



## A Critical Evaluation of Schellenberg's Divine Hiddenness Argument Based on Avicenna's Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

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### Abstract

Original Research



Atheists have long advanced arguments against the existence of God, challenging the claims of theists. Among these, John L. Schellenberg has proposed an argument known as “divine hiddenness,” which has garnered significant attention from philosophers of religion. Therefore, the subject of this paper is to critique and examine this argument based on the ontological foundations of Avicenna, one of the greatest theist philosophers and prominent figures in Islamic philosophy. The methodology of this article is descriptive-analytical, based on an ontological examination of the rational possibility of connection and the occurrence of connection with the transcendent through religious and mystical experiences. Through a careful examination, it will be demonstrated that Avicenna's ontological foundations not only support the possibility of relational experiences with the divine but also, when considered within the framework of logical argumentation and the epistemological certainty of *mutawātīrāt* (mass-transmitted *hadith*), establish the reliability and certainty of such transcendent relations. Consequently, the argument from divine hiddenness—and by extension, atheism—is effectively refuted.

### Keywords

divine hiddenness, Schellenberg, Avicenna, ontology, religious experience, mystical experience.

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### **Problem Statement**

Atheists have always made great efforts to pose arguments against theism and challenge their claims. In this vein, John L. Schellenberg, the Canadian philosopher, propounded an argument for the very first time called “divine hiddenness” in 1993 in his book titled *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Schellenberg, 1993, pp. 17-27).

In short, his argument claims that divine hiddenness at least contradicts four attributes of the deity of monotheistic religions, namely omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence and being perfectly loving. Regarding Schellenberg’s viewpoint, there are two noticeable kinds of hiddenness: the divine’s relation with creatures and vice versa. He and his proponents apparently heed the former and believe that God does not make any effort for the realization of this relationship, at least in some cases, and has hidden himself (Schellenberg, 2005, pp. 202-203).

Schellenberg aims to show that divine existence could have been more evident to human beings (Schellenberg, 2015, p. 53). This is because if God had loved His creatures, He should have provided ones who earnestly seek Him with more evidence for His existence and revealed His presence in a more explicit and less ambiguous manner. Therefore, either God exists, the consequence of which is that He ought to reveal Himself to human experience, or humans lack direct and personal experience of God, which means that such a God does not exist (Howard-Snyder, 1996, p. 434; Schellenberg, 2015, pp.4-53; 2016, p. 23).

Schellenberg’s view has been widely debated in the West and Christian theology and books and articles have been written to discredit it. Western thinkers’ critiques often focus either on the argument itself—its content, premises, and structure—or on the underlying principles. Critiques addressing the argument and its premises often take a moral approach. For example, Paul Moser, who has taken a serious critical stance on this argument, argues that there are abundant reasons and evidence for God’s presence in the universe, and if people are unaware of them, it is their own fault, not God’s. In clearer terms, people are morally deficient in this context (Moser, 2010, pp. 37 & 49).

Howard-Snyder sees the phenomenon of hiddenness as God’s way of giving human beings the freedom to choose, preserving their free will and autonomy (Howard-Snyder, 1996, pp. 434-440). Ted Patson and Trent Dougherty regard it as a way to promote personal growth and development, nurturing the dynamic and evolving spiritual and moral nature of human beings (Patson & Dougherty, 2007, pp. 185-192). Michael J. Murray and Michael S. Rea view it as a

necessary condition for achieving greater goods, such as giving people the right to choose and the opportunity for self-improvement (Murray & Rea, 2008, pp. 181-184). Thus, as you can see, Western thinkers' critiques do not approach this topic from the perspective of religious experience.

In contrast, his work has received little attention in Islamic scholarship, with only a few scattered studies in recent years, such as those published in Qom University's *Philosophical-Theological Research Journal*: 1) "A Critique of Schellenberg's New Logical Argument from Evil" (Pakdel & Alizamani, 2023); 2) "A Study and Critique of John Schellenberg's Divine Hiddenness Argument Based on the Finiteness of Divine Active Attributes and Wisdom" (Asadi et al., 2020); 3) "Moser's Criticism of Divine Hiddenness Argument" (Hossaini, 2016). None of these have criticized this argument depending on mystical and religious experiences. However, it seems necessary to object to this argument in this manner which has been neglected by critics. Because one of Schellenberg's main assertions is the lack of sufficient evidence in favor of God's existence and presence in the world, leading to the impossibility of a personal relationship with Him and consequently, the appearance of reasonable nonbelief. This state of affairs, in his view, is in conflict with the divine's perfect love and its implications.

