Religious Studies (2026), **62**, 547–567
doi:10.1017/S0034412525101261

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Non-resistant non-belief is pervasive

Andrew Blanton

Department of Philosophy, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
Email: axb1660@student.bham.ac.uk

(Received 24 June 2025; revised 1 October 2025; accepted 3 October 2025; first published online 28 October 2025)

Abstract

J.L. Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness partly rests on the claim that non-resistant non-belief exists. In this paper, I take up the question of whether such non-belief is pervasive and argue that it is, in fact, relatively common. To support this claim, I present a novel argument grounded in a distinction between acquisition responsibility and maintenance responsibility. I argue that, for a non-believer to count as resistant in Schellenberg's sense, they must be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in God. I further contend that many non-believers lack such responsibility and therefore qualify as non-resistant. This argument has the added benefit of showing that many prominent objections to the existence of non-resistant non-belief are irrelevant or incomplete. Finally, I highlight the broader significance of this conclusion, both for Schellenberg's argument and in light of recent shifts in the literature towards more evidential approaches.

Keywords: divine hiddenness; J.L. Schellenberg; doxastic responsibility; atheism; religious epistemology

Introduction

J.L. Schellenberg's (1993, 2007, 2015) argument from divine hiddenness rests, in part, on the claim that there exist non-resistant non-believers. In his terminology, these are individuals who do not believe in the God of theism, that is, in the existence of a perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, good, and loving being. Moreover, these individuals are non-resistant in their non-belief, meaning their lack of belief in God does not result from affective or behavioural dispositions characteristic of resistance to God. Put differently, their non-belief arises from circumstances independent of volitional opposition to God, his will, or his commands. Following Schellenberg, let us refer to this general phenomenon as *non-resistant non-belief*.

Many critics of Schellenberg's argument express doubt about the existence of non-resistant non-belief (Wainwright 2001; Lehe 2004; van Inwagen 2006, 147–149; Moser 2008; Azadegan 2013; Taber and McNabb 2015; Rea 2018; Macdonald 2021). Indeed, even those who grant its existence often argue that it is a rare phenomenon (Henry 2001, 81, 2008, 286; O'Connell 2013, 286; Jackson 2016, 86; Napier 2022, 6).

By contrast, Schellenberg claims that non-resistant non-belief is quite common. For example, in *The Hiddenness Argument* he writes:

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> ...anyone with some acquaintance with evolutionary history and a willingness to look the truth in the eye will be able to see that, in the actual world, *many* people in our history have failed to believe in God without resistance of God in any way coming into the explanation of their nonbelief (2015, 79; emphasis added).

Nevertheless, Schellenberg's primary aim has always been to establish the mere *existence* of non-resistant non-belief, not its *pervasiveness*. After all, his argument, which holds that non-resistant non-belief is incompatible with theism, requires only that a single non-resistant non-believer exist for theism to be disconfirmed. That said, the question of how widespread such cases are remains important. For one thing, if non-resistant non-belief is relatively common, this would strengthen the empirical premise of Schellenberg's argument, shifting the burden of debate more squarely onto its conceptual premise. Moreover, its pervasiveness has significant implications for recent efforts to frame the problem of divine hiddenness in more evidential terms. As we will see, an affirmative answer to whether non-resistant non-belief is pervasive can lend support to premises in arguments that aim to provide evidential rather than conclusive support for atheism, such as those concerned with gratuitous non-resistant non-belief or with its sheer prevalence. Finally, the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief carries practical and ethical ramifications, particularly for how practitioners of faith regard those outside specific religious traditions (Aijaz 2013, 409–410).

In this paper, I take up the question of the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief, arguing that it is, in fact, relatively common. To support this claim, I present a novel argument grounded in a distinction between acquisition responsibility and maintenance responsibility. I argue that for a non-believer to count as resistant in Schellenberg's sense, they must be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in God. I further contend that many non-believers lack such responsibility and therefore qualify as non-resistant. My argument has the added benefit of showing that many prominent objections to the existence of non-resistant non-belief are irrelevant or incomplete. In addition, I highlight its broader significance, both for Schellenberg's argument and in light of recent shifts in the literature towards more evidential approaches.

In the next section, I clarify the concepts of resistant and non-resistant non-belief by demarcating them from blameworthy and blameless non-belief. I also show that Schellenberg's notion of resistance is inextricably tied to a specific form of causal and normative responsibility. To make these connections clear, I introduce a distinction between acquisition and maintenance responsibility. I argue that, on Schellenberg's view, all resistant non-believers must be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief. In the subsequent section, I argue that many non-believers lack such responsibility and thus meet Schellenberg's criteria for non-resistance. The following section outlines the advantages of my approach and shows that it effectively neutralises several prominent objections to the existence of non-resistant non-belief. A further section addresses one additional objection, drawn from the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), which claims that 'everyone starts off with belief in God.' I argue that this does not undermine my position. In the penultimate section, I show how my core thesis might plausibly extend beyond Schellenberg's framework. Finally, the concluding section explores the implications of the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief for both Schellenberg's argument and the broader literature.

Resistance and non-resistance

Schellenberg's concepts of resistant and non-resistant non-belief are frequently misunderstood in the literature.[1] Part of this confusion stems from Schellenberg's original

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

terminology for them. However, what matters most is distinguishing resistant and non-resistant non-belief from two closely related concepts to which they are often mistakenly equated: blameworthy and blameless non-belief. In this section, I clarify that distinction by examining how Schellenberg first arrived at the problematic phenomenon of non-resistant non-belief. This was through the line of reasoning that constitutes the conceptual premise of his hiddenness argument, which holds that *if God exists, non-resistant non-belief does not occur*. This examination will also identify some necessary conditions for being a resistant non-believer. It will, in turn, set the stage for my argument in the next section, where I contend that these conditions are not satisfied in many cases of non-belief.

However, let me be clear about my aim in this section. It is not to defend Schellenberg's reasoning about the implications of divine love; rather, it is simply to explain it. For it is Schellenberg's reasoning about these implications that gives rise to, and shapes the content of, his empirical premise – namely, that *non-resistant non-belief occurs*. In other words, it is the content of Schellenberg's conceptual premise that determines the phenomenon described in his empirical premise. Accordingly, we must begin by examining Schellenberg's conceptual premise if we are to engage with his empirical premise and assess whether the phenomenon it defines is pervasive. Whether Schellenberg's reasoning in support of the conceptual premise is ultimately convincing, or whether there are other closely related phenomena to non-resistant non-belief that we should be concerned with instead, is a separate matter, one that I discuss in a later section.

Regardless, it cannot be stressed enough that the concepts of resistant and non-resistant non-belief arise from Schellenberg's armchair reflection. It is not as though Schellenberg investigates the world, discovers the problematic phenomenon of non-resistant non-belief, and then constructs his argument against the existence of God on the basis of that phenomenon.[2] Rather, the opposite is true. Schellenberg first thinks carefully about what we would expect given the existence of a perfectly loving God. He then lets the problematic phenomenon of non-resistant non-belief unfold from there.

To summarise his view, Schellenberg (2015, 53–73) argues that we have reason to believe a perfectly loving God would ensure that no individual capable of a relationship with God ever finds themselves in a state of non-belief regarding the proposition that God exists. This claim applies only to *capable* individuals, meaning those with the cognitive capacity to form beliefs about God and the affective equipment required to give and receive love in its ordinary forms. Infants, individuals with severe cognitive impairments, and others who lack such capacities fall outside the scope of this requirement. For all others, however, Schellenberg holds that they would always have sufficient evidence to believe in God's existence and therefore would believe.[3] Yet Schellenberg (2015, 54–56) notes one, and only one, exception to this rule: if God creates finite persons with libertarian free will, he may respect their decision to resist awareness of this evidence and may therefore allow them, through their own effort, to blind themselves to the reality of God and the evidence for his existence.

