their recognition that the external world is God. Self-giving love itself can be fostered through this, as an environmentally friendly life often comes at great personal cost and can be motivated by concerns like later generations being unable to enjoy the beauty of the natural world. Furthermore, experiences of awe and wonder at the majesty of the natural world can occur without recognition of this God as well. In embodied panentheism, God can bestow ethical and experiential benefits to nonbelievers through their interactions with his body.

Not all subjects will experience such benefits, but that is due to the role their own beliefs play in their interpretation of the external world. Schellenberg might respond that if the relationship were conscious, God would be more able to surpass the influence a subject's own beliefs have in these interactions due to the direct impact he would have on the subject's behavior, making experiential and ethical benefits much easier to bestow in personal relationships. However, it is still possible for them to be bestowed through the interactions that subjects have with God's body, showing that a personal relationship is not necessary for God to be able to grant them to subjects.

The relationship that nonbelievers have with God in embodied panentheism is not a personal relationship as, despite being reciprocal and positively meaningful, it is not conscious. However, as has been shown, the key benefits that Schellenberg claims are granted in conscious relationships can be experienced by subjects that are not aware of their participation in such a relationship. Therefore, we can have a model of a loving, personal God whose perfect love does not entail that he must have a personal relationship with all subjects.

## OBJECTIONS

Now that the main argument of this article has been outlined, I can address some potential objections to embodied panentheism as a concept and to it as a solution to the hiddenness argument. Some apply to the positions

that I lean on in this article, and others to the response I develop to the hiddenness argument using them.

I will start by noting the potential critique of my leaning on externalism. If one were to see this as an untenable position, one obviously would not have sympathy for the argument made here. I acknowledge that this is the case, and seeing as a defense of externalism is far beyond the remit of this article, I can do nothing more than accept this here.<sup>57</sup>

Another issue stems from the particular model of pantheism used. Creation *ex nihilo*, the idea of a contingent universe that God created out of nothing, is popular in the Christian tradition. One would rightly note that this does not have to be a Christian model, but a further issue is that modern scientific theories, such as the big bang theory, suggest that the universe is indeed finite and had a beginning. If this is the case, and God is embodied in the cosmos, he does not exist necessarily.<sup>58</sup>

A feasible way out of this problem is to argue that God is not necessarily embodied, but must necessarily create his body as a part of him.<sup>59</sup> It might be claimed that this makes the relationship between God and his body less intimate, but I see no reason why that has to be the case. After all, in the Trinity the Father is said to beget the Son, and then the Spirit is said to proceed from the Father.<sup>60</sup> One cannot find a more intimate relationship than the one that these three have, and if this can be the case whilst the Father generates the Son and the Spirit, then there is no reason why the part of the pantheistic God that resides outside the cosmos cannot have a sufficiently intimate relationship with his body even though he generates it.<sup>61</sup>

A question more pertinent to the argument made in this article is why God does not just make his relationships with all subjects conscious anyway despite their ability to have a reciprocal, positively meaningful relationship with him. It has already been conceded in the previous section that the benefits of such a relationship would be more easily transmittable if the subjects were in a conscious relationship with God. This article has shown that a conscious relationship is not logically necessary for such benefits to be bestowed, meaning that Schellenberg cannot claim that the conscious element of personal relationships is required for these benefits to be distributed. Thus, his claim that an all-loving God would desire a personal relationship with all subjects is less plausible.

God, in not having a conscious relationship with all subjects, is not depriving nonbelievers of these benefits, but is just unable to transmit them as consistently or effectively when contrasted with believers in personal relationships. However, the previous objection has not been fully addressed. Because such benefits can be more easily distributed in personal relationships, we still need an indication of why God would not establish personal relationships with all subjects.

One potential answer could be drawn from the earlier discussion of God's establishing of regularity in the universe through upholding the laws of nature. God expresses himself through the universe, his body. It could be argued that if God were to directly communicate with subjects often in the way characteristic of special revelation, he would be undermining the natural order that he has established as the means through which he expresses himself. Thus, it would make sense for God to be sparing in his use of them. However, this merely pushes the question back further, as one can ask why God has chosen laws of nature that do not make the fact that he exists immediately transparent to all subjects.<sup>62</sup>

This makes clear the areas in which this model contributes positively to the divine hiddenness debate and those which it does not directly address. It logically entails that one can experience the benefits of a personal relationship whilst a nonbeliever, and this is significant. But some key intuitions behind the hiddenness argument remain insufficiently addressed. Because such benefits can be more easily bestowed in personal relationships, an answer must still be given as to why God would not establish such a relationship with all subjects.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In embodied panentheism, the issue with Rea's account has been amended and the hiddenness argument has been undermined. God is not acting benevolently from a distance, but has a relationship with all subjects, regardless of whether they are aware of this. Moreover, if externalism is true, they can get to know God by acquiring true beliefs about the external world. Unlike in embodied classical theism, this relationship also encompasses two of the criteria—that they are reciprocal and positively meaningful—Schellenberg claims are required for personal relationships. Because the key advantages of personal relationships are not sacrificed, Schellenberg's insistence that such relationships must be conscious carries less weight.