In some of his works, he reiterates that religious experience could have overshadowed the lack of evidence. However, most people are not endowed by such experiences or, although they do have some, these experiences are obscure and cannot sturdily prove God's existence and presence. In other words, these religious experiences lack epistemological validity and necessary qualifications. Thus, they cannot be considered as evidence and warrant for God's existence and presence. Hence, it can legitimately be declared that there is no sufficient evidence. In what follows, these points will be shown in his works:

1. Schellenberg believes that some human beings are not able to endorse something except through sufficient evidence or experience. Thus, if they are to believe in God, it ought to be either through acquiring sufficient evidence or by experiencing divinity. In his view, such a state is not actualizable for human beings in the world, since there is no such evidence. Furthermore, God has not revealed Himself through religious experience to these people. In consequence, reasonable nonbelief occurs (Schellenberg, 1993, p. 59). This vividly shows that one kind of evidence which is not found sufficiently in the world is religious experience.
2. Elsewhere, Schellenberg explicitly declares the aforementioned point, saying that in many cases, the religious experience theists' claim is out of reach of atheists. This is while many of them are fully ready for such things

and sincerely make a lot of effort on this path, without any success (Schellenberg, 1993, p. 70).

3. After explicating the term ‘reasonable or justified nonbelief’ which is used as a premise in some interpretations of his argument, Schellenberg points out that to set mankind free from this kind of nonbelief, God is not required to provide humans with evidence leading them to utter certainty, but it will be enough if God prepares the grounds for belief only to some extent (Schellenberg, 1993, p. 45). He then continues that religious experience is a sufficient epistemic aid in this field and can be an appropriate base for preventing reasonable nonbelief from occurring since it is through these experiences that a personal relationship with God becomes available and his presence will be perceived (Schellenberg, 1993, p. 48; 2015, pp. 40-53).
4. Schellenberg, in other instances, clarifies that there are some human beings without personal experiences of God or their experiences are so vague that their analyses and arguments in this area fall short of proof of their certainty (Schellenberg, 1993, p. 82). In other words, Schellenberg has posed two points here: some people are without any kind of personal experience of God, the very epitome of which can be mentioned as religious and mystic experiences, and some other lucky ones with such experiences cannot prove their epistemic worthiness.

The points mentioned from Schellenberg’s works demonstrate that religious experience is a core idea for him and, in some of his works, he declares them as a kind of evidence sufficient to be the grounds for believing in God and preventing reasonable nonbelief from happening. In fact, these experiences stop divinity from being hidden if they are acquired, though this is not the case. Therefore, it can be generally concluded that criticizing the hiddenness argument from a religious experience perspective is a desideratum and can be posed as the best possible objection against this argument.

### **Inspecting the Argument from Divine Hiddenness**

Existing interpretations of the problem of divine hiddenness can be categorized into two groups: deductive interpretations and inductive interpretations. The former is to prove that the hypothesis of divine existence is in direct logical contradiction and conflict with the phenomenon of divine hiddenness. The latter, while not attempting to prove logical inconsistency, conclude at minimum that the probability of believing in God is lower than that of disbelieving in Him (Naraqi, 2014, pp. 70 & 79). In what follows, one instance of each interpretation, namely inductive and deductive, will be outlined:

### **A. Deductive Interpretation**

1. If we suppose that the God theists believe in really exists, He is perfectly loving toward His creatures.
2. The hypothesis of the existence of such divinity logically contradicts reasonable nonbelief.
3. Reasonable nonbelief occurs in the actual world.
4. From premises 1, 2, and 3, it can be concluded that there is no such God with such attributes.

Final conclusion: God does not exist (Schellenberg, 2005, p. 212).

### **B. Inductive Interpretation**

Schellenberg has propounded the inductive interpretation as the analogy argument (Schellenberg, 2004, pp. 31-38). One of the contemporary scholars has molded this argument in the following manner:

1. If a compassionate mother, according to prerequisite P, can help her child who grapples with a tough and hazardous situation, she will not hide herself from her child. (The prerequisite is compassion).
2. The situation of the mother and her child is utterly analogous to that of God and many human beings.
3. The feature P is attributable to divine love as well.
4. Thus, if God, according to prerequisite P, can help human beings who grapple with tough and hazardous situations, He will not hide Himself from them.
5. God is omniscient, so He knows human situations and is also omnipotent, so He can help them when they grapple with tough and hazardous situations.
6. Thus, God ought not to refrain from responding to His human children.
7. In other words, if God exists, divine hiddenness does not occur.
8. Divine hiddenness occurs.
9. Therefore, God does not exist (Naraq, 2014, pp. 74-75).