This exception is the sole reason the concepts of resistant and non-resistant non-belief arise in Schellenberg's discussion. If God were not expected to allow free finite persons to place themselves in a position where they could no longer perceive God or participate in a relationship with him, then the problematic phenomenon emerging from Schellenberg's argument would simply be *non-belief* in God, not non-resistant non-belief. This point is significant because, on Schellenberg's view, there is a direct causal connection between the relevant form of resistance to God and non-belief in God. I use the phrase 'relevant form of resistance' not because Schellenberg identifies other forms of resistance (as he uses the term in his argument), but because what he calls resistance could easily be confused with other types of 'resistance' (i.e., opposition) to God that are not causally linked to non-belief. For example, even theists may feel or express opposition to God, his putative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

will, commands, or perceived actions, in various ways. However, such individuals can, and often do, remain believers despite being 'resistant' (i.e., opposed) to God in these respects. What Schellenberg defines as resistance may therefore be better characterised as a *sui generis* form of opposition to God, one that is specifically linked to non-belief. (Hereafter, I will assume this usage and omit further reference to the phrase 'relevant form of resistance'.)

Schellenberg explains the causal connection between resistance and non-belief through use of metaphor as follows:

> If we truly start 'from above', thinking first about love and then about openness and then about what it would take for God to allow someone *not* to be in a position to participate in a personal relationship with the divine, we will see that a sort of free resistance sufficient to make it the case that we ourselves have shut the door to any relationship with God that might be on offer would be required. To trade one metaphor for another, if God is open to personal relationship then the divine light will remain on unless we close our eyes (2015, 55).

According to Schellenberg, this means that a person, S, can be called 'resistant' only if S is *causally responsible* for her own non-belief in God. In other words, unless S's resistance is freely produced (in whatever sense is required for responsibility) and is the cause of S's non-belief, S will continue to believe that God exists. For God's openness to relationship will ensure that any capable person is always in possession of sufficient evidence to believe, and will believe, unless that person freely brings it about that things are otherwise.

Thus, perhaps one point Schellenberg has insufficiently emphasised in the literature is that resistance to God presupposes a prior state of belief. More specifically, a resister must, by definition, begin in a state of belief in God and only subsequently lapse into non-belief (Schellenberg 1993, 38, 48–49, 2015, 54–55).[4] We could not, for instance, label as 'resistant' an individual who, while being capable of relationship with God, begins in a state of non-belief, later recognises that sufficient evidence for God's existence is available, and yet dogmatically dismisses that evidence. Such a scenario would not constitute resistance as Schellenberg defines it.

That resisters freely bring about a condition in which they no longer believe, despite once possessing sufficient evidence, is also why Schellenberg holds that they must be *normatively responsible* for their non-belief. More specifically, resisters must be responsible in a way that makes them appropriately subject to blame for their non-belief. (In what follows, when I say that an individual is 'normatively responsible' for a doxastic state, I mean that they are normatively responsible in a negative sense, that is, appropriately subject to blame for acquiring or maintaining the state in question. I will usually omit this qualification for the sake of ease and readability, and the reader should assume this understanding except where I state otherwise.)

Resistant non-believers would not merely be in a state of epistemic error arising naturally from their epistemic context or from honest reflection. They would not simply be dutifully following their evidence where it leads. Rather, they would have, at some point, responded inappropriately to that evidence. To borrow Schellenberg's metaphor, resisters would have once been 'in the light' but chosen to 'close their eyes'. Their non-belief would thus be a self-caused state of epistemic error, freely chosen and distancing them from a once-available awareness of God. In this way, it would constitute a state for which they are appropriately subject to negative normative evaluation. As Schellenberg puts it in *The Hiddenness Argument*:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> ...such resistance, which would have to come in the face of evidence of a good and loving Maker to whom one owed everything, would clearly be *blameworthy* (2015, 54–55; emphasis added).

And earlier, in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*:

> Such resistance of God would, of course, be *culpable*, for it would involve shutting out one whom we had seen to be our creator.... [I]n exercising our freedom in this way, we would be bringing it about...that what was once seen was no longer (1993, 27–28; emphasis added).

Therefore, all resistant non-believers must be both causally and normatively responsible for their non-belief in God. However, resisters must be responsible in the relevant way. While all resisters will be causally responsible for their non-belief, not all who are causally responsible for their non-belief will count as resistant. Likewise, while all resisters will be normatively responsible for their non-belief, not all who are normatively responsible for their non-belief will be resistant. This is because there are different ways in which a person might be causally and normatively responsible for non-belief. As we will see, to count as resistant, a person must be causally and normatively responsible for the *acquisition* of their non-belief: more specifically, for acquiring it from a prior state of belief.

To help clarify this, let us distinguish two types of responsibility: acquisition responsibility and maintenance responsibility. A person is *acquisition-responsible* for a doxastic state, *d*, insofar as their past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions led to their acquiring or developing *d*, and they are normatively responsible for doing so. That is, they are appropriately subject to normative evaluation (positive or negative) for acquiring *d*. Put simply, to be acquisition-responsible for *d* is to be responsible for bringing it about that one has *d*. By contrast, a person is *maintenance-responsible* for a doxastic state, *d*, insofar as they sustain or preserve *d* in a way that is likewise subject to normative evaluation, regardless of whether they were responsible for acquiring it. In plain terms, to be maintenance-responsible for *d* is to be responsible for remaining in that doxastic state, even if one was not responsible for acquiring it.

Building on these definitions, we can also say that a person, S, is acquisition-responsible in a negative sense for their non-belief in God just in case S's past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions resulted in their acquiring or developing that non-belief, and S is normatively responsible in a way that makes them appropriately subject to blame for doing so. Likewise, S is maintenance-responsible in a negative sense for their non-belief in God just in case they sustain or preserve that non-belief and are normatively responsible in a way that makes them appropriately subject to blame for doing so. (Hereafter, unless otherwise specified, I will use 'S is acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in God' or 'S is maintenance-responsible for their non-belief in God' to refer to this negative sense of responsibility.)

On Schellenberg's view, whether a person is maintenance-responsible for their non-belief in God is, by itself, insufficient and potentially misleading for determining whether they are resistant. This is because a resister must also be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in God, and acquisition-responsible in the relevant way.[5] If an individual is not acquisition-responsible, and more specifically, if they are not responsible for bringing about their non-belief from a prior state of belief, then they cannot be resistant to God, at least not in Schellenberg's sense, even if they are maintenance-responsible. This is because, on Schellenberg's view, God ensures that all individuals capable of relationship with God begin in a state of belief and remain in that belief unless they resist. A person can come to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lack belief only by moving from belief to non-belief through their own blameworthy past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions.

Given the preceding discussion, we can summarise some of the necessary conditions for resistance. Resisters must:

(A) Be causally responsible for the acquisition of their non-belief in God.
(B) Be normatively responsible for the acquisition of their non-belief in God.
(C) Have acquired non-belief from a prior state of belief in God, without any earlier period of non-belief during which they were already capable of relationship with God.

We must therefore not conflate *resistant non-belief* with *blameworthy non-belief*, or *non-resistant non-belief* with *blameless non-belief*. For non-resistant non-believers can be blameworthy for their non-belief in God in at least the following ways. First, they can be normatively responsible in the maintenance sense, so long as at least one of two conditions holds: either (i) they are not normatively responsible in the acquisition sense, or (ii) if they are normatively responsible in the acquisition sense, their non-belief was not acquired from a prior state of belief in God.[6] Second, they can be normatively responsible in the acquisition sense, so long as their non-belief was acquired, not from belief, but from a prior state of having no beliefs about God.[7]

But all this still leaves two important questions unanswered: (i) what exactly constitutes resistance, and (ii) how do resisters transition from a state of belief in God, grounded in sufficient evidence, to one of non-belief? Schellenberg argues that resistance involves both affective and behavioural dispositions (Schellenberg 2015, 55). These include negative attitudes towards God, God's purposes, or plans, as well as actions or omissions that express those attitudes. Schellenberg's basic idea is that, over time, these dispositions and behaviours characteristic of free resistance to God cause the agent to move from belief to non-belief in God.

This notion of a resister causing their non-belief assumes that resisters (at least in principle) have some degree of control over their doxastic states. However, Schellenberg does not take this to be a matter of direct voluntary control. Instead, he views it as a form of indirect control, meaning control exercised through the factors that influence belief formation (Schellenberg 2015, 56–61). Indeed, it is precisely because (i) a person's beliefs are not directly under voluntary control, and (ii) every capable person will believe in God and have sufficient evidence for God's existence unless they bring it about that things are otherwise, that Schellenberg (2015, 55–56) argues the mechanism by which resisters cause their non-belief is *self-deception*. A person must take steps to undermine the belief and evidence they already possess, perhaps by selectively focusing on evidence against God's existence, or by surrounding themselves with others who carelessly fail to believe in God, or something of the sort.

