

### III. MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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IF President Kennedy had not been shot, would he have bombed North Vietnam? God only knows. Or does He? Does even He know what Kennedy would have done?

There is a little known but interesting literature on the general issue exemplified by this question. In the 1580's a fierce controversy erupted between the Jesuits and the Dominicans about the relation between God's grace and human free will. The Jesuits held, among other things, that many human actions are free in the sense that their agents are not logically or causally determined to do them. ("Free" will always be used in this sense in the present essay.) How then does God maintain control over human history? Not by causally determining human actions, as the Dominicans seemed to believe,<sup>1</sup> but by causing circumstances in which He knew that we would *freely* act in accordance with His plans. This answer was developed with great ingenuity by Luis de Molina, and defended by other Jesuit theologians, notably by Francisco Suarez. Their theory includes the thesis that God knows with certainty what every possible free creature would freely do in every situation in which that creature could possibly find himself. Such knowledge was called "middle knowledge" by the Jesuits, because they thought it had a middle status between other kinds of knowledge—between God's knowledge of the merely possible and His knowledge of the actual; or between His knowledge of necessary truths, which all follow from the divine nature, and His knowledge of His own will and everything that is causally determined by His will.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is about two questions. The first is whether middle knowledge is possible, even for

God. I shall argue that it is not, on the ground that conditional propositions of the sort that are supposed to be known by middle knowledge cannot be true. I will examine (in section II) the attempts of Molina and Suarez to explain how God can have middle knowledge; and then (in section III) the account recently offered by Alvin Plantinga, who has reinvented the theory of middle knowledge. Two objections to my position will be discussed in section IV.

The idea of middle knowledge emerges in recent philosophical discussion chiefly because of its relevance to the second question that I shall discuss, which is whether God could have made free creatures who would always have freely done right. More precisely: Could God have brought it about that He had creatures who made free choices, but none of whom ever made wrong choices? The relevance of this question to the problem of evil is obvious and well known. If He could have, why didn't He? If He couldn't have, that's a good enough reason why He didn't. He could not have done it by causally determining the choices of creatures, for then their choices and acts would not have been free in the relevant sense. But it might seem that if God has middle knowledge, He could have secured creatures sinless but free by just creating those that He knew would not sin if allowed to act freely. In section V, therefore, we shall see what light the discussion of middle knowledge may shed on the question whether God could have arranged to have free creatures who were all sinless.

But first of all (in section I) I will try to explain why there seems to me to be a problem about the possibility of middle knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> An acutely argued Dominican contribution to the debate is Diego (Didacus) Alvarez, O.P., *De auxiliis divinae gratiae et humani arbitrii viribus, et libertate, ac legitima eius cum efficacia eorundem auxiliorum concordia* (Rome, 1590); see especially the seventh disputation.

<sup>2</sup> I believe Molina originated the term "middle knowledge" (*scientia media*). I have given a very simplified account of his reasons for thinking it appropriate. See his *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione concordia* [hereafter abbreviated, *Concordia*], ed. by John Rabeneck (Oña and Madrid, 1953), qu. 14, art. 13, disp. 52, n. 9–10, and disp. 53, memb. 1, n. 6, and memb. 4, n. 4 (pp. 339f., 360, 394).

## I

In the twenty-third chapter of the first book of Samuel it is written that after David had rescued the Jewish city of Keilah from the Philistines, and settled his men there, Saul made plans to besiege Keilah in order to capture David. When David heard of Saul's plans, he consulted God by means of an ephod, which apparently was an instrument of divination that yielded a yes-or-no answer to questions. David asked, "Will Saul come down, as thy servant has heard?" The Lord answered affirmatively. Then David asked, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the Lord replied, "They will surrender you." Thereupon David evacuated his men from Keilah, and hid out in the hills, with the result that Saul did not have the opportunity to besiege him in Keilah, and the men of Keilah did not have occasion to betray him to Saul. (I Samuel 23:1-14, RSV)

This passage was a favorite proof text for the Jesuit theologians. They took it to prove that God knew the following two propositions to be true:

- (1) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city.
- (2) If David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah would surrender David to Saul.

