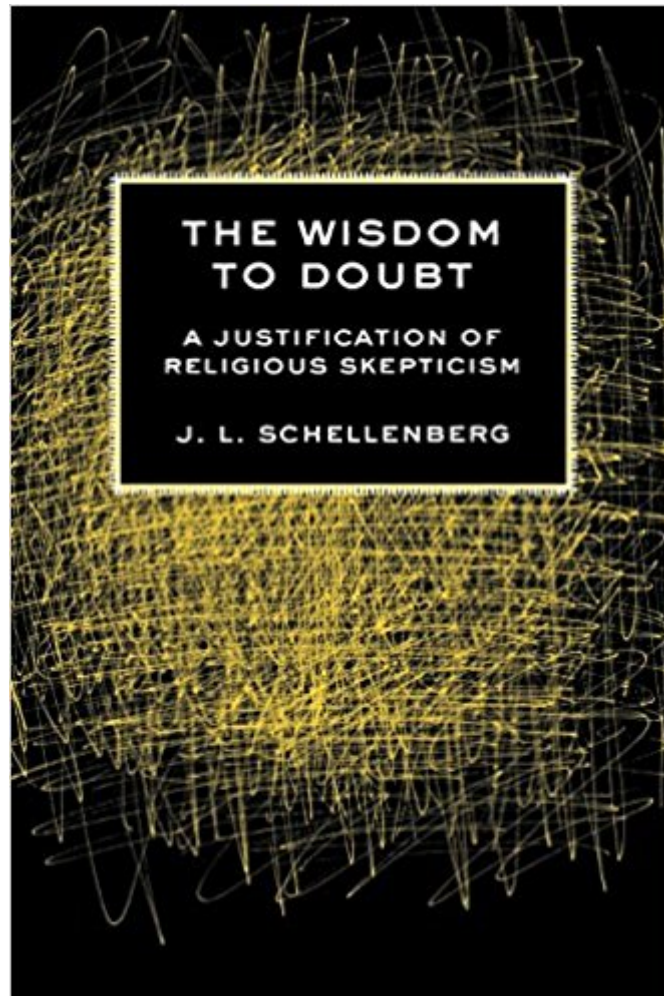


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# The Wisdom To Doubt: A Justification Of Religious Skepticism



## Synopsis

The Wisdom to Doubt is a major contribution to the contemporary literature on the epistemology of religious belief. Continuing the inquiry begun in his previous book, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion*, J. L. Schellenberg here argues that given our limitations and especially our immaturity as a species, there is no reasonable choice but to withhold judgment about the existence of an ultimate salvific reality. Schellenberg defends this conclusion against arguments from religious experience and naturalistic arguments that might seem to make either religious belief or religious disbelief preferable to his skeptical stance. In so doing, he canvasses virtually all of the important recent work on the epistemology of religion. Of particular interest is his call for at least skepticism about theism, the most common religious claim among philosophers. The Wisdom to Doubt expands the author's well-known hiddenness argument against theism and situates it within a larger atheistic argument, itself made to serve the purposes of his broader skeptical case. That case need not, on Schellenberg's view, lead to a dead end but rather functions as a gateway to important new insights about intellectual tasks and religious possibilities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Schellenberg's book provides an interesting and thought provoking case for Categorical Religious Skepticism. . . . Like his other books, *The Wisdom to Doubt* is well written and clear. Helpful charts and figures facilitate a better understanding of the text. His arguments become clearer and easier to grasp, and more challenging, the more time one spends thinking through them. I encourage readers to carefully attend to his arguments or risk missing a good opportunity to be

challenged." —Erik Baldwin, Kinesis "This is a brilliant work, full of original thinking and unhurriedly persuasive argument. The project it carries forward is a major new departure in the philosophy of religion, and should break much of the deadlock in contemporary debate." —Terence Penelhum, University of Calgary "The Wisdom to Doubt is extraordinarily well structured; moreover, it is stuffed with powerful arguments that are passionately expressed and enlightening. Those who are serious about the philosophy of religion will have to come to terms with it." —Daniel Howard-Snyder, Western Washington University "The Wisdom to Doubt is a major contribution to the philosophical discussion of religion and carries profound import for anyone interested in the study of religious phenomena. Schellenberg's construction of 'an edifice of doubt' here embraces a generalized religious skepticism that includes the claims of a naturalism prone to overestimating the accomplishments of science and underestimating the potential of religion. The book provides a sophisticated and systematic treatment of the arguments for and against the existence of an ultimate salvific reality, and in the process reveals a wisdom in rising above religious and irreligious belief which are both just 'too neat and tidy, too smooth and definite for our world.' In showing that it is 'abundantly clear that the truth about religion is unclear' Schellenberg provides a basis for different kinds of study of religion and religions that will appeal to many scholars within and beyond the walls of philosophy." —Donald Wiebe, Trinity College, University of Toronto

