Martyria **1** (2026): 43–52
https://doi.org/10.15664/32wy7619

Martyria

ARTICLE 4

ASYMMETRY IN DIVINE LOVE: A CLASSICAL THEIST RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE HIDDENNESS

ZACH MIYAZAKI, *BAYLOR UNIVERSITY*

(Received 15 January 2026; revised 23 March 2026; accepted 20 April 2026; first published online 30 June 2026)

ABSTRACT

I argue that J. L. Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, among other hiddenness arguments, rests upon an inadequate conception of perfect love—namely, the assumption that perfect love requires openness to conscious, reciprocal relationship. Through an analysis of paradigmatic human relationships, informed by an Aristotelian understanding of relational reciprocity, patristic articulations of the Trinity, and perfect being theology, I show that genuine loving relationships can exist without conscious reciprocity from one party and that this asymmetry reflects rather than contradicts the nature of divine love. Ultimately, I demonstrate that a Christian account of perfect love in the tradition of classical theism does not necessitate the kind of conscious reciprocal relationship that Schellenberg, among others, demands from the God-creature relationship.

The problem of divine hiddenness poses a genuine challenge to theistic belief. In one of its most influential contemporary formulations, developed by J.L. Schellenberg, the challenge is posed roughly as follows:[1] if God exists, then He is perfectly loving. If God is perfectly loving, then He would ensure that every person capable of relationship with Him is, at every moment, open to that relationship. Yet there are persons who, through no fault of their own, are unable to believe in God. For these persons, God seems, as it were, hidden. If a perfectly loving God would not permit non-resistant non-belief, yet such unbelief exists, then it would seem that God is not perfectly loving—a contradiction in terms. Therefore, God does not exist.

The force of this argument depends on two assumptions that deserve careful examination: first, that perfect love necessitates openness to conscious, reciprocal relationship; and second, that the God-creature relation is the kind where creaturely relationship with the Creator is not only available, but to be expected.

This essay argues that Christians formed in the classical theist tradition have cause to question the assumptions upon which Schellenberg's argument, and others like it, depend. Through an analysis of paradigmatic loving relationships—maternal love and enemy love—I will

[1] J.L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13–32.

show that non-reciprocity and asymmetry are not deficiencies in a loving relationship but may be constitutive of what makes the relationship the kind it is. Indeed, non-reciprocity and asymmetry are not incidental to the God-creature relation, but fundamental to it. This is made clear through a participatory ontology in which creaturely love is shown to participate on the prior, unconditional, and asymmetrical love of God for His creation. Finally, drawing on the classical theist tradition from Aquinas through McCabe, I will suggest that what hiddenness arguments demand of God—namely His manifest disclosure and genuine availability for conscious reciprocal relationship—reflects a picture of God as being among beings, which this tradition explicitly rejects. On the classical theist account, divine hiddenness is not a failure of love but a consequence of the ontological disparity intrinsic to the God-creature relation.

PARADIGMATIC HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: MATERNAL LOVE AND ENEMY LOVE

Schellenberg's argument assumes that perfect love necessarily involves openness to "positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship." But do genuine loving relationships necessitate conscious reciprocity from both parties? A close examination of paradigmatic relationships suggests otherwise. Consider first the case of maternal love: As a fetus and as a newborn the child lacks the cognitive capacity to recognize the mother's love and consequently, to consciously reciprocate. In fact, neither the fetus nor the newborn is yet able to form beliefs about the existence of the mother. Despite the lack of conscious reciprocation on the part of the child, few would go so far as to deny the genuineness of a mother's love or question whether a real relationship exists. The asymmetry in maternal love does not render it deficient or less than genuine; rather this asymmetry is accepted as inherent to this kind of relationship. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes that mothers may love their children "even if their children, in ignorance of who their mothers are, may render to them nothing of what is proper to a mother."[2] The relationship remains genuine despite the absence of reciprocal recognition or response. Aristotle classifies this relationship as a "friendship based on a superiority"—relationships characterized by a disparity in capacity, merit, and power.[3] In such friendships, Aristotle argues that equality is not achieved arithmetically, but proportionally: "whenever the friendly affection accords with merit, at that point equality somehow arises."[4] The mother contributes according to the proportion proper to her role as a mother while the child contributes according to its lesser capacity. The situation of a mother and her nascent child is the