This is a case of middle knowledge; for it is assumed that all the actions mentioned in (1) and (2) would have been *free*, in the relevant sense, if they had occurred.

If we suppose that God is omniscient, we cannot consistently doubt that He had this middle knowledge unless we doubt that (1) and (2) were true. Therefore, as Suarez says, "the whole controversy comes back to this, that we should see whether those conditionals have a knowable determinate truth."<sup>3</sup>

But I do doubt that propositions (1) and (2) ever were, or ever will be, true. This is not because I am inclined to assert the truth of their opposites,

- (3) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would *not* besiege the city.

<sup>3</sup> Suarez, *De gratia*, prol. 2, c. 7, n. 1, in his *Opera omnia* (Paris, 1856-1878), vol. 7, p. 85. (All my page references to *De gratia* will be to this edition and volume.)

<sup>4</sup> Alvarez, *op. cit.*, Bk. 2, disp. 7, n. 30 (p. 74). See Suarez, *De gratia*, prol. 2, c. 7, n. 24 (p. 95).

<sup>5</sup> David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford, 1973), p. 79f.; John H. Pollock, "Four Kinds of Conditionals," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 12 (1975), p. 53. The law of Conditional Excluded Middle was defended by Robert C. Stalnaker, in "A Theory of Conditionals," *American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Series*, No. 2, *Studies in Logical Theory*, ed. by Nicholas Rescher (Oxford, 1968), p. 106f.

<sup>6</sup> Suarez saw this point pretty clearly; see his "De scientia Dei futurorum contingentium" [hereafter abbreviated, DSDFC], Bk. 2, c. 5, n. 6 (*Opera omnia*, vol. 11, p. 357).

- (4) If David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah would *not* surrender David to Saul.

Suarez would say that (1) and (3), and (2) and (4), respectively, are pairs of contradictories, and therefore that one member of each pair must be true. He thus affirms what has been called the law of Conditional Excluded Middle. But this is a mistake. To obtain the contradictory of a conditional proposition is not enough to negate the consequent; one must negate the whole conditional, as was pointed out by Suarez's Dominican opponent, Diego Alvarez.<sup>4</sup> It is true that in everyday speech we might deny (1) by asserting (3), as we may deny a proposition by asserting any belief we hold that is obviously enough inconsistent with it. But we might also deny both of them by asserting, "If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might or might not besiege the city." I believe the case of what Saul would or might have done if David stayed in Keilah provides a plausible counterexample to the proposed law of Conditional Excluded Middle; and philosophers have found even more convincing counterexamples.<sup>5</sup>

I do not understand what it would be for any of propositions (1)-(4) to be true, given that the actions in question would have been free, and that David did not stay in Keilah. I will explain my incomprehension.

First we must note that middle knowledge is not simple *foreknowledge*. The answers that David got from the ephod—"He will come down," and "They will surrender you"—are not understood by the theologians as categorical predictions. If they were categorical predictions, they would be false. Most philosophers (including Suarez but not Molina) have supposed that categorical predictions, even about contingent events, can be true by corresponding to the actual occurrence of the event that they predict. But propositions (1) and (2) are not true in this way. For there never was nor will be an actual besieging of Keilah by Saul, nor an actual betrayal of David to Saul by the men of Keilah, to which those propositions might correspond.<sup>6</sup>

Some other grounds that might be suggested for

the truth of (1) and (2) are ruled out by the assumption that the actions of Saul and the men of Keilah are and would be free in the relevant sense. The suggestion that Saul's besieging Keilah follows by *logical* necessity from David's staying there is implausible in any case.<sup>7</sup> It would be more plausible to suggest that Saul's besieging Keilah follows by *causal* necessity from David's staying there, together with a number of other features of the situation which in fact obtained. But both of these suggestions are inconsistent with the assumption that Saul's action would have been free.