As is obvious, both deductive and inductive interpretations contain epistemological and ontological bases and aspects. In ontological disputations, questions regarding the quality, nature, and essence of factual states of affairs arise, so if one is to elicit the ontological viewpoints of a scholar and theorist, one ought to discover her perspective toward the world and its essence (Furlong & Marsh, 2002, pp. 18-19). Because an ontological inquiry is a general scrutiny

with a holistic domain about the world as a whole and the reality of the universe (Shams, 2008, p. 32).

Furthermore, since disputations whose subject is human knowledge and probing epistemic aspects of it, and the way it represents reality are epistemological ones, (Hamlyn, 1967, pp. 8-9), if one is to elicit the epistemological viewpoints of a scholar and theorist, one ought to discover her perspective toward recognition and the quality of acquiring knowledge.

It seems that the dominant facet of the deductive interpretations of the argument is ontological. For deductive interpretations of the hiddenness argument, based on the absence of a real and generative relation between God and creatures, conclude that neither God makes any effort to relate to His creatures nor the creatures can do so, even if they intend to relate to God. Thus, divine existence is hidden and unacceptable.

In fact, these kinds of interpretations insist that the generative lack of a meaningful, active, and reciprocal interaction between God and creatures renders the very existence of God rebutted. Hence, the core of these interpretations is an existential entity (God/creature relation) and is inevitably ontological. Thinkers like Schellenberg pursue illustrating the point that the unavailability of such a relation between God and His creatures (the very fact of divine hiddenness), logically conflicts with the existence of God. It demonstrates that there should be philosophically convincing reasons for the occurrence of such experiences. Regarding inductive interpretations, it should be said that although they are not deprived of ontological foundations, the epistemological aspect is prominent. This is because, in contrast with deductive forms, they do not intend to show the logical conflict between the God of theism and the phenomenon of divine hiddenness from an ontological viewpoint and in the actual state of affairs.

The ultimate aim of the inductive formulations of the hiddenness argument is to demonstrate that, in the realm of proof, the probability of the pieces of evidence affirming theism is far less than the probability of those opposing it. In fact, the upshot that these interpretations pursue is to prove that the very phenomenon of divine hiddenness as strong evidence in favor of atheism, significantly overshadows the probability of the truth of theistic evidence and divine existence. Therefore, while attention is given to the revealing aspect of evidence, proofs, and supporting indications of the existence of God in the world, and that the epistemic value of these elements is diminished when the issue of divine hiddenness is raised, it must be noted that the prevailing perspective in these matters is epistemological. Thus in both interpretations of the hiddenness argument, we will conclude that as God has not provided us with any kind of evidence for His existence, He is hidden and such hiddenness is in conflict with theistic claims. Therefore, such a God does not exist.

Ultimately, it seems that considering what has been said so far, in order to criticize deductive and inductive interpretations of the hiddenness argument, these steps ought to be taken. First, from an ontological perspective, we are to discuss the possibility of having a relationship with the transcendent and holy through religious experiences. Hence, our question in the first phase will be whether it is possible to communicate with God, the transcendent, through religious and mystical experiences for all creatures. More accurately, first, whether such a relationship is possible and second, whether such a possibility is available in a general way for all human beings.

Proving the possibility of a universal, general, and reciprocal relationship between God and human beings demonstrates that not only does God exist, but also that the nature of His existence involves recurrent manifestation and sufficient evidence. This means that, on the one hand, there is the possibility that God communicates with all people through various styles of mystical and religious experiences and on the other hand, that all human beings can potentially relate to their Lord in a general way.

The first step is ultimately not enough to criticize deductive and inductive interpretations, since an advocate of the argument might contend that such a possibility does not entail its actualization. They would reject the realization of such a relationship, consistent with their argument. Therefore, in the second step, the actualization of such a relationship between God and creatures through religious experience should be assessed and proven. The second step will be conducted on the basis of one of the greatest Muslim philosophers of all time, namely Avicenna, among whose works discussions regarding this disputation can be abundantly found.