The key takeaway of this section is that Schellenberg's narrower notion of resistant or non-resistant non-belief should not be confused with a broader notion of blameworthy or blameless non-belief. A person might be blameworthy for their non-belief in God even without ever having had sufficient evidence to believe. This could occur, for instance, if they failed to investigate the available evidence for theism despite knowing they should and being able to do so. In such a case, the blameworthy non-believer may be maintenance-responsible but not acquisition-responsible – or at least not acquisition-responsible in the relevant way. That is, they may be responsible for continuing in their non-belief, but not for acquiring it, or not for acquiring it from the relevant prior doxastic state. By contrast, a resistant non-believer must be acquisition-responsible in the relevant sense for their non-belief. If they are not both causally and normatively responsible for bringing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about their non-belief from a prior state of belief, then, regardless of whether they are maintenance-responsible, they cannot be considered resistant. They are non-resistant.

While Schellenberg initially employed the terminology of 'blameless' and 'blameworthy' non-belief in *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Schellenberg 1993), he later acknowledged this as a mistake (Schellenberg 2015, 55). The phenomenon he aimed to isolate was not blameless non-belief in God but non-resistant non-belief.[8] With these conditions and distinctions in place, let us now turn to their implications for my main thesis.

The pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief

We saw in the previous section that, according to Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, if God exists, all non-believers capable of relationship with God must be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in God. In this section, I build on that idea to formulate an argument for the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief. The argument can be stated as follows:

(1) Any non-believer (who possesses the relevant capacities for relationship with God) who is not acquisition-responsible in the relevant sense for their non-belief in God is a non-resistant non-believer.
(2) Many non-believers (who possess the relevant capacities for relationship with God) are not acquisition-responsible in the relevant sense for their non-belief in God.
(3) Therefore, many non-believers (who possess the relevant capacities for relationship with God) are non-resistant non-believers.

This argument is clearly valid. To reject it, one must show that at least one of its premises is false or, at minimum, doubtful. Premise (1) merely restates the point established in the previous section: according to Schellenberg's hiddenness argument, resisters must be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in God in the relevant sense (by 'relevant sense', I mean that they must have acquired their non-belief from a prior state of belief in God, without any earlier period of non-belief during which they were already capable of relationship with God). On this view, any non-believer who is not acquisition-responsible in that way is, by definition, non-resistant. So (1) is true by stipulation. Given that (3) is the conclusion and follows logically from premises (1) and (2), the argument's success ultimately hinges on the truth of premise (2).

Contrary to what many critics have suggested, establishing premise (2) is relatively straightforward. One way to support it is simply by showing that many individuals are not acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in the relevant sense, namely, that they *did not bring it about from a prior state of belief*. This would be to show that such individuals do not satisfy condition (C). Perhaps the clearest place to find such individuals is in prehistory, before the concept of God had even emerged. As Jason Marsh notes,

> For a variety of biological, cognitive, and environmental reasons, early humans, including many anatomically and behaviorally modern humans, originally lacked a concept of God and were religiously restricted to concepts of limited, and sometimes mean, supernatural agents. As a result, many early humans, including many early anatomically and behaviorally modern humans, failed to believe in God or in anything like God (2013, 359).

If the concept of God did not emerge until later in history, then clearly many individuals would have been non-resistant. There would have been no prior state of belief from which they transitioned into non-belief. After all, if someone lacks the concept of God, it is difficult

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to see how they could be said to *believe* that God exists, at least in any ordinary sense of the term. Many of these prehistoric individuals would therefore have lacked the relevant sort of acquisition responsibility for their non-belief. None of their past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions would have led them to move from belief in God to non-belief; they simply lacked the concept of God, and thus lacked belief, from the outset.

However, while appealing to prehistory may support premise (2), it has two disadvantages. First, some argue that claims about the absence of theistic belief in prehistory rest on shaky empirical foundations (Braddock 2022, 176). Second, prehistoric humans account for only a tiny fraction of the total human population, as the overwhelming majority (99.9 percent or more) have lived since the rise of the Abrahamic traditions (Haub 1995). So, if the aim is to show that non-resistant non-belief is pervasive, it may be useful to identify examples elsewhere.[9]

Thankfully, we need not restrict ourselves to empirical data about individuals from the distant past. To show that many individuals are not acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in the relevant sense, namely, in the sense of *having brought it about from a prior state of belief*, we can simply appeal to the many individuals from both recent history and the present day who either (i) have never possessed belief in God or (ii) came to believe in God only later in life.

Consider (i): all those who have never possessed belief in God. In such cases, non-belief takes root in childhood, with no prior state of theistic belief, and continues into adolescence and adulthood. There is, in these instances, no acquisition of non-belief in the relevant sense. That is, no transition from belief to non-belief. And without such a transition, there can be no causal or normative responsibility of the relevant kind. At most, there may have been a shift from a state of having no beliefs at all in infancy, due to cognitive immaturity, to one of non-belief in God in childhood, for which these individuals may be causally and normatively responsible.[10] But crucially, there is no movement from belief to non-belief. Accordingly, since there is no causal or normative responsibility of the relevant sort, such individuals will not be acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in the relevant sense. They will be non-resistant.

Likewise, consider (ii): all those who came to believe in God later in life, only after a preceding period of non-belief during which they were already capable of relationship with God. These individuals begin in a state of non-belief and later transition to belief. Again, since there is no transition from belief to non-belief, and, at most, only a transition from having no beliefs in infancy, to non-belief in childhood, and then to belief in childhood or adulthood, there will be no causal or normative responsibility of the relevant sort. Such individuals will therefore not be acquisition-responsible in the relevant sense. In fact, even if they later transition from belief to non-belief, they will still count as non-resistant, so long as the initial period of their lives, during which they were capable of relationship with God, was marked by non-belief.

We will turn to some empirical support for these views shortly. For now, I simply note that, if correct, they are sufficient on their own to support premise (2). However, we can go further. Another way to support premise (2) is to show that even individuals who begin their lives as believers, believing in God from the time they are capable of relationship with God, are nonetheless not acquisition-responsible for their subsequent non-belief. This would be to show that such individuals fail to meet either condition (A) or (B). One way to do this is by appealing to a plausible, though not entirely uncontroversial, assumption[11]: namely, that many very young children cannot be held responsible for their doxastic states, at least not in the same way or to the same extent as adults.[12] If we grant this assumption, then even if a young child initially believes in God, so long as their non-belief becomes established during childhood, before they could plausibly be held sufficiently (causally or normatively)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

responsible for their doxastic states, and this non-belief persists into adolescence or early adulthood, that is sufficient to show that they are non-resistant.

There are two ways responsibility for the acquisition of non-belief might be mitigated here. First, whether we can attribute this acquisition to the child in any causal sense relevant to the hiddenness argument is questionable. Consider an analogy: suppose a young child grows up speaking some French, perhaps because one parent is a native speaker. At an early age, however, the child is adopted into a new family and environment where no one speaks French or reinforces the language. Over time, simply through lack of exposure and practice, the child forgets the French they once knew. Did the child causally contribute to the loss of their ability to speak French? In any sense relevant to the hiddenness argument, the answer appears to be no. The child did not act to withhold French from themselves, nor did they choose to avoid it. The loss resulted from external circumstances largely beyond the child's control, in the absence of agency, intention, or self-directed action.

Similarly, the ability to meaningfully influence the formation of doxastic states (or at least many subsets of these states) early in life requires a degree of maturity, understanding, and cognitive sophistication that many very young children generally lack. It may follow that they do not have the capacity to be causal contributors to the acquisition of many of their early doxastic states, including non-belief in God, in the sense relevant to the hiddenness argument. So they would fail condition (A).

But let's assume that we can attribute at least a bare form of causal responsibility to children for their early doxastic states, albeit not in the sense required by the hiddenness argument. Even so, the second consideration is that many young children are not appropriate candidates for normative assessment with respect to those states. Many simply lack the normative competence required to be held accountable in this regard. Thus, even if there has been a shift from belief to non-belief, and the child is a causal contributor to it, they would still not be normatively responsible for the acquisition of their non-belief. They would fail condition (B). Hence, they would lack acquisition responsibility and would be non-resistant.