Since necessitation is incompatible with the relevant sort of free will, we might seek non-necessitating grounds for the truth of (1) and (2) in the actual intentions, desires, and character of Saul and the Keilahites. It does appear from the Biblical narrative that Saul actually intended to besiege David in Keilah if he could. Perhaps proposition (1) is true by virtue of its correspondence with Saul's intention. One might also suppose that (2) was true by virtue of correspondence with the desires and character of the leading men of Keilah, if not their fully formed intentions. Maybe they were cowardly, untrustworthy, and ungrateful. And I take it that neither the Jesuits nor Plantinga would say that Saul's intentions, or the desires and character of the Keilahites, necessitated their actions or interfered in any way with their freedom of will.

But the basis thus offered for the truth of (1) and (2) is inadequate precisely because it is not necessitating. A free agent may act out of character, or change his intentions, or fail to act on them. Therefore the propositions which may be true by virtue of correspondence with the intentions, desires and character of Saul and the men of Keilah are not (1) and (2) but

(5) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would *probably* besiege the city.

(6) If David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah would *probably* surrender David to Saul.

(5) and (6) are enough for David to act on, if he is prudent; but they will not satisfy the partisans of middle knowledge. It is part of their theory that God knows infallibly what definitely would happen,

and not just what would probably happen or what free creatures would be likely to do.<sup>8</sup>

## II

I trust that it is clear by this point that there is reason to doubt the possibility of middle knowledge. Those who believe it possible have some explaining to do.

In Molina's explanation the superiority of God's cognitive powers bears the heaviest burden. He holds "that the certainty of that middle knowledge comes from the depth and unlimited perfection of the divine intellect, by which [God] knows certainly what is in itself uncertain."<sup>9</sup> This came to be known as the theory of "supercomprehension." According to it God's intellect so immensely surpasses, in its perfection, all created free wills, that it "supercomprehends" them—that is, it understands more about them than would be necessary merely to comprehend them.<sup>10</sup> But as Saurez pointed out in rejecting the theory of supercomprehension, to comprehend something is already to understand about it everything that is there to be understood, and it is absurd to suppose that anyone, even God, could understand more than that.<sup>11</sup> Molina seems to want to say that what free creatures would do under various possible conditions is not there, objectively, to be known, but that God's mind is so perfect that He knows it anyway. But that is impossible. The problem to be solved is how the relevant subjunctive conditionals can be true, and nothing that may be said about the excellence of God's cognitive powers contributes anything to the solution of that problem.

Suarez offers what seems to me the least clearly unsatisfactory type of explanation for the alleged possibility of middle knowledge. He appeals, in effect, to a primitive understanding, which needs no analysis, of what is for the relevant subjunctive conditionals to be true. Consider a possible free creature, *c*, who may not ever exist, and a possible free action, *a*, which *c* may freely do or refrain from doing in a possible situation *s*. We are to consider *c*, not as actually existing, but as having "possible being" in the cause (God) that is able to produce *c*. So considered, according to Suarez, *c* has a property (a *habitud*o, as Suarez puts it) which is

<sup>7</sup> Suarez makes a similar point: DSDFC, Bk. 2, c. 5, n. 11 (p. 358).

<sup>8</sup> See Suarez, DSDFC, Bk. 2, c. 1, n. 1–2, and c. 5, n. 9 (pp. 343f., 357f.).

<sup>9</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, qu. 14, art. 13, disp. 53, memb. 3, n. 10 (p. 389f.).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, qu. 14, art. 13, disp. 52, n. 11, 17 (pp. 341, 345).