Based on Avicenna's presuppositions and after taking these two steps, it will be proven that not only is God not hidden, but also the possibility and actuality of such a relationship disprove hiddenness and prove the presence of God. Hence, what the two interpretations of the hiddenness argument have claimed, namely, the philosophical and logical conflict between God and divine hiddenness, will be undermined.

Before addressing the critique of the divine hiddenness argument from our specific perspective in this article, it is necessary to clarify important points and ambiguities that may be raised on the margins of this discussion:

Although Avicenna's philosophy and the problem of divine hiddenness presented by Schellenberg belong to two completely different paradigms, both are based on clear rational arguments and principles that can be evaluated across different schools of thought.

Additionally, critiques of the argument from divine hiddenness based on the concept of "religious experience," which is a significant and noteworthy topic



in the philosophy of religion, due to some shared aspects between Islamic and Christian theology, can serve to a great extent as a common ground for dialogue between Islamic and Christian theology, despite their differences. Moreover, Avicenna is a prominent Islamic philosopher who has paid considerable attention to the question of “proving the existence of God” in his philosophical discussions and has sought to provide definitive arguments on this matter. This issue is also of interest to Christian theist philosophers and theologians, such as Swinburne and others, who have used the concept of religious experience to formulate arguments for the existence of God.

Thus, even though Avicenna does not explicitly mention the term “religious experience,” which undoubtedly has its origins in Christian and Western theology, some of his philosophical discussions relate to this topic, as will be outlined in this article. Based on this connection, we can utilize Avicenna’s thought to critique the “divine hiddenness” argument alongside the ideas of Christian philosophers and theologians who have addressed this issue.

### **2.1. Ontological Deliberations on the Possibility of a Relationship with the Transcendent Through Religious and Mystical Experiences**

Schellenberg’s interpretations of the hiddenness argument mainly concentrate on the God of monotheism, but it seems that we must focus on the transcendent in our discussion for two reasons. First, the common element of these experiences – as philosophers of religion explicitly declare – is recognition, consciousness, and a relationship with the transcendent. That is why we pose it in a more general vein regarding the transcendent.

The second reason is that the transcendent, which is what all religions concentrate on, is either self-existent and self-originating—which, in our view, is the God referenced by monotheistic religions—or it is not self-existent. In the latter case, based on Avicenna’s decisive intellectual and philosophical arguments such as the “contingency and necessity” argument, the argument of “the truthful” (*burhān al-siddiqīn*), etc, He must be the self-subsisting existent. Otherwise, it would lead to infinite regress or circular reasoning, both types of logical fallacies (Avicenna, 1979, pp. 242-244). Based on Avicenna’s principles, in either case, the transcendent in various religious experiences is in some way proving the God of monotheism. Thus, regarding what has been said so far, it is vividly a desideratum to talk about the transcendent.

### **2.2. The Very Definition and Nature of the Transcendent Reality**

According to some philosophers of religion, the common element in the



definition of all religions, despite the disagreement about a single definition, is 'awareness of the transcendent.' This is also true of religious experiences. Although there is no common cognitive content between them, the existence of the transcendent enjoys broad consensus (Geisler, 2003, p. 28). Hence, what is meant by the transcendent is a universal and all-inclusive reality embracing both pantheism and theism and personal and impersonal approaches toward the deity. Therefore, the God of theism, Brahman, Nirvana, Thao, and even Schleiermacher's universal reason, Otto's numinous, Tillich's existence beyond existence, and so forth are all various understandings of the transcendent (Geisler, 2003, p. 16).

From a different perspective, it can be said that the transcendent has two elemental factors: First, it exists beyond human indirect consciousness, which is why it is called 'the transcendent,' and second, teleologically speaking, it serves as the final cause, thereby acquiring religious significance. Put differently, the transcendent is perfection and the final end, attaining which, one seeks nothing beyond. The latter element makes humankind committed and devoted. Thus, some examples of it cannot be found outside the realm of religion (Geisler, 2003, pp. 31-32).

### **2.3. The Possibility of Connection Between the Transcendent Reality and Creation from Avicenna's Perspective.**

For Avicenna, one of the realms of the immaterial world or the realm of pure intellects (transcendental affairs) is the Active intellect whose responsibility is to govern the material world, including human souls. Hence, the Active Intellect is connected with human souls, and this connection is in the form of a unitive relationship through which human souls receive intellectual forms and truths. In other words, because the Active Intellect is considered a direct cause of existence for the creatures of the world and is postulated to perpetually endow them with forms, the transcendental entity, including the Active Intellect, perpetually relates to its creatures (Avicenna, 1979, p. 57).