It has been conceded that such benefits are more easily bestowed to those subjects in a personal relationship with God, and thus the question of why God would not establish such a relationship with all subjects remains. Thus, there is still work to do in this debate. However, this does not detract from the significance of what has been achieved in this article. Schellenberg's claim that an all-loving God would establish a personal relationship between himself and all subjects has been significantly weakened, because nonbelievers can still experience the benefits of such a relationship without the relationship being conscious.

## NOTES

1. Concerns about the hiddenness of God did not originate with Schellenberg and he is not the only contemporary scholar who has produced an argument from divine hiddenness.

However, his argument is certainly the most influential in the contemporary literature and thus I shall focus on it in this article.

2. See Clayton (1998).
3. There are other forms of externalism in epistemology and philosophy of mind, but when using the term in this article, I am referring specifically to these variants.
4. For an overview of the debate on divine hiddenness, see Schellenberg (2017a, 2017b).
5. This formulation of the argument is from Schellenberg (2016).
6. See Schellenberg (2016, footnote 8).
7. Schellenberg provides a detailed defense of each premise in Schellenberg (2006, 2016). For the purposes of this article, I shall reserve detailed explanation for the premises that my argument challenges.
8. For some alternative responses to the hiddenness argument, see Evans (2010) and Blanchard (2016). Evans, in chapter 6 of his *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, identifies the possible disanalogies between divine and human love that undermine Schellenberg's argument. Blanchard explains divine hiddenness using community relationships, arguing that nonresistant individuals can fail to have a relationship with God because of their community's relationship with him.
9. See Rea (2018, 111–12).
10. See Rea (2018, 130). When using the term "subject" I am referring specifically to those entities, like human persons, to whom the hiddenness argument applies.
11. See Rea (2018, 133–34).
12. See Rea (2018, 135).
13. See Rea (2018, 98).
14. See Rea (2018, 90–91).
15. Rea uses the term "personal relationship," but his definition differs from Schellenberg's. To avoid confusion with Schellenberg's understanding of the term, I will refrain from using it when referring to Rea's work.
16. See Rea (2018, 173–74).
17. See Rea (2018, 169–70).
18. Sarah Lane Ritchie has produced an extremely interesting defense of Rea's view, suggesting that the notion of the neuroplasticity of the brain (the brain's ability to alter its structure and function in response to experience) entails that belief in God can be developed through certain practices that are focused or repetitive (Ritchie 2021). However, as Ritchie is investigating how individuals can pursue belief in or knowledge of God (i.e., seeking nonresistant nonbelievers), her argument does not assist Rea here.
19. Mikael Stenmark has suggested that this scale should be extended to include deism, further along from classical theism on the transcendence side. In deism, God does not intervene in the world after its creation, and so one can see that there is less immanence here than in classical theism. See Stenmark (2019).
20. See Meister (2017, 1).
21. See Levine (1994, 121).
22. This description of pantheism was drawn from Nagasawa (2020) and Mullins (2016, 333).
23. In the words of Catherine Keller, "Transcendence and immanence will no longer be pitted against each other" in panentheism (Keller 2014, 66). An advantage panentheism has over classical theism is the increase in God's greatness due to his encompassing all of reality (Nagasawa 2016). However, panentheism comes with its own set of problems, particularly when it comes to the existence of evil. For more on this issue and a response, see Göcke (2019).
24. See Cockayne (2020, 2).
25. See Meister (2017, 8). See Mullins (2016) and Thomas (2008) for more on this issue.
26. See Lataster (2014, 392).
27. This is derived from Philip Clayton's outline of Rāmānuja's explanation of the relationship between Brahman and the world (Clayton 2010, 189). For a more comprehensive outline of Rāmānuja's thought, see Barua (2010). Other schools and thinkers in Eastern thought also provide interesting understandings of the divine that are extremely relevant to this debate. For more on this, see Stansell and Phillips (2010) and Bilimoria and Stansell (2010). I note that the success of the mind-body analogy largely depends on the anthropology one uses when trying to make sense of it (Peterson 2001). Nevertheless, even this general analogy is still useful when

one is trying to explain God's immanence and transcendence in panentheism. For an alternative model of divine embodiment, see the pioneering work of Grace Jantzen (1984).

28. One might disagree with Swinburne's criteria, but it is useful for highlighting the differences between God's embodiment in panentheism and classical theism. I will thus assume it for the purposes of this article.

29. In using the phrase "locus of perception in the world," I am following Mullins (2016, 336).

30. See Swinburne (1993, 104–5).

31. See Mullins (2016, 336).

32. See Mawson (2006).

33. Depending on how many of these criteria one thinks must be fulfilled for embodiment, one might reject the idea that one of these forms of theism is embodied. The classical theist version seems particularly susceptible to this critique. I acknowledge this but will assume that both are embodied when making my arguments, with a much stronger notion of embodiment pertaining to the panentheist God.

34. See Nikkel (2016, 300).

35. This draws on Barua (2010, 6).

36. Mullins (2016) does not think that differing definitions of embodiment provide a reasonable solution to the demarcation issue. I disagree. The two forms of embodied theism outlined here both have significant differences and God in the panentheist variant is far more immanent in the world than the God of the classical theist version.