<sup>11</sup> Suarez, DSDFC, Bk. 2, c. 7, n. 6 (p. 366f.).

either the property of being a possible agent who would in *s* freely do *a*, or the property of being a possible agent who would in *s* freely refrain from doing *a*. *c* has one of these properties, although there is nothing either internal or external to *c*, except the property itself, which would make or determine *c* to have one of these properties rather than the other. God has middle knowledge of what *c* would do in *s*, because God knows which of the two properties *c* has.<sup>12</sup>

Many philosophers would object to Suarez's ontology of merely possible entities, but perhaps one could develop a similar account of the relevant conditionals without such an ontology. God's *idea* of *c*, for example, is presumably an *existing* subject of properties. And one might ascribe to it, as a primitive property, the property of being an idea which, if it were satisfied by anything in *s*, would be satisfied by an agent that freely did *a* in *s*. This would have the disadvantage, however, of implying that whether *c* would do *a* in *s* depends, not on a property of *c*, but on a property of God's idea of *c*. That consequence might seem to compromise *c*'s freedom of will.

My principal objection to Suarez's defense of the possibility of middle knowledge is not based on ontological considerations, however. I do not think I have any conception, primitive or otherwise, of the sort of *habitus* or property that Suarez ascribes to possible agents with respect to their acts under possible conditions. Nor do I think that I have any other primitive understanding of what it would be for the relevant subjunctive conditionals to be true. My reason for saying that Suarez's defense is of the least clearly unsatisfactory type is that it is very difficult to refute someone who claims to have a primitive understanding which I seem not to have.

### III

In his several published discussions of the "free will defense" to the problem of evil, Alvin Plantinga has assumed, in effect, that God can have middle knowledge; and in the most recent of these dis-

cussions he has defended this assumption.<sup>13</sup> Following Robert Stalnaker and David Lewis, Plantinga adopts what he calls "the possible worlds explanation of counterfactuals."<sup>14</sup> For proposition (1) to be true, according to Plantinga's theory, is for the following to be the case:

- (7) The actual world is more similar to some possible world in which David stays in Keilah and Saul besieges the city than to any possible world in which David stays in Keilah and Saul does not besiege the city.

There are two important reasons for denying that this analysis establishes the possibility of middle knowledge.

(A) To the extent that it is plausible, the possible worlds explanation does not really give us a new solution to our problem about the truth of the crucial conditionals. It merely offers us a new and up-to-date form for the expression of attempted solutions that we may already have considered and rejected. (In fairness it should be said that Plantinga does not claim otherwise.) Two points must be made here.

(i) If the explanation is to be plausible, the kinds of similarity among possible worlds that are allowed to be relevant to the truth and falsity of counterfactual conditionals must mirror the considerations that would in any case determine our judgment of their truth and falsity. Some similarities cannot plausibly be allowed any relevance at all. Among the possible worlds in which David stays in Keilah, for example, I suspect the most similar to the actual world is one in which Saul does not besiege Keilah, and in which the subsequent history of David, Saul, and of Israel and Judah goes very much as it did in the actual world. Perhaps in such a world Saul has a slightly different character, or acts out of character in a way that he does not in the actual world; but I doubt that that is as great a dissimilarity as the dissimilarity between a world in which there is a siege of Keilah by Saul (and perhaps a killing of David by Saul) and a world in which there is not. I certainly would not conclude, however, that therefore Saul would not have

<sup>12</sup> I believe this is what Suarez's views come to, as they are found in *De gratia*, prol. 2, c. 7, n. 21, 24, 25 (pp. 94-96).

<sup>13</sup> The assumption passed unquestioned in Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, 1967), ch. 6. In his *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974), ch. 9, and less fully in "Which Worlds Could God Have Created?" *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 70 (1973), pp. 539-552, it is defended. At the same time Plantinga has attempted (successfully, I think) to free a part of his larger argument from dependence on the assumption (*The Nature of Necessity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-184). Plantinga has not used the term "middle knowledge," although it seems to me very apt for the expression of his views.