This issue can also be addressed through Avicenna's viewpoint on causation. The effect depends on its cause, both in coming into existence and continuing to exist. In this vein, as long as the effect exists, it is related to its cause. Consequently, he considers that the source of all human perceptions from immaterial entities, which lack material characteristics and possess attributes like universality, is this fundamental connection between humans and Separate Intellects (Avicenna, 2000, p. 577).

Based on this, Avicenna considers mystical (intuitive) experience to be the most important human knowledge, which is attained through the strong

connection of human souls with the intellects and the imprinting of intelligible forms on souls. Consequently, from his perspective, the nature of revelation is also intellectual emanations from the Active Intellect. Therefore, the scope of the possibility of such a connection for human beings includes the creation of mystical states as well as the reception of universal concepts, which is the result of actualizing this potential (Avicenna, 1979, p. 223).

These attainments come in a hierarchical structure and the actualization of such potentiality in human beings depends on the capability of their souls, their readiness for communication with the intellects, and the intensity of their proximity to the intellects. Hence, acquiring such observations and developing these capabilities is realizable through detachment from mundane dependence and concerns, in addition to catharsis or self-purification (Avicenna, 2000, p. 341).

Such a person, through their connection with transcendent sources, gains a light from the divine, granting them the ability to influence worldly things.

This point demonstrates that, for Avicenna, the kind of observation that is the very consequence of striving for inner betterment and self-purification is the mystical states and experiences, as mystics believe. (Avicenna, 1992, pp. 277-278).

In this matter, as in many other matters, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) was influenced by al-Farabi. Evidence of this influence is that Avicenna, because of al-Farabi's philosophical power and precision, referred to al-Farabi as the "most knowledgeable of the later philosophers." Therefore, for understanding Avicenna's view, the statements of al-Farabi will be very effective. This is because Avicenna, like al-Farabi, believed that the source of divine emanation is first bestowed from God to the Active Intellect, and then emanates from the Active Intellect into the human passive intellect, which has reached the stage of the Acquired Intellect. Indeed, if a human can reach the stage of complete union with the Active Intellect, they will attain the stage of the "Acquired Intellect" (Farabi, 1995, p. 121).

However, al-Farabi considered this connection of the acquired intellect with the Active Intellect to be exclusive to the divine prophets, and through them, it is extended to all human beings. In other words, the path of connection with God and transcendent realities is open for all human beings; however, the way to actualize this possibility is not merely through learning the conventional and common sciences, or in other words, the acquired sciences. Rather, it is made possible through divine emanation and by means of the sources of that emanation, who are the prophets (Farabi, 1995, p. 121 & 109-111).

Therefore, those human beings who have not become solely occupied with their external senses and material aspects of their existence, but also pay attention to their sublime aspects and the higher realms, possess a sacred soul.

A sacred soul is one that, by virtue of its attention to the higher realms, has cultivated within itself the capacity and aptitude to connect with the sublime spirits, that is, the intellects, and to receive the forms of the intelligibles (Farabi, 1991, p. 82; Avicenna, 1904, p. 69).

The weakest type of connection between the intellects, transcendent realities, and particularly the Active Intellect with human beings is the emanation of the forms and truths of the intelligibles onto the human imagination. Avicenna, in explaining the difference between this and intellectual perceptions, says that its origin, like general intellectual perceptions, is the human intellect. However, he believes that these intelligibles attained through the human imagination take on perceptible forms (Avicenna, 1992, p. 199).

Al-Farabi also refers to the emanation of forms onto the human imagination as “witnessing.” This is because he considers the things that a human perceives not through reasoning but in a non-absent way as witnessing (Farabi, 1991, p. 93; Avicenna, 1904, p. 69). Therefore, witnessing is not exclusive to material things but also includes abstract and transcendent realities, for al-Farabi explicitly states that witnessing includes the vision of the Truth and unseen factors. They also call this type of witnessing a “vision” (*ru'yat*): “And witnessing is either through direct experience and encounter, or without direct experience and encounter, and this (latter) is a vision” (Farabi, 1991, p. 93).