[2] Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1159a32–34).
[3] Aristotle, *Nicom.*, 1158b11.
[4] Aristotle, *Nicom.*, 1158b27–28.

extreme limit of Aristotle's principle, for although the child cannot contribute anything through conscious interaction with its mother, the authenticity of this relationship and the mother's genuine love are not thereby diminished. That Aristotle regards this relationship as authentic suggests that the absence of conscious interaction on the part of one party does not necessarily disqualify it from being genuine.

Aristotle's insight concerning the asymmetry inherent to certain kinds of relationships, challenges Schellenberg's assumption that perfect love necessitates conscious reciprocity. If genuine loving relationships can exist in the total absence of conscious reciprocity—as in the structure of maternal love, one of the most paradigmatic instances of human love—then conscious reciprocity cannot be necessary for loving relationships as such. The mother-child relationship demonstrates that the genuineness of love is not located in conscious reciprocity, but in each party giving in accordance with their nature and capacity—which may mean that one party gives nothing at all.

Yet Aristotle's account of friendships might seem potentially problematic for divine-human relationships so far as he argues that friendship becomes impossible when one party "is separated from the other to a great degree"[5] as is the case in divine-human relationships where the gods "exceed [human beings]' in all good things to the greatest degree."[6] For Aristotle, the impossibility of such a relationship is founded upon his understanding of a god who is a maximally great being outside the created order. By contrast, Christians understand God not as a being who possesses all good things to the maximum degree, but as Being Himself. While both the Aristotelian and Christian conceptions of divinity hold that God is transcendent, these conceptions understand transcendence differently. The Aristotelian portrayal of God as transcendent results in a kind of removal of God from the created order. He is indeed the first cause of creation, even its sustainer, but nevertheless operating alongside creation. In contrast, Christians, view God not as an impersonal first cause beyond and outside of creation, but as a creator who is intimately present *to* His creation—even entering into it through the assumption of a human nature.

Where Aristotle's account of *philia* (φιλία) reaches its limit, the Christian account of *agapē* (ἀγάπη) begins — presenting non-reciprocal love not merely as a peculiar case, but as a paradigmatic and profound form of love. Jesus commands: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matt 5:44–45 NRSV). This command presupposes not

[5] Aristotle, *Nicom.*, 1159a4–5.
[6] Aristotle, *Nicom.*, 1158b36–37.

merely the possibility, but the actuality of non-reciprocation. In the case of enemy love, the beloved is actively hostile towards the lover. Yet such love is presented as revealing the Father's character: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). This paradigmatic form of *agapē* is thus presented as explicitly non-reciprocal. Indeed, non-reciprocal love is a profound, rather than deficient, manifestation of love. As St. Paul writes, "God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Divine love towards humanity is directed toward those who cannot, or refuse to, reciprocate. If enemy love is possible, and if it shows the Father's own perfection, then Schellenberg's assumption that perfect love requires "reciprocal conscious relationship" inverts the biblical understanding of those who can be loved and the nature of love Himself.

These philosophical and theological considerations illustrate that nonreciprocal love is perfect for the lover, even if the lover does not reciprocate consciously or at all. In the next section I will show that on a Christian understanding of divine love, contrary to Schellenberg's assumption that God's perfect love requires Him to be open to conscious reciprocal relationship, God could not fail to be open to relationship—even if this relationship is not conscious or reciprocal on the part of the creature. Specifically, I will argue that the possibility and very structure of asymmetrical love is explained by participatory ontology.

CREATURELY PARTICIPATION IN DIVINE LOVE

Participatory ontology holds that creaturely being and activity are not self-explanatory, but contingent upon God as their source and sustainer. Concerning love, 1 John asserts unequivocally: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love is not merely an attribute that God possesses but is identical with his very essence. Consequently, when creatures love, they do not autonomously generate love but participate in divine love. "Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16). Importantly, this mutual indwelling is not pantheistic—creatures remain ontologically distinct from God. Yet creaturely love is utterly dependent on divine love as its ontological ground. Since all creaturely love participates in divine love, to observe authentic creaturely love—including non-reciprocal instantiations—is to know something true about the nature of divine love itself.

