

Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

John, I love talking to atheists because that's the only hope that I have to believe that my desire to believe in God has any substance whatsoever. So, what are your best arguments against the existence of God?

J.L. Schellenberg:

Well, there may well be other arguments, but there are three that I would mention, in particular. One is the argument from hiddenness, the hiddenness argument. Another is the argument from horrors, a certain subclass of evils, the very worst evils. And the third is, uh, an argument from free will, which is a less familiar, but still important argument. So, let's take those in turn. Um, the hiddenness argument, uh, starts from the fact about the nature of God, or at least the traditional theistic personal God, that God is perfectly loving. And it moves from there in a series of steps, okay, it goes from the love of God to the idea of the importance of relationship, that a loving God would pursue, or at least be open to relationship with finite persons who were created by God and loved by God. And then it makes the point that, for God to really be open like that, uh, people have to be in a position to participate in a relationship with God. For that to be the case, they have to be able to believe that God exists, um, and then you look around and you say, well, there are a lot of people that don't believe in – in the existence of God who would believe if there were such a being. So, that's – that's the rough outline of the hiddenness argument. The arguments from horrors says look, these are – these are the worst – the absolutely worst evils, the ones that, uh, as Marilyn McCord Adams defined the category of horrendous evils, the ones that give those who suffer or perpetrate them, uh, a reason to think that their life is not worth living, okay? So, why would a god permit these awful things to occur? And I think that the argument from horrors is even more impressive today, because more and more we are becoming, um, empathetic creatures, we're becoming more and more empathetic. And so, when we think about what a perfect God would have to have, what a perfect personal God would have to have, one of things we're going to say is – is unsurpassable empathy. I mean, you look at people who are empathetic, um, and compassionate, uh, the more empathetic and compassionate they are, the more they seek to get rid of horrors if they can, or to prevent them. And so, if God is unsurpassably empathetic and compassionate, wouldn't God get rid of horrors all together? That's one way of putting the argument from horrors. The argument from free will says look, free will is often thought to be a solution to problems for theists, like a solution to the problem of evil. Um, but it's actually itself a problem, when you think of it, all the different ways the world might have been, um, and you think about all the different sorts of relationship between finite persons and God that might get along perfectly well without free will, um, a lot more would need to be said to develop that point but, um, the – the argument is that we wouldn't expect to find, uh, that finite persons have free will, uh, because of all of the alternative ways that things could have been, which wouldn't have brought with them the problem of evil. Um, so – so, that's a rough outline of – of three arguments that I would put forward.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, I mean, let me, let me consider it because, uh, I mean, these are very serious arguments. Uh, from hiddenness, I would say that, uh, you are requiring God to, uh, to march to your drum beat. That it is, uh, that – that everything has to be happening now, you don't allow a future possibility that – that God may deal with – with beings and, uh, human beings in some future sense, or there's an afterlife or something like that, and the world that you have in fact, for – for both of the first two arguments would seem to be like a – a toy world, a simplistic world, that, uh, that – that the real world may be more complicated than that, as – as God has – has – has defined it. So, from the hiddenness argument, if God were obvious and everybody believed in God, I, I don't know if it'd be all that interesting, anymore. I – I would just – I don't know. I mean, I – I would – I wouldn't – I wouldn't be that interested. [cross talk] Let me give you all three of my arguments, then – then you can come back at me. Now, on evil, we all agree with what you say, of course, but the, uh, the – the – the free will defense is part of it but to me that – that is not totally satisfying. Uh, there has to be a deeper sense of that. Um, I believe that if there is a God, and we know there is evil, I believe that God created that evil. Now, most theists, the vast majority of theists, would throw up their hands in horror at that. But I believe that – I believe it's the only self consistent way you can think about evil, that God created evil and it's part of a system to understand some deep nature of reality or build, and anyway, the evil that we would have is something that would be within a finite period of time, less, a hundred years, the worst evil you could have, and so you have to have an afterlife. So, to be self consistent, you need an afterlife, and you – you have this fine, infinite relationship to, uh, a small time that you suffer the evil. On the free will. On free will, I think that's a – that's perhaps harder. It's a little – little more complicated, but, uh, I guess I would say that – that worlds without free will, though you can imagine that, uh, are secondary worlds, that – that, I would give up a lot before I'd want to give up free will. I mean I – I'd – I'd suffer evil myself, I would suffer horrors myself, if – if it – if – as long as it's a finite process of time to keep my free will.

J.L. Schellenberg:

Well –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's – that's it. That's all I got.