<sup>14</sup> *The Nature of Necessity*, *op. cit.*, p. 178. See also Stalnaker, *op. cit.*, and Lewis, *op. cit.* In the present paper I shall disregard complications having to do with conditionals whose antecedents are impossible, as all the conditionals that will concern us have possible antecedents.

besieged Keilah if David had stayed in the city.<sup>15</sup> That a world in which Saul besieges Keilah is in that respect unlike the actual world, is irrelevant to the question what Saul would have done if David stayed in Keilah. Some similarities between the actual world and other possible worlds are relevant to that question—for example, similarities and dissimilarities in causal laws and in people's characters. But we have already considered and rejected the idea of founding the truth of our crucial conditionals on causal laws or on people's characters.

(ii) Even the similarities that are allowed to be relevant to the truth of counterfactuals must not be given more decisiveness than we would otherwise accord to the considerations that they mirror. A world in which David stays in Keilah and Saul besieges the city is perhaps more similar to the actual world in respect of Saul's character than a world in which David stays in Keilah and Saul does not besiege the city. But we had better not conclude that therefore the former is more similar to the actual world than the latter for purposes of the possible worlds explanation, if we mean to adhere to the explanation. For this conclusion would give us more reason to reject the analysis in terms of similarity of possible worlds than to abandon our previous judgment that Saul *might* have acted out of character and so would only *probably*, not definitely, have laid siege to Keilah if David had stayed in the city. The issue here is a general one, and important. We have a well entrenched belief that under many counterfactual conditions many a person *might* have acted out of character, although he probably would not have. If the possible worlds explanation is to be plausible, it must not give such decisiveness to similarities of character and behavior as to be inconsistent with this belief.

(B) On the possible worlds theory, moreover, the truth of the crucial conditionals cannot be settled soon enough to be of use to God. The chief importance of middle knowledge, for Plantinga as well as Molina and Suarez, is that God is supposed to be guided by it in making decisions about the creation and providential governance of the world. And as Molina and Suarez insist, if God is to make such use of it, His middle knowledge must be prior,

if not temporally, at least in the order of explanation (*prius ratione*, as Suarez puts it), to His decisions about what creatures to create.<sup>16</sup> For similar reasons the truth of the conditional propositions which are the object of middle knowledge must not depend on God's creative decisions. Ignoring angels (fallen or unfallen) for the sake of argument, let us suppose that Adam and Eve were the first free creatures that God made. We are to think of God as choosing from among many alternatives; among them were creating Adam and Eve, creating other free creatures instead of them, and making no free creatures at all. According to the theory of middle knowledge, God's decisions to make some free creatures, and Adam and Eve in particular, are to be explained in part by the truth of

- (8) If God created Adam and Eve, there would be more moral good than moral evil in the history of the world.<sup>17</sup>

This explanation would be viciously circular if the truth of (8) were later in the order of explanation than the decisions it is supposed to help explain.

Here we are dealing with a type of subjunctive conditionals that we may call *deliberative conditionals*. They ought not, in strictness, to be called *counterfactual*. For in asserting one of them one does not commit oneself to the falsity of its antecedent. That is because a deliberative conditional is asserted (or entertained) in a context of deliberation about whether to (try to) make its antecedent true or false. In asserting such a conditional one commits oneself rather to the view that its truth is independent of the truth or falsity of its antecedent.

There is a problem, which so far as I know has not been discussed in the literature, about applying to deliberative conditionals, as Plantinga does, the possible worlds explanation of counterfactuals.<sup>18</sup> Consider a deliberative conditional,

- (9) If I did *x*, *y* would happen.

Is (9) true? According to the possible worlds explanation, that depends on whether the actual world is more similar to some world in which I do *x* and *y* happens than to any world in which I do *x* and *y* does not happen. That in turn seems to

<sup>15</sup> Similar problems are discussed by Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 174–179, and Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–77, 91–95.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Suarez, DSDFC, Bk. 2, c. 4, n. 6, and c. 6, n. 3, 6 (pp. 355, 361, 363).