We therefore have good reason to conclude that many individuals are non-resistant non-believers. On the one hand, many people, both historically and today, do not begin their lives (understood as the period during which they are capable of forming beliefs about and relating personally to God) believing in the existence of a perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, good, and loving God. Even if this is not strictly an empirical fact, it strongly appears to be the case. For many, their initial doxastic attitude towards God's existence is one of non-belief or disbelief. On the other hand, many individuals do begin their capable lives as believers but subsequently slip into non-belief at a young age, before they can plausibly be held sufficiently responsible for their relevant doxastic states. Accordingly, many of these individuals are not acquisition-responsible for their non-belief in the relevant sense. There is nothing they did or failed to do, while they were believers or plausibly bearers of doxastic responsibility, that brought it about.

To underscore these points, it may be helpful to consider a paradigmatic case, one that highlights some of the powerful formative and causal influences that can lead to non-theistic belief in childhood and beyond. For this purpose, I focus on primarily non-theistic contexts. By this, I mean countries or regions where the majority of inhabitants adhere to non-theistic belief systems, such as animism, agnosticism, atheism, or any worldview at odds with (mono)theism. One illustrative example might be Vietnam.[13] According to recent demographic data, Vietnam is home to approximately 82 million people, with 81 percent reporting that they do not believe in God.[14] I do not mean to suggest that the points developed below are inapplicable to more theistic contexts. However, focusing on non-theistic contexts helps illustrate the argument with particular clarity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In primarily non-theistic contexts, where theistic belief is absent or significantly less prevalent, a range of developmental, psychological, cultural, and epistemic influences can make non-belief in God a likely, if not nearly inevitable, outcome. This is especially true for children raised in such environments. These influences often shape individuals' doxastic states well before they reach an age at which they can reasonably be held responsible for acquiring or evaluating their beliefs. In many cases, this non-belief persists into adolescence and adulthood. Let us briefly consider several of these formative factors.

First, *intergenerational or parental transmission* plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's religious or irreligious outlook (Myers 1996; Smith and Snell 2009). In primarily non-theistic populations, individuals are more likely to be raised by non-theistic parents, making it statistically probable that they will begin life without belief in God. These early beliefs are formed during crucial developmental stages and shaped through direct instruction, imitation, and social immersion. While children are not entirely passive in this process, their dependence on caregivers means their initial beliefs are largely inherited rather than reflectively chosen. This early formation tends to carry forward into adolescence and adulthood (Smith and Snell 2009).[15]

Second, individuals in such environments are likely to encounter *informational barriers* that make non-theistic beliefs more readily assimilated than theistic ones. These barriers may include limited educational opportunities, restricted access to diverse religious perspectives, or the filtering of religious content through dominant cultural or political ideologies.[16] As a result, individuals, especially children, are more frequently exposed to non-theistic views, while theistic perspectives may be underrepresented, misunderstood, or entirely absent from serious consideration. This lack of exposure further reinforces non-belief.

Third, in these non-theistic contexts, theistic communities and institutions, such as places of worship, religious schools, and public religious practices, are often few or marginal. Consequently, children raised in these contexts may have *minimal exposure to active theistic belief or practice*. Without regular encounters with theism as a lived tradition, belief in God may remain a distant abstraction. As a result, theistic belief may not become integrated into the child's cognitive world or identity formation, making it less likely for theistic belief to develop as the child matures (Pusztai and Rosta 2023).

Fourth, *cultural norms and shared practices* can render theism cognitively and socially alien. For example, certain aspects of theism, such as dietary restrictions (e.g., halal or kosher laws), dress codes, and ritual observances, may be perceived as incompatible with prevailing non-theistic cultural practices (Tan 2014, 437–438; Bautista 2014, 223–225). In such settings, these practices may be viewed as outdated, burdensome, or unnecessary, reinforcing the perception that theism lacks relevance or credibility. These attitudes often take root early in childhood and shape how people later engage with unfamiliar belief systems. As a result, theistic belief is often never considered a serious or live option for those raised in such contexts.

Fifth, there is the *psychological tendency to conform to prevailing consensus.* Human beings are inherently social and rely on others for much of their understanding of the world. One well-documented cognitive disposition is our inclination to align our beliefs and behaviours with those held by the majority around us (Asch 1951; Barrett 2011, 42). This effect was famously demonstrated in Solomon Asch's (1951) conformity experiments, where individuals conformed to even clearly incorrect group judgements because they were endorsed by the majority. In primarily non-theistic contexts, where non-belief is widespread, this social tendency makes it more likely that children and adults will adopt non-theistic beliefs, whether intentionally or not. Surrounded by peers, educators, and social institutions that affirm non-theism, the pull of consensus subtly steers many individuals away from theistic belief.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sixth, people have an *innate disposition to trust and align with the testimony of those they perceive as similar to themselves*. Individuals are generally more inclined to accept the beliefs and values of close relations – such as parents, siblings, teachers, and friends – who share key social or personal characteristics (Smaldino and Velilla 2025; Barrett 2012, 43; Hilmert et al. 2006). This kind of similarity bias shapes not only who we find credible but also whose worldviews we are most likely to adopt. Crucially, this psychological tendency operates largely beneath the surface, often without our awareness or endorsement. In primarily non-theistic cultures, it increases the likelihood that children will inherit non-theistic beliefs. With fewer similar figures endorsing theism, children may lack the relational context necessary for theistic belief to gain traction.

Seventh, a child's non-theistic identity can become *deeply integrated into their psychological sense of self*. From an early age, individuals in non-theistic contexts are shaped by formative experiences, rituals, stories, and social practices, or by their absence, that define their basic sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. These influences are not merely cognitive but identity-forming, embedding assumptions about the world into the very framework of the self. In such environments, theism may not only seem foreign or intellectually implausible but, in practical terms, almost psychologically impossible to adopt. To engage seriously with theism would require disrupting one's psychological equilibrium and departing from the inherited structures that ground their understanding of self and world (Usborne and Taylor 2010).

Each of these factors helps explain why many individuals hold, or come to hold, non-belief without any shift from belief, or at least not during a period when they can be held sufficiently responsible for their doxastic states. In short, these individuals begin life as non-believers due to a confluence of developmental, cultural, and informational influences that shape their early belief systems, which are typically carried into early adulthood and, in many cases, persist throughout life. Because this non-belief arises without a previous state of belief or during a stage when they cannot reasonably be said to bear doxastic responsibility, these individuals qualify as non-resistant non-believers. Taken together, these observations support premise (2) of the argument.

Notice that this is no small number of non-resistant non-believers. Vietnam alone contains some 82 million individuals. When we consider other primarily non-theistic contexts and their various historical periods, it becomes likely that the number of non-resistant non-believers is substantial. Moreover, I have focused on non-theistic contexts merely as a paradigmatic case. Similar points could be made in mixed contexts, where theism and non-theism are more evenly balanced, and even in primarily theistic contexts, where theism predominates.[17] While not all of the formative factors outlined earlier may apply in these settings, others, such as the parental transmission of non-belief, may still exert a powerful influence.

I would submit, therefore, that premise (2) is true: many non-believers in God lack acquisition responsibility for their non-belief. Thus, non-resistant non-belief is relatively common.

Upshot of my strategy

In the previous section, I argued that non-resistant non-belief is relatively common by focusing on acquisition responsibility. Emphasising this type of responsibility offers important advantages. In particular, it shows how many objections to non-resistant non-belief are either irrelevant or, at the least, incomplete. In this section, I briefly outline these advantages by way of example.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Consider one of Douglas Henry's (2008) main objections to the existence of non-resistant non-belief. He argues that any non-believer who fails to sufficiently investigate or reflect on theism might be blameworthy or responsible for their non-belief. He writes:

> There is something wrong with...being aware of the idea of God but neglecting it.... We [therefore]...have cause to regard unreflective nonbelief as culpable. Not considering the significant issues of human existence-including a highest good, God, to which unqualified commitment belongs-or briefly considering and then ignoring such questions, is blameworthy. Human beings should consider such questions, and they are in a position, at least sometimes, to consider such questions unless they ignore the profound for the picayune (Henry 2008, 279–280).