Because creaturely love is fundamentally participatory, it is fundamentally asymmetrical. Importantly, the possibility of reciprocal love between creatures is ontologically preceded by the asymmetry fundamental to participation: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he

loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Indeed, we "love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). That is to say, creaturely love is a response to the initiatory, free act of divine love that generates and sustains creatures. God's creation of the universe *ex nihilo* is itself an act of asymmetrical love, for there was nothing other than God to reciprocate. Even as God sustains the universe, there are beings who are recipients of His love and do not recognize, acknowledge, or reciprocate it. Divine love is extended even, and especially, to those who are incapable of responding, who are actively hostile, who resist and reject. It is apparent then, that God's love is not contingent upon a creaturely response, but rather precedes, enables, and sustains creaturely capacity to love at all. Reciprocal love between creatures is made possible by the ontologically prior non-reciprocal love of God.

The ontological priority of divine love has profound implications for understanding the structure of creaturely love. Augustine's analysis of love in *De Trinitate* is particularly helpful in understanding creaturely love as caused and arranged according to the perichoretic relationship between persons of the Trinity. In every act of love, Augustine identifies a threefold structure: the lover, the beloved, and the love that proceeds between them. This structure is an articulation of Trinitarian life: the Father as lover, loves the beloved Son, and the love which proceeds between them is the Spirit.[7] Of course, none of these roles are *exclusively* restricted to particular persons of the Trinity, for while the persons are *truly distinct*, the distinction between persons does not entail compositional difference in the divine essence. When creatures love, they instantiate this Trinitarian structure: a human lover, a human beloved, and the love that proceeds between them, which is not simply a human emotion, but Love Himself. Thus, when a mother loves her non-reciprocating infant, it is not merely that she is exercising a maternal instinct, but rather, God who is Love is loving through her. The possibility of loving someone who cannot, or does not, love in return—whether infant or enemy—is grounded in the fact that divine love is sufficient in itself, requiring no reciprocity, yet enabling all creaturely love. Jesus' command to love enemies is possible because it is participatory in God's own mode of loving, extended to those who may not love Him in return. Therefore, every genuine act of creaturely love, regardless of reciprocation, participates in the self-sufficient divine love which is the ground of all relationship.

This participatory framework articulated in Trinitarian terms draws out Schellenberg's assumption that perfect love requires "openness to positively meaningful and reciprocal conscious relationship." Indeed, Schellenberg conceives of divine love as a maximal degree of a love that creatures possess in lesser measure (a limit simpliciter) while Christians take divine love

[7] Augustine, *De Trinitate* VIII.10.14.

to be the paradigm that all love participates in and according to which all love is measured (a limit case). I have taken this distinction between degree and quality from Barry Miller's articulation of the difference between a limit simpliciter and a limit case: "the former differs merely in degree from that of which it is a limit simpliciter, whereas the latter differs absolutely from that of which it is a limit case."[8] If divine love is a limit case, rather than a limit simpliciter, then creaturely love reveals the structure of divine love itself. Since genuine love can exist without conscious reciprocity as was earlier demonstrated, and since this love is participatory in divine love, conscious reciprocity cannot be essential to love as such. Thus God can be in authentic, perfect loving relationship with creatures who do not consciously recognize Him, similar to the way that a mother can be in genuine relationship with a nascent child or newborn. The nonbeliever, as a creature generated and sustained by God's love, even if he should not love anything at all, could not fail to be in relationship with God—ontologically, if not consciously. God's love is not only present as the grounds of the nonbeliever's being, but also the enabler of the nonbeliever's capacity to love as well as the recipient of all the nonbeliever's moral strivings (insofar as all goodness participates in God). While Schellenberg's argument assumes that the lack of conscious reciprocity indicates a failure of love and consequently, the absence of perfectly loving relationship altogether, participatory ontology reveals that regardless of conscious acknowledgment, creatures cannot fail to be in authentic loving relationship with God.