<sup>17</sup> I have simplified here, particularly in the antecedent. God is supposed to have known that there would be more moral good than moral evil in the world if He executed a long series of actions, beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve. Many of these actions would be occasioned in part by responses He supposedly knew creatures would freely make to earlier actions in the series.

<sup>18</sup> Stalnaker would apply it to deliberative conditionals too. Lewis might not; see his *Counterfactuals*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

depend on which world is the actual world. And which world is the actual world? That depends in part on whether I do  $x$ . Thus the truth of (9) seems to depend on the truth or falsity of its antecedent. Similarly the truth of (8) will depend on whether God creates Adam and Eve.

I think it may be possible for a possible worlds theory of deliberative conditionals to overcome this difficulty in general, but not in such a way as to rescue the doctrine of middle knowledge. There is, I presume, a large class,  $K$ , of possible worlds that are more similar to some world in which I do  $x$  and  $y$  happens than to any world in which I do  $x$  and  $y$  does not happen. According to the possible worlds theory the truth of (9) depends on the actual world being some member of  $K$ , but not on *which* member of  $K$  it is. In asserting (9) in the context of deliberation I commit myself, in effect, to the view that the actual world is a member of  $K$  and that its membership in  $K$  does not depend on which I choose of the alternatives among which I am deliberating. This view may well be correct—if, for instance,  $x$  and  $y$  are linked by a strict causal law.

Similarly there is a class,  $K^*$ , of possible worlds that are more similar to some world in which God creates Adam and Eve and there is more moral good than moral evil in the history of the world than to any world in which God creates Adam and Eve and there is not more moral good than moral evil in the history of the world. The truth of (8) depends on the actual world being some member of  $K^*$ , according to the possible worlds theory. But how can the actual world's membership in  $K^*$  have been settled earlier in the order of explanation than God's decision whether to create Adam and Eve, or some other free creatures, or none? Here we face all the old difficulties about middle knowledge, and the possible worlds theory does nothing to help us answer this question. At most it explains why (8) is true, *given* that some member of  $K^*$  is actual.

Furthermore there is reason to believe that the actual world's membership in  $K^*$  cannot have been settled earlier in the order of explanation than God's decision. Let us say that one of God's alternatives is *represented* in  $K^*$  if and only if there is some world in  $K^*$  in which He chooses that alternative. If any of the alternatives among which God was choosing is not represented in  $K^*$ , then the actual world's membership in  $K^*$  depends on His rejecting that alternative, and therefore cannot be prior in the order of explanation to His decision.

But I think at least one of God's alternatives is indeed unrepresented in  $K^*$ . For one alternative was to make no free creatures at all, and I do not see how a world in which there are no free creatures at all could be a member of  $K^*$ . Since it is free actions that are morally good and morally evil,<sup>19</sup> no possible world,  $w$ , will be a member of  $K^*$  unless there is some feature of  $w$  by virtue of which a difference in the free actions of free creatures in some worlds  $u$  and  $v$  would be a reason for counting  $u$  as more similar than  $v$  to  $w$  (in relevant respects). And any such feature of  $w$  must surely involve the existence in  $w$  of free creatures. If there are no free creatures at all in  $w$ , what would make  $w$  more like a world in which most free creaturely decisions are good ones than like a world in which most free creaturely decisions are bad ones? I conclude that the actual world's membership in  $K^*$  cannot be earlier in the order of explanation than God's decision to make some free creatures. Therefore the truth of (8), on the possible world's analysis, cannot be prior in the order of explanation to that decision.