#### 2.4. Avicenna on the Possibility of Humanity's Relationship with God

To analyze the process of how humans connect with transcendent entities and sacred, hidden truths, Avicenna addresses the possibility of a mystic gaining knowledge of the unseen and their capacity to convey it. He grapples with this issue throughout sixteen chapters (chapters 7-23) of his book, *al-Ishārāt va al-Tanbīhāt* [Remarks and Admonitions]. (See: Avicenna, n.d., pp. 150-160).

He states that awareness of the unseen is indisputable, and all humans have such capabilities. In his view, human beings, at least at times in their dreams, experience such things. Therefore, attaining some levels of religious experience and communication with the transcendent, especially with God, is feasible for everyone, even those who have weaker souls. Everybody is, albeit, not at the same level of nurturing such capability, because human experience has proven that, from time to time, some people can be aware of unseen facts by having true dreams. Thus, there is no intellectual boundary that such a thing happens when one is awake unless something prevents its occurrence (Avicenna, n.d., p. 150).

The argument for this claim, based on Avicenna's principles, is built on two premises: 1) The forms of events occurring in the material world are already imprinted in higher and transcendent sources before their actual occurrence; 2)

these forms, imprinted in the transcendent sources, can be reflected in the human soul under two conditions: the soul's capacity to receive them and the absence of any barriers (Tusi, 1996, vol. 3, p. 400).

According to Avicenna's philosophical foundations, the first premise is necessary because awareness of the cause entails awareness of its effect and since this world's supernatural and transcendental causes are abstract and self-conscious, thus they know every event of this world before events happen. It should be noted about the second premise that, regarding Avicenna's principles, the capability of communication with the transcendent and awareness of it is in everyone's nature and if one removes obstacles, he/she can actualize such a capacity. For Avicenna, one of the most important obstacles depriving human beings of communication with superior sources and transcendental affairs and, consequently, not receiving facts is being immersed in the five senses and the data acquired from them. Therefore, the path through which one can attach to and communicate with the transcendent, and beyond them, God, is disregarding the five senses and the data they provide. Of course, if a soul becomes strong, its various faculties can be utilized without any kind of conflict (Avicenna, n.d., pp. 152-154).

Furthermore, postulating Avicenna's principles, one of the common capabilities among all human beings is to know oneself and one's attributes which is presential knowledge and intuition. Human souls, like mundane facts, depend on their transcendental and metaphysical causes. Since God is the true and innermost reality of everything, including human souls, in direct and intuitional awareness of themselves, human beings, in fact, observe God and communicate with Him, and then they recognize themselves and others.

This evidence for the feasibility of such a relationship for all creatures can be explained in the following way: The existence of every existent is related to the existence of its cause based on the principle of causality, so every creature's presential knowledge and consciousness of itself is, in fact, knowledge of the relation of its essence with its cause. Consequently, no knowledge is acquired by a creature unless, at first, it obtains the knowledge of the deity. In other words, as the existence of an effect is not actualized without the existence of its cause, the effect's awareness of itself and its cause is not obtained without its cause's mediation (Avicenna, 2000, p. 115; Mulla Sadra, 2004, vol. 3, p. 396).

Therefore, it can be concluded that human beings can attain an understanding of God even through their ordinary perceptions, that is, sensory perceptions, and relate themselves to Him. This explanation can be reconciled with some kinds of religious experiences. Based on Swinburne's classification, they can be categorized as the second kind of religious experiences since they are mediated by sensory affairs, universal which makes them accessible to all human beings, and being extraordinary in nature, due to which most humans have deprived

themselves of these states and are not acquaintance with them (Swinburne, 2004, pp. 298-302).

In the end, the upshot is that communicating with God is possible and available for all humans. Having said that, only some of them are successful in actualizing this potentiality. The realization of this potential occurs at varying levels: some achieve it through rational contemplation, while others attain it through intuitive apprehension. It is evident that attaining the capacity for intuitive perception of one's relationship with God represents the highest level of this faculty. This capacity is achievable through diverse religious and mystical experiences, manifesting in varying degrees and forms.

Consequently, at the end of this part, which was about the divine-human communication and relationship, it must be stated against the content of the argument from divine hiddenness, that not only one is not required to hold that there is no relationship between God and humans, but also it is the intensity and proximity of such a relationship that causes the hiddenness. In fact, based on Avicenna's views, although human disregard of divine existence and coming to understand his/her relationship with God is undeniable as the cause of divine hiddenness, there are more complex reasons, some of which have been mentioned. Therefore, the occurrence of such hiddenness in no way results in the unavailability of a human-divine relationship which might lead one to believe in the non-existence of God.