A proponent of the hiddenness argument, however, might object that while the notion of participation establishes an ontological relationship, it does not explain why God would choose to remain epistemically hidden when He could make Himself consciously known. To address this concern, we must consider whether there is something intrinsic to God's nature as God that accounts for a certain kind of hiddenness which is not merely compatible with perfect love, but intrinsic to the divine-human relationship.

A Classical Theist Picture of God and Creation

Schellenberg's argument assumes a sort of loose "theistic personalism." According to Brian Davies, theistic personalists conceive of God as essentially "a person without a body."[9] The danger of this view is equivocation—viewing God to be a person, albeit a maximally great person, among others less perfect. Although an atheist, Schellenberg assumes that God is a person among others and it is understandable then, that Schellenberg assumes the God-creature relationship to be one in which human persons relate to God as if He were *only* human. While

[8] Barry Miller, *A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 7.
[9] Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.

God makes Himself intelligible to humans through revelation—the incarnation as the paradigmatic example of this—God is not merely a human person, but God. Schellenberg's demand for conscious reciprocal relationship makes sense if we related to God as if he were simply another person among others because persons relate to other persons through mutual recognition and conscious relationship. Yet God, though personal, and indeed a human person, is not simply someone with positive attributes to the maximal degree, but transcendent God. He is not a limit simpliciter, but a limit case. Following Aquinas and the broader patristic/medieval tradition, classical theists maintain that God is not a being among beings, but *ipsum esse subsistens*. Thus, "everything other than God is totally dependent on God for its existing and being as it is."[10] God is not existing alongside creatures as an entity, or as an individual within creation, but rather as the "constantly sustaining cause of the universe and all it contains."[11] If classical theism is correct, then the demand of Schellenberg's argument for "reciprocal conscious relationship" is misapplied to the God-creature relationship.

The classical theist understanding of creation suggests that God's creative activity is not an event in the past, but God's singular, continuous act which generates and sustains creaturely existence. "God brought it about that the universe *began* to exist," but His "creative work is just as much present in the continued existence" of creation.[12] As Herbert McCabe puts it: "God cannot *interfere* in the universe…To interfere you have to be an alternative to, or alongside, what you are interfering with."[13] God does not start the universe and interfere with it as time progresses, but generates it in a single eternal act. If God is understood as the cause of creation, rather than an agent within it or alongside it, then for God to enter into "conscious reciprocal relationship" in the way that Schellenberg envisions, would require God to be something He is not: namely, a being among beings.

The relationship between God and creatures is therefore fundamentally asymmetrical in a manner that transcends all human instances of non-reciprocal loving relationships. While a mother and a child are both creatures who participate in existence, God does not participate in existence—He *is* existence itself. While creatures genuinely relate to God (as ontologically dependent), God's relation to creatures is a fundamentally different sort of relation: changes in creation occur because of changes in creatures, not changes in God.[14] It is a mistake to think that since God causes creation He can be apprehended as an object within the world. He is the

[10] Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion,* 3.
[11] Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion,* 3.
[12] Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion,* 3.
[13] Herbert McCabe, "*Creation*," *New Blackfriars* 61 (1980), as quoted in Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 4.
[14] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.13, 7.

ground of the world's being. God's "hiddenness" is not a withholding of Himself, but a necessary consequence of His ontological incommensurability.

There is scriptural basis for such thinking. For instance, Moses could not see God's face and Paul wrote that God dwells in unapproachable light (Exod 33:20; 1 Tim 6:16). God's unapproachability is not divine refusal but is an intrinsic feature of His ontology. Even in the beatific vision, God is not comprehended by creatures exhaustively. The inexhaustibility of God's nature does not reflect God's withdrawal, but rather is the result of creaturely limitation.