Perhaps it will be objected to me that the partisans of middle knowledge need not claim that the truth of (8) precedes God's creative choices in the order of explanation. It is enough for their explanations if God *believed* (8) prior to making the choices. My reply is that if God acted on a belief in (8) before it was settled that (8) is true, then the fact (if it is a fact) that there is more moral good than moral evil in the history of the world is due to God's good luck rather than His wisdom—whereas the chief motivation of the theological theory of middle knowledge has been the desire to maintain that such happy results of God's dealings with created freedom are due to His wisdom, and that He had no need at all of luck.

#### IV

Of the philosophical objections that may be raised against my critique of the theory of middle knowledge, two seem to me the most important.

(A) I have relied on the claim that in the circumstances assumed in our example about David and Saul at Keilah, what is true by virtue of Saul's intentions and character is not

- (1) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city,

<sup>19</sup> Plantinga insists on this point (*The Nature of Necessity*, *op. cit.*, p. 166f.).

but

- (5) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would *probably* besiege the city.

Suarez has an interesting objection to this claim. He argues, in effect, that (5) can only mean that (1) is probably true, and that in accepting (5) one commits oneself, albeit with some trepidation, to the truth of (1).<sup>20</sup> Certainly it would be pragmatically inconsistent to assert that (1) is probably true and deny (as I do) that there is any way in which (1) can be true.

In proposing (5) as an alternative to (1), however, I do not understand it as a claim that (1), or any other proposition, *is* probable. It is rather a claim that

- (10) Saul will besiege Keilah

would be probable, given facts that would (definitely, not just probably) obtain if David stayed in Keilah. While "probably" is an epistemological term, moreover, it is used in (5) primarily to characterize dispositions or tendencies toward the truth of (10) that there would be if David stayed in Keilah. (5) does not imply that anyone would *know* the facts that would probabilify (10), but only that they would *obtain*, if David stayed in Keilah.

This view is consistent with treatment that (5) might receive under either of the two major types of theory of counterfactuals distinguished by Lewis. According to a *metalinguistic* theory, as Lewis puts it, "a counterfactual is true, or assertable, if and only if its antecedent, together with suitable further premises, implies its consequent."<sup>21</sup> Holding a theory of this type, we might say that (5) is true if and only if (10) would be probable on total evidence constituted by the antecedent of (5), together with suitable further premises. The suitable further premises in this case would be partly about Saul's intentions and character. Lewis has proposed for the *possible worlds* theory an essentially similar treatment of counterfactuals that involve probability in the way that (5) does.<sup>22</sup>

(B) Probably the most serious grounds for misgivings about my argument may be found in cases in which we seem to have confidence in what looks like a piece of middle knowledge. Suarez appeals

to such confidence on the part of ordinary speakers,<sup>23</sup> and Plantinga endeavors to provide us with convincing examples of it.

In one of Plantinga's fictitious examples Curley Smith, a mayor of Boston, has accepted a bribe of \$35,000 to drop his opposition to a proposed free-way route. In this case is the following true?

- (11) Smith would still have accepted a bribe to drop his opposition, if the bribe had been \$36,000.

Plantinga thinks "the answer seems fairly clear: indeed [Smith] would have" accepted the larger bribe;<sup>24</sup> and I agree.

But what makes (11) true? Let us note that it belongs to the class of subjunctive conditionals with antecedents assumed to be false and consequents assumed to be true, which have been called *semi-factals*. What makes (11) true, I think, is that its consequent is true and the truth of its antecedent would not have prevented, or made less likely, the event that makes the consequent true. My view here is in accord with Nelson Goodman's claim that "in practice full counterfactuals affirm, while semifactuals deny, that a certain connection obtains between antecedent and consequent."<sup>25</sup> My account of what makes (11) true does not suggest a way in which (1) or (2) could be true, since they do not have true consequents to help make them true.

Furthermore, if my account is right, it was presumably not settled that (11) is true before (in the order of explanation) it was settled that Smith was going to be offered, and accept, \$35,000, since his actual acceptance is part of what makes (11) true. I see no reason, therefore, to suppose that God could have known of the truth of (11) early enough in the order of explanation to make use of it as He is supposed to make use of middle knowledge.