## **2.5. Avicenna on the Ontological Assessment of the Occurrence of a Relationship with the Transcendent**

After proving the possibility of relating oneself to God and vice versa, it is time to assess the occurrence and actualization of such a relationship based on Avicenna's presuppositions. Some philosophers of religion assert that the occurrence of religious experiences for human beings is undeniable and undoubtable. For them, that human beings experience some things that are believed to have a religious nature is indisputable (Geisler, 2003, p. 64). According to Tillisch, all humans, even the nonbelievers have a sort of 'ultimate worship.' Even Freud has endorsed what Schleiermacher calls religious experience and introduces it as a kind of dependence on the transcendent or universal dependence that is a collective experience and all-inclusive. In addition, some existentialists have posited the modern human's enthusiasm and willingness to experience God. Regarding the aforementioned, it can confidently be claimed that religious experience exists among all human beings in a common and all-including vein (Geisler, 2003, p. 27).

In many cases where philosophers of religion attempted to define religious

experience and explain its nature, what they meant by religious experience was the experience of God. Therefore, instead of using the term 'religious experience,' they have utilized the expression 'experience of God.' For example, in the introduction of his argument entitled "Religious experience: perceiving God," Alston states that in his view, what counts as an initial component of the experience of God is the fact that the subject of such experience considers it an indirect and immediate awareness of God (Alston, 2014, p. 52). He concludes that many people have experienced God in that way. They hold it as a dynamic and vivid experience and a direct and immediate encounter with God which is distinguished from the state in which one contemplates and poses arguments for God and reviews his/her mental recollections of it (Alston, 2014, p. 58). Swinburne has also endorsed this when he defines religious experience and declares that religious experience is a kind of experience that appears to its subject as experiencing God or the supernatural or other transcendental affairs (Swinburne, 2004, p. 246).

The occurrence of religious experiences, indeed, does not indicate that they are representing something real. Neither do they indicate the opposite (Geisler, 2003, pp. 45-46). What is really at stake in religious experiences is not their occurrence but being rooted and arising from reality or hallucination, which should be philosophically discussed.

One thing that can prove the realism of these is the consensus and frequency of the reports of the mystics. It seems that attaching this point to what has been concluded based on the aforementioned can at least make it possible to attain a psychological certainty that mystic and religious experiences represent the real communication between humans on one side and God or the transcendent on the other side. For Avicenna, the frequency of reports means one single narration is reported so much by so many narrators that it guarantees certainty that conspiracy or consensus that it is false becomes impossible. There is no specific number for the narrators, but they ought to be so abundant that certainty is attained that the content of the narration is authentic and reliable (Avicenna, 2000, p. 115; n.d., p. 35). Thus, it can be argued that such narrations are necessary propositions containing psychological dogmas based on which one can argue for something and obtain certainty in its absolute sense.

The occurrence of mystical and religious experiences in different religious traditions and for all human beings demonstrates that the possibility and potentiality of communicating with God and the transcendent, which was proven in previous parts, has, at least in some human beings, been actualized. This very fact is another refutation against Schellenberg's hiddenness argument since not only has communication with God and the transcendent always been feasible and attainable and there has never been any kind of hiddenness, but also such thing has been actualized in reality.

Some prominent Western scholars have pointed out this issue. As one of the most significant researchers on the topic, Walter Stace, in his well-known book *Mysticism and Philosophy* declares, one of his primary objectives is examining the consensus and frequency of the reports among various mystics. He has designated one chapter of his book to this crucial issue (Stace, 1960, p. 42).

In addition to the consensus and commonalities between the mystics' various experiences in different cultures, William James notes that all these experiences indicate communication with the transcendent and the absolute and the aim is the unification with this superior reality (Stace, 1960, pp. 32-33). In his renowned book, *The Variety of Religious Experience*, William James collected around 200 cases of various kinds of religious and mystical experiences and classified them. In chapters 3, 16, and 17, he has discussed these experiences and specifically mentioned some of their characteristics, although some other features can be derived from his explanations. Despite the fact that some of them do not have a theistic interpretation of their experiences, James holds that it is not unnatural to take them as cases of divine revelation (James, 2009, pp. 47-49).