Henry appears to have maintenance responsibility in mind. He suggests that, regardless of how one arrives at a belief, individuals may still be responsible or blameworthy for continuing to hold that belief if they fail to evaluate or investigate it adequately. This reading is supported by Henry's (2008, 280) endorsement of Adams (1985) 'involuntary sins' thesis, according to which individuals can be culpable for involuntary mental states or attitudes – that is, for traits or dispositions not produced through their own past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions. As Henry puts it, 'unreflective nonbelievers [in God] are [possibly] culpable for their nonbelief even if they *do not arrive at it voluntarily*' (Henry 2008, 280; emphasis added). The rationale, he explains, is that they remain responsible for properly evaluating their beliefs and are blameworthy when they fail to do so. In short, they are maintenance-responsible.

Henry's objection is therefore irrelevant to my argument. Even if a non-believer is maintenance-responsible and perhaps an appropriate object of blame for failing to investigate or reflect sufficiently on theism, if they are not, or cannot be, held acquisition-responsible for their non-belief, they still qualify as non-resistant. This may feel counter-intuitive, but it follows logically from Schellenberg's conception of non-resistance.

Likewise, consider Elizabeth Jackson's (2016) argument for why there isn't much non-resistant non-belief. She contends that many non-believers are resistant to God because they have strong pragmatic reason to believe in God. She writes:

> Most people who have responded to Schellenberg have taken the word 'non-resistant non-belief' to have a narrow scope – referring to only epistemic norms.... However, I want to examine Schellenberg's arguments taking 'non-resistant non-belief' to have a larger scope, one that also takes prudential norms into consideration.... So, rather than arguing that there is sufficient epistemic reason for people to believe in God, I argue that there is sufficient prudential reason to form belief in God. Because many people have such a strong pragmatic reason to believe in God, God is not hidden for those people, so they are not non-resistant non-believers (Jackson 2016, 89–90).

Why Jackson believes that such non-believers have sufficient prudential reason to believe in God need not concern us. This is because her view is fully consistent with my argument that many non-believers lack acquisition responsibility. Her objection pertains to maintenance responsibility, albeit with a pragmatic twist.[18] Perhaps Jackson is right. Perhaps many non-believers do have sufficient pragmatic reason to cultivate theistic belief by engaging in practices such as prayer, participating in theistic communities, and the like. But this is ultimately irrelevant to determining whether such individuals are resistant. For someone to be considered resistant, they must start with sufficient epistemic reason to believe in God and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

then transition to non-belief. It is not enough to say that a non-believer lacks sufficient epistemic reason to believe but has sufficient pragmatic reason to try to cultivate belief. That is not the kind of scenario a loving God would allow, at least according to Schellenberg.

This is also why one of William Wainwright's (2001) central objections to the existence of non-resistant non-belief fails. His concern centres on the epistemic implications of social sin, that is, the epistemic consequences of participating in sinful communities. More specifically, Wainwright argues that involvement in such communities can place individuals in epistemically uncongenial environments for theism. Simply put, people may become 'blinded' to the truth of theism because of the cultural and social context in which they live. As he puts it, 'it is not surprising that people are blind to the Good [i.e., God]'. But he goes on to say:

> This does not absolve humanity of responsibility for epistemic failure. For insofar as our own guilty choices contribute to the perpetuation of sinful social structures, we are responsible for the blindness they partially cause.... [There are] many ways in which we sinfully cooperate with, and thereby reinforce, our corrupt dispositions and the sinful social structures within which we function. We do so, for example, when we fail to resist them, when we implicitly assent to them, or when we fail to critically scrutinize them – faults which are all more or less voluntary (Wainwright 2001, 111).

Wainwright seems concerned with maintenance responsibility. He acknowledges that epistemic environments can blind us to the truth of certain matters, and for non-theists, that blindness may obscure the truth of theism. Their environment may cause them to become non-believers, raised with non-theistic beliefs. That's simply how things often unfold: humans are social creatures, shaped by the communities we inhabit and the choices of those who came before us.

Nevertheless, Wainwright maintains that these non-believers are partly responsible or blameworthy for their inherited blindness. Why? Because they fail to 'critically scrutinize' or 'resist' their non-belief and the community around them, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of the uncongenial epistemic conditions in which they live. Put simply, this is an admission that, while they may lack acquisition responsibility for their non-belief, they still bear maintenance responsibility.

This is acknowledged by Wainwright himself when he writes: 'noetic blindness can be traced back to sinful human choices, but the choices aren't only *ours* but those of countless *others*. Human freedom includes the ability to cause significant epistemic harm to others as well as to ourselves' (Wainwright 2001, 111; emphasis added). So Wainwright's objection is irrelevant and only reinforces my claim that many individuals lack acquisition responsibility for their non-belief.

We can see a general pattern of response emerging from these three objections to non-resistant non-belief. Any objection that hinges on attributing maintenance responsibility ultimately fails to undermine my argument. If a non-believer is not acquisition-responsible in the relevant sense for their non-belief, that is, if they have not shifted from belief to non-belief at a time when they were responsible and appropriately subject to blame, then other considerations are beside the point.

This is also why other major objections to the existence of non-resistant non-belief fail to hit the mark. Consider, for example, the common theistic claim that many non-believers are blinded to God's reality because of sin. Exactly how sin factors into this account may vary. But if the idea is that individuals inherit from previous generations, and now express, dispositions or values inimical to belief in God, dispositions that lead to non-belief during childhood, then such individuals are clearly not acquisition-responsible for their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

non-belief. They did not arrive at this state through their past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions; it was simply handed down to them.

Objection: 'everyone starts off with belief in God'

So far, I have: (i) clarified the notions of resistant and non-resistant non-belief, (ii) argued that non-resistant non-belief is relatively common, and (iii) shown how my approach addresses several major objections to non-resistant non-belief. In this section, I consider one further challenge to my account.

One might object that my argument fails because it is plausible to suppose that most individuals begin life with belief in God, or at least something like God. This would constitute an objection to premise (2) of my argument, which claims that many individuals lack acquisition responsibility for their non-belief in God. If it could be shown (or reasonably believed) that most individuals likely held theistic belief at some early point in their lives and only later developed non-belief, this would go a fair way towards casting doubt on premise (2). The objector would only need to show that this non-belief emerged at a time when most of these individuals could be held responsible for acquiring it, and that they may, for all we know, have been resistant as well.[19]

One place the objector might turn for support is the CSR. A long-standing pillar of CSR is the so-called naturalness of religion thesis. Roughly put, this thesis holds that religious beliefs arise readily in human minds because they thrive off ordinary cognitive mechanisms, such as hyperactive agency detection and theory of mind. As a result, belief in supernatural agents becomes a common and easily acquired feature of human cognition.

Some CSR theorists go further and claim that these cognitive dispositions are not just broadly religious but theistically biased. That is, while humans are naturally inclined to form supernatural beliefs, the content of those beliefs often takes on a theistic-like shape. On this view, our supernatural disposition tends to favour belief in agents with attributes that closely resemble those of the God of theism.

Matthew Braddock (2018, 2022) argues precisely this. Drawing on CSR research, he contends that humans are disposed to believe in 'non-human, invisible, disembodied, immortal, super-powerful, super-knowing, super-perceiving, infallible, morally interested, punishing/loving, causally active, and minded agents (with beliefs, desires, intentions, character, and free will) who possess creator or designer status' (Braddock 2018, 178). According to Braddock, this cluster of attributes is 'recognizably theistic-like', approximating many core properties traditionally associated with the God of theism (Braddock 2018, 179). In short, he argues that we are naturally inclined to believe in supernatural beings whose traits closely resemble those of the theistic God. He refers to this tendency as being 'theistically bent'.