"The Wisdom to Doubt is extraordinarily well structured; moreover, it is stuffed with powerful arguments that are passionately expressed and enlightening. Those who are serious about the philosophy of religion will have to come to terms with it." --Daniel Howard-Snyder, Western Washington University --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The Wisdom to Doubt Skepticism I am writing this review today because the Divine hiddenness argument (DHA) and J.L. Schellenberg's work in promoting the DHA are being discussed and debated in the religious/atheism blogosphere these days, oftentimes initiated by atheists who are convinced that the DHA is a strong argument in support of God's alleged non-existence. This has prompted me to return to Schellenberg's "The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism" (2007) for a second look and further study and analysis. The outcome of this is to endorse his book as a deep, thoughtful and well-written philosophical analysis of religious belief, but to raise cautions about his fundamental argument and his suggestion that religious skepticism should lead the skeptic to embrace atheism. Allow me to explain my reasons: First, Schellenberg declares in his

Introduction that the “higher-level goal of philosophy of religion is to determine whether religious practice is justified.” (p. 6). Here is where my “wisdom to doubt” begins. Is it the role of the philosopher to determine whether or not MY religious practice is justified? Or the religious practice of a particular cultural or religious group justified? Or whether religion as an artifact of human civilization is justified? Schellenberg clearly comes down on the side of atheism throughout his book, with many clues along the way as to his preference in terms of the fate of religious practice. Take for example his discussion chapter titled “The bearing of pragmatic considerations” and specifically, his treatise of “The benefits of disbelief” p. 124-128. According to Schellenberg, disbelief “takes a huge load off our minds” and allows us instead to “enter more completely into the here and now” and “find ourselves more able to relax metaphysically and experience a deeper mental calm and emotional piece as we are “freed from metaphysical angst and transcendent aspiration.” Not only that, but disbelief helps us avoid the “self-deception involved in religious belief and gives us a “willingness to look truth in the face” and puts us into a state of “intellectual high-mindedness” and weaken the “believing disposition of both “religious and irreligious belief.” Here, my objection to Schellenberg’s argument for religious skepticism is that he has failed to sufficiently address how skepticism plays a role in faith development over a lifetime, where oftentimes skepticism leads not to atheism and the rejection of religion but to affirmation of universal principles embodied in all world religions through stages of cognitive and psychological development in a person’s spiritual and religious life. I recommend that Schellenberg examine the research of Professor James Fowler (1981). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: HarperCollins. However, the concept of faith development throughout a lifetime and the role of skepticism in faith development may be incongruent with Schellenberg’s concerns about religious diversity and the justification for religious practices of spirituality and mysticism through meditative and disciplined prayer as sources of the confirmation and justification of religious “claims.” For further examination of the role of spiritual experiences and meditative and contemplative disciplines in justifying religious faith, I recommend Abraham Maslow (1971). *Religions, values and peak-experiences*. Which brings me to my

skepticism about Schellenberg's overall treatment of religion as a collection of "claims" or "propositions" disembodied from communities of faith. Schellenberg defines faith as "a purely voluntary attitude of mental assent toward that proposition, undertaken in circumstances where one views the state of affairs to which it refers as good and desirable but in which one lacks evidence causally sufficient for belief of the proposition." (p. 7). There are two types of faith: propositional and operational. Both are a response to religious "claims." A "faith response" to a proposition is where the believer is "mentally going along with the content of [a] proposition" rather than criticizing or ignoring it. In my opinion, this approach to religious belief and religious faith is problematic because the major world religions are coherent and comprehensive belief systems. Their practices are traditions, rituals and symbolic expressions of a view of reality and a moral problem-solving paradigm rather than assent to isolated or particularized claims and propositions. The truth of a religion is much more of an integrated and holistic expression and manifestation of a world view than Schellenberg acknowledges in his endorsement of the skepticism that is to rid us of "metaphysical angst." In conclusion, *The Wisdom to Doubt* is "vintage" atheism, with a scholarly analysis of many of the more popular and commonly-known arguments in support of "reasonable nonbelief" in "traditional" theism. These include the Problem of Evil, which Schellenberg intensifies as "horrific suffering." Schellenberg not only raises objections to the "free will defense" of theists against the Problem of Evil, but concludes that "free will of the sort we find in the actual world ought to be viewed as an insurmountable impediment to theistic belief rather than a help." (p. 288). This bold assertion is, unfortunately, not supported by Schellenberg's musings about how God could achieve goodness and prevent horrific suffering without the risks entailed in granting free will to His human creatures. There is much of value to be gained through a careful and thoughtful reading of Schellenberg's *The Wisdom to Doubt*, most especially for philosophy "junkies" and students. However, I sound a note of cautions to those who might too readily and perhaps, without skepticism, accept the author's rationale for endorsing atheism as the outcome of religious skepticism. Schellenberg does not make his case. Readers of this book who are people of faith, especially, should keep in mind that skepticism, in and of itself, is not truth but is only a vehicle for discovering

the truth.