There might have been some scholars who have raised some objections to what Stace and similar thinkers have said. They set forth three distinguished forms of mysticism, namely naturalistic, monistic, and theistic ones. Therefore, the central idea, nature, and essence of these mystic approaches are so different that there cannot be a common core and consensus among them. Furthermore, based on contextualism, these similarities among various kinds of mystical approaches are just superficial and are caused by presuppositions of mystics.

Let us assume that these critics are right. Nonetheless, the minimum that these similarities among various religious experiences prove, even though they are superficial, is an indication of the occurrence of a relationship and communication with transcendental realities and affairs which suffices for what we need. Through separate analysis of each case, one can infer that they do not conflict with the consensus or frequent reports, and even if they do, it is not in a way that undermines the core findings. Therefore, all mystical and religious experiences in all religions and cultures, even if they are from some Buddhist cults which are questionable, indicate a human soul's understanding of the transcendent and communication with it, the object of which is God in some religions. This is exactly what we have been seeking to prove, that is, the indication of the occurrence of religious and mystical experiences or the occurrence of communication with God or the transcendent.

All that has been discussed so far proves that relationships with the transcendent through religious and mystical experiences have been occurring frequently. This can be postulated as the first premise of a deductive argument whose second premise consists of Avicenna's principles on massively



transmitted reports and traditions (In logic and philosophy, they are called *mutawātirāt*). The result of this argument is sound and valid according to Avicenna's approach and viewpoint.

To further elaborate, in Avicenna's thought, there is a specific pathway for understanding the reality of entities and achieving certain knowledge about them, namely, through demonstration (Avicenna, 1984, vol.2, p. 220). Alongside sensory data and experience, which can be epistemologically informative and is a source of knowledge in Avicenna's view, there are other sources for the premises of an argument, namely, massively transmitted reports, which can lead one to certainty (Avicenna, 1984, vol.2, p. 6).

Avicenna believes in the logical and epistemological value of massively transmitted reports which hinges on a kind of implicit deduction. For him, the human soul and mind, based on a universal principle, unintentionally endorses the truth of propositions derived from massively transmitted reports without articulating the premises of such arguments intentionally. This principle states that if the reporters of a single narration are so abundant that it would be rendered infeasible to have a conspiracy or consensus regarding a false narration, that single narration would be trustworthy and reliable. The second premise of this deduction is the human mind's endorsement of the frequency of some specific propositions. The content of this proposition is affirmed and approved by so many people that it would be nonsense to believe that their consensus is a false one (Avicenna, n.d., pp. 35-36).

Considering prior discussions regarding the relationship with the transcendent through religious and mystical experiences, their frequent occurrence is empirically proven. Drawing attention to the fact that frequency can be a source of attaining certainty, an argument can be formulated and articulated whose first premise is the frequency of the occurrence of communication with the transcendent through religious and mystical experiences, and its second premise is the reliability of frequency as evident content which can be utilized as a source for arguments and necessary deductions. The argument is as follows:

1. Some religious and mystical experiences, which represent communication with the transcendent, have been reported frequently.
2. The frequency of reports is one of the self-evident forms of evidentiary content for arguments and is reliable and necessity-inducing.

Conclusion: Therefore, a portion of religious and mystical experiences indicating a connection with the transcendent can be considered reliable and capable of providing certainty.

## Conclusion

Through conducted analyses based on Avicenna's principles and bases, it can be inferred that a divine-human relationship is possible for everyone. Actualization of the potentiality comes at various levels; some attain it through contemplation and argumentation, while others through intuition. The highest level of this hierarchy is in the form of various kinds of religious and mystical experiences that are actualizable for human beings at different levels, classes, and degrees. In other words, based on Avicenna's foundations and against the content of the hiddenness argument, the occurrence of such hiddenness in some human beings is in no way a sign of being deprived of divine-human communication and it does not signify the inexistence of God.

In addition, considering the occurrence of frequent religious and mystical experiences it can be proven with certainty that a relationship with the transcendent has been actualized. Based on Avicenna's principles, in the first form of logical deduction, which is commonly held to be reliable and yields trustworthy proofs and deductions (Avicenna, 1984, vol.2, pp. 107-108), the frequency of many religious experiences can be considered as the middle term and results in concluding the occurrence of a relationship with the transcendent through religious and mystical experiences.

### ▣ Conflict of Interests

▣ The authors declare no competing interests.

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