J.L. Schellenberg:

To respond to your first point about fashioning God in our own image, really what we're doing is looking at what's implied by, uh, aspects of the concept of God to which theists are committed. Um, and so, you – you look at what it means to say that God is perfectly loving, um, and you can bring out certain consequences, that just logically follow, given the concept of love, okay, if you think about what it means to be loving. Now, God could have, you know, been off the hook in this regard if God just hadn't created any finite persons, or if no finite persons existed right now. 12:06:44:28 But given that there are finite persons created by God, that would then have to be loved by God if God is perfectly loving, um, and that they exist right now, then right now there is a problem of hiddenness.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yeah, and – and I agree, but – but that falls apart if there is a – an afterlife or some continuation of that person in the future.

J.L. Schellenberg:

Are you suggesting that God might put off the relationship until the future?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yeah, sure.

J.L. Schellenberg:

Okay. Perhaps for the sake of, who knows what.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

For who knows what?

J.L. Schellenberg:

Okay, is that – is that how human parents behave? Do they say, well, you know, I'm not going to be –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Human parents know [cross talk]

J.L. Schellenberg:

Available to my, my son or daughter, uh, until later.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Human – human parents have a – a – a finite life. They know their child is going to grow up, they know it's going to grow up and die, it's going to be a hundred years, God may know that we have a much longer period of time.

J.L. Schellenberg:

So, if – if my son were going to live a thousand years, I could say oh –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It's not a thousand years.

J.L. Schellenberg:

I don't have to – I don't have to worry about the first nine hundred; I can just, you know, avoid being available to my –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Maybe – maybe that's better for your son. Maybe –

J.L. Schellenberg:

Would I be perfectly loving, if that were the case?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I think that – that if you created the ultimate value in that son, through the second system, you would be – you'd be better. See, I can't make that judgment. You're making a judgment –

J.L. Schellenberg:

Okay. The judgment about, what it takes to produce –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Correct.

J.L. Schellenberg:

Ultimate values.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Correct, well said.

J.L. Schellenberg:

Yes. Well, I think that, um, choices we make, for example, the choice to get into a relationship in the first place and to have children, uh, can strain future choices. And so, for example, a father, uh, and a husband, like myself, um, there are certain goods that I no longer pursue, if I'm in this relationship. Um, I pursue relationship compatible goods. So, if I have a relationship with a spouse, relationship with children, that constrains the sorts of goods I pursue. And so, we might expect by analogy that God, if God chooses, and of course, God needn't choose to do this, but, uh, we're assuming in this context that God has chosen to create finite persons. Um, that constrains what else God can do. And so, I would argue that God would pursue relationship compatible goods, and there are plenty of those, and in fact, they've been overlooked. I mean, when you think about the multidimensional, uh, nature of the relationship with an ultimate divine being, um, there's so much good that's available, even if there's no evil, even if there's no nonresistant, non-belief in the world, and even if there's no free will. I think we simply haven't exercised our imaginations enough here to think about other ways the world might be, that would be, uh, very attractive to a perfectly loving, divine being. Let me pick up on your point about how the world would be a toy world, I think that's how you put it. If, um, God didn't permit nonresistant non-belief, and didn't permit horrors to exist, and didn't permit free will, um, I think – I think that people who've used expressions like that are working with a false antithesis(?). Either God permits all these things, or it's just a toy world. It's, you know – but if we use our imaginations to think about all the other ways things might be, okay, it being a toy world is just one of the ways it might be. Ah, for example, there could still be a really, really fascinating evolutionary process, where people, even without free will, uh, and even in the absence of evil,

and certainly in the absence of horrors, are given the opportunity to ever more fully develop in their understanding of the truth about God, and about the world, a hugely complex truth. I mean, traditional religion has often simplified that. And so, theistic philosophers will sometimes be thinking about that. However, if we think about just the concept of God, and what would have to be, um, open to inquirers to discover, if God were simply to make that possible, um, we can develop the idea of – of – of a – of a – just a multilayered good, that could go on indefinitely, even without free will, even without horrors, even without nonresistant non-belief. So –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

There'd be no risk in your world. No risk.

J.L. Schellenberg:

There'd be no risk. Uh –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, that's a good – that's a good, for you.

J.L. Schellenberg:

Is – is the presence of risk in itself a good thing? What's so good about risk, I might ask? Is it that it facilitates something of great value? Or is it itself something of great value? Um, we have to think about what the goods are, and then we have to think about whether versions of those goods are available even in the worlds that we've been talking about, and if they're not, then we might say, well, then God wouldn't pursue those, because God would pursue only relationship compatible goods, and look at how wonderful those are. So, that's a – that's at least an outline of a quick response to your – to your point, and the sort of point that it represents.