37. One might wonder why I have spent so much time outlining the particular form of panentheism used. The reason is that not all models have these advantages. For example, mereological panentheism, in which God and the world are two overlapping entities that are the two parts of a mereological whole, is unsuitable. Although forming a whole together, God and the world are ultimately different entities, making it unclear that one could refer to the world as "God." This view is outlined and critiqued in Crisp (2019). Furthermore, as panentheism is deemed to be a vague term, it is important for one to clarify one's understanding of it.

38. This point is made in Nikkel (2016, 302).

39. This is not the first consideration of the relevance of epistemic concerns to divine hiddenness. For example, Jonathan Kvanvig has produced an argument against the idea that divine hiddenness can alter the epistemic status of theism (see Kvanvig 2002). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

40. See Swinburne (1993, 102).

41. To be clear, Swinburne does not see these predicates as sufficient for personhood, as they can be possessed by things like animals as well. For him, to be a person, things require members of a subclass of P-predicates including the ability to make moral judgements, to use language, to have second-order wants, and to theorize about things they are unable to observe (see Swinburne 1993, 102–3).

42. I am indebted to Joshua Cockayne for pointing me to the semantic externalism literature as something of assistance to my argument.

43. See Putnam (2013, 199–200). This example first appeared in Putnam (1973), and the ideas expressed in that article are developed in Putnam (1975). See Matsui (2021) for an explanation of the contribution of Putnam's debate with Wilfrid Sellars to his thought. This outline also benefitted from that found in Farkas (2006, 325–26).

44. See Farkas (2006, 326–27).

45. See Farkas (2006, 328).

46. This move is widely endorsed but has been challenged. See Wikforss (2008) for a critique. Addressing these concerns is beyond my purposes here.

47. See Farkas (2006, 328).

48. It might be objected that this requires a high degree of superstition that is not held to by many nonbelievers. However, such nonbelievers could still get to know God through his M-predicates. Furthermore, acknowledgement of these P-predicates does not require belief in God, and such acknowledgement is possible for both seeking and nonseeking nonresistant nonbelievers because they do not require one to be seeking a concept like "creator of the universe."

49. This is an adaptation of a similar example from Putnam (1973, 702–3).

50. See Schellenberg (2016, 24).

51. Fulfilling the reciprocal criterion is key to defending the idea that nonbelievers can have a relationship with a God embodied in the universe against some troubling counterexamples. For instance, one would not say that a surgeon is in a relationship with the unconscious person they are operating on. However, unlike the person in the operating theatre, the God of embodied pantheism is actively interacting with subjects, and this establishes the reciprocal relationship between God and the relevant subject. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point and providing this example.

52. See Moser (2004, 58; Wainwright 2002, 113). Aijaz and Weidler (2007) drew my attention to this. Schellenberg (2005a, 208) responds, but his use of the term “conscious” rather than “explicit” in more recent forms of the argument rebuts their contentions more conclusively. See Schellenberg (2005b) for a reply to a different set of objections.

53. Aijaz and Weidler (2007) use a similar example.

54. See Schellenberg (2006, 30).

55. See Schellenberg (2016, 18).

56. See Schellenberg (2006, 18–21).

57. The externalism debate is still ongoing. Yli-Vakkuri (2018) has attempted to provide a deductive proof for externalism, but Sawyer (2018) has responded to this.

58. See Dumsday (2019, 313).

59. Other views that see God as essentially creative are outlined in Crisp (2019).

60. See Swinburne (2018).

61. Modal pantheism, which claims that all possible worlds exist in the same way that the actual world does, and that God is the totality of these worlds, could work as well, as this universe could have a beginning whilst God is embodied in other, earlier universes. However, one would end up with a God that is not sufficiently personal and that has every possible instance of evil as a part of him, and thus this is an inadequate solution. See Nagasawa (2016) for an outline and assessment of this view.

62. A potential response to this is C. Stephen Evans’s concept of natural signs (Evans 2010). However, this area is not one that the pantheist element of this model furthers, and thus it will not be addressed here.

63. The question I have been attempting to answer is whether nonresistant nonbelievers are able to have a relationship with God that preserves the benefits of personal relationships without being conscious. Admittedly, there is another prong to Schellenberg’s argument that I have not addressed. Ultimism, the idea that God is metaphysically ultimate (his existence is the most fundamental fact about the nature of things), axiologically ultimate (he embodies the greatest possible value and is the greatest possible reality), and soteriologically ultimate (the ultimate good can be obtained in relation to him). See (Schellenberg 2016; Howard-Snyder and Green 2016). It has been suggested that a personal relationship with God *as God* is the greatest good that can be obtained (Howard-Snyder and Green 2016), and this can be done just from his soteriologically ultimate status. This is a different concern to the one that has occupied my focus, and is not something that pantheism makes obvious progress in addressing. A response to this issue would need to attack Schellenberg’s ultimism or the assumptions he draws from it. For a critical examination of ultimism, see Leech (2020). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

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