This book is a very important work by a top-notch philosopher who argues for "complete religious skepticism." He argues against any belief in "ultimism," which is based upon religious claims that entail "there is an ultimate and salvic reality." (p.3). In his words, "the categorical skepticism I am defending, as the name suggests, is doubt that embraces any and all religious claims," whether it's "religious belief" or religious disbelief." (p. 50) He says "our skeptic is not just an agnostic. (Indeed, his stance is compatible with atheism, since...atheism does not entail the denial of ultimism.)" (p. 3)

The book contains three parts and is not as technical as one would think. You won't find any symbolic logic to worry about deciphering. The arguments are understandable to the college student. You might first have to wade through the "Introduction" where he defines various terms he uses, although, if you've read his previous book, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2005), you would already be familiar with them. In Part One he argues for religious skepticism based on four distinct categories of thought called "modes," which he later combines into one. In the "Subject Mode" the author argues that human beings are limited in understanding. There is available evidence that is neglected and/or inaccessible to us. There is unrecognized evidence that is undiscovered and undiscoverable by all of us. In the "Object Mode" the author argues that it's probably beyond finite human beings to understand Ultimate reality, since it must be "something infinitely profound." (p. 51) As such, we may have inadequate and incoherent conceptions of it. In the "Retrospective Mode" the author considers the human past with regard to religious claims. The human past is too brief, ("only a few thousand years old") and we have been occupied by other things for us to conclude we have arrived at a final understanding. There have been moral, psychological and social factors which were actively against religious improvements to our understanding. There has been hubris (or self-importance) and greed, jealousy and envy, which taken together led to dogmatism, hostility and rivalry among people of different understandings. "Because religious belief is wrapped up with this ultimate concern, it has tended to go hand in hand with a rather fierce loyalty. Nothing less than complete devotion is appropriate where such a reality is involved." "How, for example, can one remain loyal to God if one allows oneself to be seduced by objections to the belief that there is a God?...she is likely rather to become stubborn and intransigent, because of a well-intentional but misplaced loyalty." "When they notice that others disagree, they tend not to think of this as an opportunity for dialogue and growth toward deeper understanding, but rather feel impelled to insist on fundamental error in the opposing views." (p. 76-78). Furthermore, "the more attached one becomes to one's beliefs, the more difficult it is to

remain open to their falsity and to engage in investigations that might show them to be false" (p. 84), which in turn has been "inimical to creative and critical thinking" about the Ultimate. In the "Prospective Mode" the author "considers what may lie ahead rather than what lies behind us." (p. 91). If we survive on this planet we have 1 billion years to come up with better solutions to understanding the Ultimate, especially since we've just entered an era of unprecedented access to digital information that may all be categorized and placed into a hand held iPod someday. Science will progress into the future as well. People will increasingly be forced to get to know others who have a different religious perspective with a global economy and travel, and we will learn from each other and become more tolerant and assimilating of these views with a healthy exchange of information. The author finally combines these four into one called "The Presumption Mode," which builds on everything he said before. He argues that "human beings are both profoundly limited and profoundly immature." (p. 117). Lacking any pragmatic reasons to counter his truth-oriented arguments, he concludes that "religious skepticism is positively justified." (p. 129). In a short Part Two, Schellenberg applies these modes to the argument for naturalism and the argument from religious experience. He argues that "both sides are mistaken": "These sources of religious and irreligious belief do not have it in them to justify such belief." (p. 132). In Part Three of his book Schellenberg focuses his arguments against "traditional theism--the claim that there is a personal God," since this view of Ultimism "looms large in all contemporary discussion." (p. 191). Here is where he argues from divine hiddenness and the problem of evil that we should be skeptical of traditional theism. He also combines them to add even more force to his arguments. Scholars must come to grips with what he says, and so must everyone who is interested in such issues or who has a stake in their outcome.-----I'm the author of "Why I Became an Atheist," and the edited book, "The Christian Delusion."

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