An objector might claim, then, that there is evidence suggesting many more individuals begin life with theistic (or theistic-like) belief than previously assumed, and that this disposition is later overcome or repressed, resulting in non-belief in God. On this view, non-belief is not the 'natural' cognitive starting point for humans.[20] If correct, it may follow that most people have acquired or developed non-belief in God. And if that's the case, the objector might argue that many people could be resistant, or at least susceptible to being classified as such.[21]

However, there is much to worry about with this strategy. First, set aside the concern that the so-called theistic bent in human psychology, if that is even an accurate description, fails, for many people, to generate belief in the unique and sole existence of a perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, good, and loving being. So suppose, as some theists seem willing to allow, that God may be content to relate to many humans through only relevantly similar god-concepts or beliefs about ultimate reality, even if those beliefs deviate more significantly from the truth than standard theistic conceptions.[22] Even on that assumption,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a deeper problem remains: in the right sociocultural conditions, this theistic disposition can be inhibited, such that theistic (or theistic-like) belief fails to form. As Braddock himself admits:

> To be clear: the CSR literature does not say that humans inevitably will believe in a high god [i.e. inevitably believe in theism or a theistic-like substitute], for two reasons. First, our cognitive dispositions do not by themselves produce religious belief: some environmental or cultural input is necessary, although it need not be a special experience or extensive teaching. Second, countervailing influences such as cultural factors can work in the other direction and lead humans to alternative religious beliefs or worldviews that do not affirm a high god. The contingency of high god beliefs is evidenced by the fact that cultures have gone in different religious and secular directions (2018, 167).

The key point is this: Even if Braddock and others are right that humans are cognitively biased towards theistic belief, this bias is likely to be inhibited in various contexts, especially in the non-theistic environments discussed earlier. Moreover, this is not a marginal number of individuals (recall the 82 million in Vietnam). In such settings, conditions may either prevent belief in God from ever taking root or lead individuals to acquire non-belief early in life, at a stage when they cannot be held acquisition-responsible. If that non-belief persists into later life when they can be held responsible, then they won't count as acquisition-responsible; they will be non-resistant. So, while CSR gives us some reason to pause, it does not seriously threaten my argument.

Expanding the scope of non-resistance

Suppose we broadened the definition of non-resistance to include not just a lack of acquisition responsibility but also a lack of maintenance responsibility. This would yield a new conception of non-resistance, perhaps better described as *blameless non-belief*, that is unrelated to Schellenberg's hiddenness argument. (One cannot object to Schellenberg's argument simply by redefining non-resistance in this way.) Still, someone might pursue this broader conception if they rejected Schellenberg's reasoning about the implications of divine love: that is, if they denied his conceptual premise and thereby rejected the hiddenness argument.[23]

It's worth noting that if someone did pursue this route, my argument could be reformulated to accommodate it, by showing that many individuals are not maintenance-responsible for their non-belief either, and thus count as blameless non-believers. Such an argument might focus on the conditions under which someone can be held maintenance-responsible, including the ease or difficulty of revising one's non-theistic beliefs or the quality of opportunities available to come to believe in God, especially for those raised in primarily non-theistic contexts. An argument along these lines might run as follows:

(1a) Whether an individual can be held maintenance-responsible for their non-belief in God is sensitive to the degree of difficulty they face in becoming or remaining a theist.
(2a) If it is psychologically or practically impossible for an individual to become or remain a theist, then that individual is not maintenance-responsible for their non-belief in God.
(3a) For many individuals (especially those in primarily non-theistic contexts), their historically contingent circumstances make it psychologically or practically impossible to become or remain a theist.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(4a) Therefore, many individuals are not maintenance-responsible for their non-belief in God.

The basic idea is that maintenance responsibility requires that one's doxastic state(s) be open to modification or revision. If individuals are psychologically or practically unable to revise their relevant doxastic states, and if this inability does not stem from a blameworthy failure on their part, then they cannot reasonably be held responsible for those states (assuming, of course, they are not acquisition-responsible either).

Consider, for example, a near-unshakable false belief held by an individual struggling with severe mental illness (e.g., the belief that they are being followed by secret agents). In such cases, the illness may deprive the person of any real opportunity to rid themselves of the belief. Barring extreme external intervention, such as heavy sedation that the individual does not recognise they need, they may be stripped of effective influence or control over their doxastic state. In such circumstances, it would not be appropriate to hold the individual normatively responsible for continuing to hold the belief or for failing to try to investigate or revise it.

Even among mentally healthy individuals, certain sociocultural conditions can constrain the quality of one's opportunity to modify or revise their doxastic states. Many people may be aware of theism but, given the context of their time and place, encounter little reason to take it seriously or to weigh arguments for and against its truth. In James (1896) terms, theism is not a live option for them. Just as the Norse gods are not a live option for many people – leaving them with no real opportunity to revise their non-belief – so too can theism lack psychological salience for many non-theists, depriving them of a real opportunity to revise their view. Even if non-theistic belief is, in principle, open to revision, the historically contingent circumstances of many non-believers may make it *practically impossible* for them to become theists (consider, again, contexts like Vietnam). In such cases, this lack of opportunity can limit their ability to exert control or influence over their non-theistic belief. They may simply have little reason to investigate theistic claims or to convert.

Granted, the view of doxastic responsibility I am defending is largely control-based: being maintenance-responsible for one's doxastic states involves, in large part, having the capacity to influence, modify, or change them through one's indirect efforts. While I believe this view is plausible, it is not uncontroversial.[24] Still, if something like it is correct, we have good grounds to argue for the pervasiveness of *blameless non-belief*, not just non-resistant non-belief. I do not have space to pursue this further here, but I note it as one way my thesis could be extended beyond Schellenberg's framework.

The significance of its pervasiveness

I now turn to the final section to consider the broader significance of my thesis. I highlight two main reasons why the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief matters.

First, it might appear that the pervasiveness of such non-belief is not especially significant if one already takes non-resistant non-belief to be straightforwardly incompatible with the existence of God. Schellenberg's (main) hiddenness argument, for example, is constructed so that its conceptual premise, when combined with just one empirical instance of non-resistant non-belief, suffices to demonstrate God's non-existence. So, one might wonder: why argue that non-resistant non-belief is relatively common, if a single case is enough for the argument to go through?

My response is that having multiple instances or types of non-resistant non-belief remains valuable for Schellenberg's argument.[25] For one, if we are mistaken in classifying a particular individual as non-resistant, we can always appeal to other cases that plausibly meet the criteria. Additionally, theists have developed various theodicies to explain why

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God might permit non-resistant non-belief. The more such cases we identify, the greater the explanatory burden placed on the theist to provide a theodicy capable of addressing them all. This, in turn, reduces the plausibility that any single theodicy can do the necessary work, or at least increases the risk that appeals to multiple, distinct explanations will appear *ad hoc*.

Second, recent literature has seen a shift towards framing the problem of divine hiddenness in evidential terms.[26] Spearheading much of this development is Charity Anderson (2021), who draws on tools from Bayesian reasoning to cast the hiddenness problem in probabilistic terms. To avoid introducing further conceptual baggage that might complicate the picture, Anderson formulates her argument in terms of the ratio or frequency of non-believers to believers, bracketing the issue of whether such non-belief is resistant or non-resistant. This approach is understandable, and one can certainly appreciate her interest in avoiding additional conceptual baggage. However, it leaves her version of the argument open to the objection that the mere existence of non-believers (as such) is not particularly surprising, if it is surprising at all, on theism.

My point is not to dismiss Anderson's contribution – far from it. Rather, I want to highlight that there are other fruitful ways of framing the hiddenness problem evidentially, ways that explicitly incorporate the notion of non-resistance or notions like it. For example, we might want to frame the problem in terms of the amount of non-resistant non-belief, or in terms of whether there is gratuitous non-resistant non-belief, or an unacceptable amount of gratuitous non-resistant non-belief. In each case, whether non-resistant non-belief is pervasive could help inform premises in arguments that aim to provide evidential rather than conclusive support for atheism. Suppose, for instance, we frame the problem in terms of whether there is gratuitous non-resistant non-belief. One way the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief might be relevant is by contributing to a broad, non-inductive cumulative base (Oliveira 2020), which could support the premise that gratuitous non-resistant non-belief exists. On this view, a sufficiently large set of apparently gratuitous instances of such non-belief could justify us in inferring that at least one instance is genuinely gratuitous – even granting the truth of traditional sceptical theist views. But of course, no such cumulative case can get off the ground unless non-resistant non-belief is itself sufficiently pervasive in the first place.