CONCLUSION

Schellenberg's argument presupposes that God is an agent who chooses to be more or less available to creatures. But on the classical understanding of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, God cannot simply make Himself available. To do so, would be for God to cease to be what He is. As the mother-child relationship is genuine despite the child's inability to recognize the mother, the God-creature relationship is authentically and perfectly loving despite the unbeliever's inability to consciously relate to God. Schellenberg's argument depends on a theistic personalist picture of God as a being among beings. The classical theism framework, however, affords a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of God, in which nonresistant nonbelief, if such a thing is possible, does not pose a threat to perfect love or divine existence.

Through an analysis of paradigmatic loving relationships—specifically, maternal love and enemy love—this essay has shown that non-reciprocity and asymmetry do not necessarily indicate deficiencies in a relationship but rather may be constitutive of that relationship as the kind it is. Notably, this asymmetry is not incidental. Participatory theology reveals that creaturely love—whether between creatures or creatures and their Creator—necessarily participates in the prior, unconditional, unreciprocated love of God for His creation. What hiddenness arguments typically demand of God—namely his manifest disclosure and genuine availability for conscious reciprocal relationship—are not necessary for perfect love, but criteria imported from creaturely experience and misapplied to God who relates to creation not as a being among others (which would be to consider God as if he were a maximally great creature), but as Being itself. Schellenberg's argument, along with other traditional formulations of the hiddenness problem, rests on assumptions about perfect love and divine personhood that classical theists may rightly set aside. On such an account, God could not fail to be in relationship with His gratuitous creation—and this relationship does not depend on the creaturely awareness or reciprocity for God's love to be considered perfect and His relationship with creatures authentic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Augustine. "De Trinitate." In *The Trinity*. Translated by Edmund Hill. Edited by John E. Rotelle. The Works of Saint Augustine I/5. Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991.

Davies, Brian. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Green, Adam, and Eleonore Stump, eds. *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

McCabe, Herbert. "Creation." *New Blackfriars* 61 (1980): 244–54.

Miller, Barry. *A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of God*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.

Schellenberg, J.L. "Divine Hiddenness and Human Philosophy." In *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, edited by Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, 13–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the English Dominican Fathers. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1911.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Zach Miyazaki is a third-year student in Baylor University and a visiting student in the University of St Andrews studying divinity, philosophy, and classics. He enjoys cooking, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, hiking, and playing guitar.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The problem of divine hiddenness was introduced to me in a module I took with Prof Andrew Torrance. Wrestling with this topic has forced me to examine my assumptions about what constitutes a loving relationship at all and what distinguishes relationships among creatures from the relationship between God and His creation. As I continue this research, I hope to engage more deeply with Schellenberg and familiarize myself with the broader literature on the topic of divine hiddenness.

EDITORS' NOTE

If God loves us so much, then where is He? The problem of divine hiddenness is a hotly debated topic in the contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Often categorized as an argument against the existence of God, the problem aims to demonstrate that, given some people fail to believe in God despite their non-resistance towards faith, a perfectly loving God cannot exist. Ever since the problem was formalized by J. L. Schellenberg in his 1993 book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, it has attracted interests from theists and non-theists, philosophers and theologians alike.

For some, divine hiddenness challenges the logical coherency of theism; for others, the philosophical and theological premises assumed by the problem require further scrutiny. In the following paper presented, Zach Miyazaki offers a theological response to the problem of divine hiddenness. Drawing from Aristotle, the Bible, and various theological sources both classical and

contemporary, the author creatively presents a theological framework based on classical theism that is alternative to the one underlying the debate of divine hiddenness—a framework which the author has acutely identified to be based on theistic personalism. We wish to highlight that Miyazaki's original contribution lies in his introduction of classical theism to the debate, which offers an alternative lens through which divine hiddenness can be viewed from a new angle, perhaps even dissolving the problem from a Christian standpoint. We believe Miyazaki has engaged skillfully with a meaningful and relevant topic in the philosophy of religion with an original approach that seeks insight from the field of theology. Miyazaki's approach, including the rigorous engagement with analytic philosophy, the retrieval of classical theology and, in particular, metaphysics, as well as the use of scripture, is an exemplar of contemporary philosophical theology.

EDITORS: Arthur Zhang, Aqeel Khaldun, and Madeline McDermott