So, if non-resistant non-belief is pervasive, it raises the explanatory stakes for theism and/or strengthens both traditional and evidential formulations of the hiddenness argument. This view is far from idiosyncratic. Others have similarly emphasised that the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief carries significant epistemic implications for the probability of theism. Elizabeth Jackson, for example, notes that 'the number of non-resistant non-believers matters' (Jackson 2016, 87). Similarly, Marek Dobrzenieck and Jacek Wojtysiak state that 'the existence of great (overwhelming) numbers of nonresistant non-believers would be problematic for theism' (Dobrzeniecki and Wojtysiak 2022, 1699). And William Wainwright remarks that, much like the problem of evil, the 'problem of God's hiddenness…is aggravated by…[its] pervasiveness' (2002, 107). So this perspective finds support in the broader literature as well.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that non-resistant non-belief is relatively common. To support this claim, I introduced a distinction between acquisition responsibility and maintenance responsibility. I showed that, according to Schellenberg's conception of resistance, an individual must possess acquisition responsibility for their non-belief in God to count as resistant. I then argued that many non-believers lack such responsibility and are therefore non-resistant. Other strategies (Schellenberg 1993, 58–82, 2007, 207, 227–242, 2015, 76–86;

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Aijaz 2013; Megill and Linford 2017) may be employed alongside the one presented here to reinforce this thesis. But wherever one stands on the pervasiveness of non-resistant non-belief, the question remains important: not only for Schellenberg's argument but also for the broader literature on divine hiddenness.

Acknowledgements. I am particularly grateful to John Schellenberg for invaluable conversation and comments on this paper. I am also indebted to Rik Peels, Elizabeth Jackson, Martin Pickup, Jonathan Robson, and Douglas Henry for their helpful and insightful feedback on earlier drafts.

Financial Support. This work has been generously supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant ID: 2726204).

Notes

1. I won't provide examples, as my intention is not to point fingers.
2. Although this is not to deny that recognising certain facts about the world played a role in instigating Schellenberg's reflections on divine love.
3. To avoid confusion: by 'belief in God's existence' or 'belief in God' here and elsewhere in the paper, I mean the belief *that God exists*. As Schellenberg (2007, 207) emphasises, God would not necessarily bring us into relationship with himself; rather, he would provide the necessary conditions for us to enter such a relationship, should we wish to do so. The key necessary condition is the possession of propositional belief. I retain the locution 'belief in' for the sake of readability, though I acknowledge that it may misleadingly connote a fiducial state.
4. Some early commentators on this paper, including one reviewer, expressed doubt about this point. But consider just two passages from Schellenberg in support. First: '...resistance...would also involve...actions or omissions which have the result that, self-deceived, one *no longer believes in the existence of God, although one did to begin with*' (2015, 55; emphasis added). Second: 'God will at all times leave it open to us to resist his facilitative endeavours – to resist the actions he takes to put us in a position to relate personally with himself. Transposing this into the key of the present discussion, we must say that S will remain free to bring it about that he is in a position incompatible with belief (and so *no longer* in a position to relate personally to God) by opposing the evidence that God provides. Since such resistance would be culpable, it follows that S would remain free to culpably bring about *the loss of belief*' (1993, 38; emphasis added). Should the reader still doubt my interpretation of Schellenberg on this point, it is worth noting that he provided detailed feedback on two previous drafts of this paper, during which no concerns were raised about my presentation of his view. Indeed, in separate personal correspondence on a different occasion, he also remarked that it would be helpful to underscore this aspect of his view in the literature.
5. I say 'also' here because it seems plausible that a resister (in Schellenberg's sense) must be both acquisition- and maintenance-responsible for their non-belief. However, I need not make a decisive commitment as to other necessary conditions for resistance.
6. It should be remembered that I am using the term 'non-belief', following Schellenberg (1993, 58), as shorthand for 'non-belief or disbelief'. I take it that going from non-belief to *disbelief* involves acquisition of a doxastic state.
7. See footnote 6.
8. One can hardly fault Schellenberg for this slip. It's easy to see how, if resistant non-belief is always blameworthy, one might naturally infer that non-resistant non-belief is never blameworthy.
9. Although, this isn't to deny that this strategy is useful. There may have been millions upon millions of such prehistoric individuals.
10. See footnote 6.
11. In fact, we need not assume quite so much. All we need to assume is that many very young children are not sufficiently responsible for at least *some* of their doxastic states, and that a plausible subset of these states concerns religious propositions. Indeed, we need only assume that many very young children are not sufficiently responsible for their doxastic states regarding *God*. This assumption is particularly plausible in our context. On Schellenberg's view, God would ensure that sufficient evidence for (and belief in) God's existence emerges at a very young age, as soon as a child's capacity to relate personally to God develops (1993, 49–50). According to Schellenberg, this would occur 'before any investigations as to the existence of God have been undertaken' (Schellenberg 1993, 49). We are therefore considering children well below adolescent or even pre-teen years, at an age at which attributing (at least normative) responsibility for beliefs is much less plausible. Indeed, some (e.g., Barrett 2012, 77, 104) have speculated that children as young as three may exhibit, in a very limited form, the capacities relevant here, such as forming rudimentary beliefs about God and possessing a basic relational capacity to engage with God interpersonally.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I cannot fully argue for this assumption here, so those initially inclined to disagree will have to treat this route as conditional. That said, the assumption seems to me plausible, and many others find it plausible as well (see, for example, Osborne 2021, 95).

12. We are assuming, alongside Schellenberg, that resisters could be (in principle) responsible for their non-belief. While the idea of *epistemic* blame or responsibility has traditionally not been a popular one, an increasing number of epistemologists have been appealing to this notion.

13. For answers to methodological concerns about demographic data, see Mawson (2012, 184–189) and Zuckerman (2006, 47–48).

14. See Zuckerman (2006) and CIA World Factbook 2025 (https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/religions/).

15. Admittedly, the relationship between an individual's inherited religious or non-religious beliefs in childhood and their beliefs in adulthood can be complex. A minority of studies, such as Willits and Crider (1989), raise questions about the strength of this correlation. However, I do not believe such studies significantly undermine the general point made here. It is also worth noting that, according to some research, the successful intergenerational transmission of specifically religious belief (e.g., theism) appears to diminish with each successive generation. See Voas and Crockett (2005).

16. See, for example, the Sinicization of China: Pew Research Center (2023) '10 Things to Know About China's Policies on Religion'.

17. Indeed, a conservative estimate places the number of contemporary non-believers in God worldwide between 505 million and 749 million (Zuckerman 2006, 55), a figure that is by no means insignificant. More recently, a survey conducted across 26 countries with approximately 20,000 participants found that 21% of respondents reported not believing in God, a higher power, or any kind of spirit, while an additional 12% said they were unsure (Ipsos 2023, 13).

18. That is, Jackson holds that many non-believers are ultimately maintenance-responsible for their non-belief in God in an epistemic sense, insofar as they are maintenance-responsible for it in a pragmatic sense. Put simply, non-believers are responsible for lacking belief in God because they are responsible for failing to respond appropriately to sufficient prudential reason to (attempt to) alter their beliefs.

19. This is not to say that establishing this claim would be *easy*. There may be good reason to think that the acquisition of non-belief is not a *causal result* of *resistance*. Consider a theist who encounters strong evidence against theism and finds non-belief overtaking them despite a strong desire to remain a believer. See Schellenberg (2015, 80–82).

20. CSR theorists can and do make room for the 'naturalness' of atheism. See, for example, Geertz and Markússon (2010) and Gervais et al (2011).

21. Lari Launonen (2024) explores a point like this. See Baker-Hytch (2025) for distinct but related discussions.

22. I acknowledge, as does Schellenberg (1993, 43–44), that it is possible for God to relate to individuals who hold substantially false beliefs about God, possess only an inchoate sense of the divine, or even lack belief in God's existence altogether. A person *x* can relate to a person *y* without *y* realising – or even believing – that they are relating to *x* (and vice versa). The problem, however, is this: if *x* loves *y* in a relational (not merely benevolent) sense, we would ordinarily expect *x* to relate to *y* in a way that involves *y*'s *conscious recognition* of *x*. We must be careful, then, not to stray too far from a robust monotheistic conception of God. For the idea that finite persons would consciously recognise God *as God* is built into Schellenberg's hiddenness argument, and he has written at length to clarify and defend this commitment. This is why he consistently stresses that God would make available to finite persons an 'explicit, reciprocal' relationship with God (Schellenberg 1993, 18), or a '(positively) meaningful conscious' relationship with God (Schellenberg 2007, 201). That said, Schellenberg (1993, 58) does allow for some degree of flexibility in how 'God' is interpreted, although not much (Schellenberg 2015, 78–79).

23. Many have challenged Schellenberg's conceptual premise. See, for example, (Aijaz and Weidler 2007; Crummett 2015; Cullison 2010; Dumsday 2011, 2014; Howard-Snyder 1996; Lougheed 2018; McBrayer and Swenson 2012; McCreary 2010; Murray 2002; Paytas 2019; Sheeks 2023; Swinburne 2004; Weidner 2020).

24. Intuitively, where there is no control – i.e., no voluntary, evaluative, or managerial control – and that lack of control is not culpable, there is no responsibility. For a contemporary advocate, see Peels (2017).

25. By 'types' of non-resistant non-belief, I mean the more specific categories or subtypes under which Schellenberg (1993, 59) has at times classified these non-believers – namely, as reflective, unreflective, and so on.

26. This shift is not entirely new, since early on there were formulations that could reasonably be described as *evidential*, including those offered by Schellenberg (1993, 7–9; 2004), Drange (1998), and Maitzen (2006). For my part, I count myself among those who find the labels *evidential, logical*, or *deductive* to be rather unhelpful (and often ambiguous) ways of demarcating these arguments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Adams RM (1985) Involuntary sins. *The Philosophical Review* **94**, 3–31.

Aijaz I (2013) Some ruminations about inculpable non-belief. *Religious Studies* **49**, 399–419.

Aijaz I and Weidler M (2007) Some critical reflections on the hiddenness argument. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **61**, 1–23.

Anderson C (2021) Divine hiddenness: An evidential argument. *Philosophical Perspectives* **35**, 5–22.

Asch SE (1951) Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In Guetzkow H (ed), *Groups, Leadership and Men: Research in Human Relations*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Press, pp. 177–190.

Azadegan E (2013) Divine hiddenness and human sin: The noetic effects of sin. *Journal of Reformed Theology* **7**, 69–90.

Baker-Hytch M (2025) On sin-based responses to divine hiddenness. *Religious Studies* **61**, 650–664.

Barrett JL (2011) Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.

Barrett JL (2012) *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Bautista J (2014) Christianity in Southeast Asia: Colonialism, nationalism and the caveats to conversion. In Wilfred F (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 263–277.

Braddock M (2018) An evidential argument for theism from the cognitive science of religion. In van Eyghen H, Peels R and van den Brink G (eds), *New Developments in the Cognitive Science of Religion*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, pp. 171–198.

Braddock M (2022) Natural nonbelief in God: Prehistoric humans, divine hiddenness, and debunking. In Machuca DE (ed), *Evolutionary Debunking Arguments*. London: Routledge, pp. 160–184.

Crummett D (2015) We are here to help each other: Religious community, divine hiddenness, and the responsibility argument. *Faith and Philosophy* **32**, 45–62.

Cullison A (2010) Two solutions to the problem of divine hiddenness. *American Philosophical Quarterly* **47**, 119–134.

Dobrzeniecki M and Wojtysiak J (2022) Schellenberg's hiddenness argument and its reversal. *Philosophia* **50**, 1687–1705.

Drange TM (1998) *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Dumsday T (2011) Divine hiddenness as divine mercy. *Religious Studies* **47**, 337–353.

Dumsday T (2014) Divine hiddenness as deserved. *Faith and Philosophy* **31**, 286–302.

Geertz AW and Markússon GI (2010) Religion is natural, atheism is not: On why everybody is both right and wrong. *Religion* **40**, 152–165.

Gervais WM, Willard AK, Norenzayan A and Henrich J (2011) The cultural transmission of faith: Why innate intuitions are necessary, but insufficient, to explain religious belief. *Religion* **41**, 389–410.

Haub C (1995) How many people have ever lived on earth? *Population Today* **23**, 4–5.

Henry D (2001) Does reasonable nonbelief exist? *Faith and Philosophy* **18**, 75–92.

Henry D (2008) Reasonable doubts about reasonable nonbelief. *Faith and Philosophy* **25**, 276–289.

Hilmert CJ, Kulik JA and Christenfeld NJS (2006) Positive and negative opinion modeling: The influence of another's similarity and dissimilarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **90**, 440–452.

Howard-Snyder D (1996) The argument from divine hiddenness. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* **26**, 25–50.

Ipsos (2023) *Global Religion 2023: Religion and Belief around the World*. Paris, France: Ipsos Global Advisor.

Jackson E (2016) Wagering against divine hiddenness. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **8**, 85–108.

James W (1896) The will to believe. *The New World* **5**, 327–347.

Launonen L (2024) Non-belief as self-deception? *Religious Studies* **61**, 263–279.

Lehe R (2004) A response to the argument from the reasonableness of nonbelief. *Faith and Philosophy* **21**, 159–174.

Lougheed K (2018) The axiological solution to divine hiddenness. *Ratio* **31**, 331–341.

Macdonald P (2021) Schellenberg's noseeum assumption about blameless nonbelief. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **13**, 1–15.

Maitzen S (2006) Divine hiddenness and the demographics of theism. *Religious Studies* **42**, 177–191.

Marsh J (2013) Darwin and the problem of natural nonbelief. *The Monist* **96**, 349–376.

Mawson TJ (2012) The rationality of classical theism and its demographics. In Nagasawa Y (ed), *Scientific Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 184–204.

McBrayer J and Swenson P (2012) Scepticism about the argument from divine hiddenness. *Religious Studies* **48**, 129–150.

McCreary ML (2010) Schellenberg on divine hiddenness and religious scepticism. *Religious Studies* **46**, 207–225.

Megill J and Linford D (2017) On the unimportance of theistic belief. *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* **25**, 1–21.

Moser P (2008) *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Murray MJ (2002) Deus absconditus. In D H-S and Moser PK (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp. 62–82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Myers SM (1996) An interactive model of religiosity inheritance: The importance of family context. *American Sociological Review* **61**, 858–866.
Napier S (2022) Is there non-resistant non-belief? *Religious Studies* **59**, 572–588.
O'Connell J (2013) Divine hiddenness: Would more miracles solve the problem? *Heythrop Journal* **54**, 261–267.
Oliveira LRG (2020) Sceptical theism and the paradox of evil. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **98**, 319–333.
Osborne R (2021) Doxastic responsibility, guidance control, and ownership of belief. *Episteme* **18**, 82–98.
Paytas T (2019) Of Providence and puppet shows: Divine hiddenness as Kantian theodicy. *Faith and Philosophy* **36**, 56–80.
Peels R (2017) *Doxastic Responsibility: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Pusztai G and Rosta G (2023) Does home or school matter more? The effect of family and institutional socialization on religiosity: The case of Hungarian youth. *Education Sciences* **13**, 1245.
Rea MC (2018) *The Hiddenness of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Schellenberg JL (1993) *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Schellenberg JL (2004) Divine hiddenness justifies atheism. In Peterson ML and Rj V (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 30–41.
Schellenberg JL (2007) *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Schellenberg JL (2015) *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sheeks M (2023) A love that hides. *Faith and Philosophy* **40**, 202–220.
Smaldino PE and Velilla AP (2025) The evolution of similarity-biased social learning. *Evolutionary Human Sciences* **7**, e4.
Smith C and Snell P (2009) *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Swinburne R (2004) *The Existence of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Taber T and McNabb T (2015) Is the problem of divine hiddenness a problem for the Reformed epistemologist? *The Heythrop Journal* **59**, 783–793.
Tan J (2014) Encounter between Confucianism and Christianity. In Wilfred F (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 428–443.
Usborne E and Taylor DM (2010) The role of cultural identity clarity for self-concept clarity, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* **36**, 883–897.
van Inwagen P (2006) *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Voas D and Crockett A (2005) Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology* **39**, 11–28.
Wainwright WJ (2001) Jonathan Edwards and the hiddenness of God. In D H-S and Moser PK (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp. 88–119.
Weidner V (2020) *Divine Hiddenness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Willits FK and Crider DM (1989) Church attendance and traditional religious beliefs in adolescence and young adulthood: A panel study. *Review of Religious Research* **31**, 68–81.
Zuckerman P (2006) Atheism: Contemporary numbers and patterns. In Martin M (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 47–66.

Cite this article: Blanton A (2026) Non-resistant non-belief is pervasive. *Religious Studies* **62**, 547–567. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525101261 Published online by Cambridge University Press