Another type of case, not presented by Plantinga, perplexes me more. There does not normally seem to be any uncertainty at all about what a butcher, for example, would have done if I had asked him to sell me a pound of ground beef, although we suppose he would have had free will in the matter.

<sup>20</sup> Suarez, DSDFC, Bk. 2, c. 5, n. 9 (p. 357f.). I am simplifying here, but I think not in such a way as to make this argument less plausible.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> David Lewis, "Counterfactuals and Comparative Probability," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, vol. 2 (1973), p. 437f.

<sup>23</sup> Suarez, DSDFC, Bk. 2, c. 5, n. 8 (p. 357).

<sup>24</sup> Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (London, 1954), p. 15.

We say he would certainly have sold me the meat, if he had it to sell. What makes us regard it as certain? Chiefly his character, habits, desires, and intentions, and the absence of countervailing dispositions. (He would have had no motive to refuse me.)

There are three alternative views one might take of this case. One might say that if I had asked the butcher to sell me the meat, (i) he would only probably have sold it to me, though we normally ignore the minute but real chance there would have been that he would refuse; *or* (ii) he would certainly have sold me the meat, because he would have been causally determined to do so by his character and dispositions; *or* (iii) his character and dispositions would not have causally determined his action, but they render it absolutely certain that he would have complied with my request.

I have rested an important part of my argument on the assumption that what a person's character and dispositions do not causally determine, they do not render absolutely certain. Alternative (iii) is inconsistent with this assumption. It still seems to me, however, that my assumption is sound and alternative (iii) is more implausible than (i) or (ii)—although I must admit that I am not altogether content with either of them. For what is the nature of the rendering certain in alternative (iii), if it is not causal determination? On some views—Humean views—of the nature of probability and causality, alternative (iii) is plainly impossible; and I do not know of any theory that would render it intelligible.

## V

Could God have arranged to have creatures who would perform free actions but only right ones? Let us consider the question first on the assumption that God has middle knowledge. In that case, we might think, He could have obtained sinless free creatures simply by making only those that He knew would always freely do right in those situations in which He would permit them to act freely.<sup>26</sup> Plantinga's response to this argument, a response which he develops with much greater elegance than I have space to reproduce here, is that God could not do this unless there are some possible free creatures who would in fact behave so well, and

that perhaps none would. Plantinga proposes the hypothesis that all possible free creatures (or their essences) have *trans-world depravity*. Roughly speaking, a possible free creature (or its essence) has trans-world depravity, in Plantinga's sense, if and only if that creature *would* do some wrong if God created it and permitted it to act freely, no matter what else God did. If the hypothesis of universal trans-world depravity is true, God must have known it is true, if He had middle knowledge, and must therefore have known that some evil was the inescapable price of created freedom.

Plantinga does not claim that the hypothesis is true, or even that it is plausible.<sup>27</sup> He argues only that it is logically possible, because he is using it to defend the view that it is logically possible that both God and evil exist. I do not doubt that the latter is logically possible; but religious thought must seek an account of the relations between God and evil that is credible, as well as logically possible.

It is worth asking, therefore, whether the hypothesis of universal trans-world depravity is plausible, on the assumptions about truth of conditionals that Plantinga shares with the Jesuit theologians. I think Molina and Suarez would deny that any possible free creature (or any free creature's essence) has trans-world depravity; and they could support their denial with persuasive arguments. Suarez holds that "it is alien to the common doctrine . . . and to the divine perfection and omnipotence, and is therefore of itself incredible enough, to say that God cannot predetermine [*praedefinire*] an honorable free act, in particular and with all [its] circumstances, by His absolute and effective will, the freedom of the created will still being preserved."<sup>28</sup> God uses his middle knowledge to make such predeterminations effective, choosing conditions and helps of grace that He knows will elicit a favorable response, and avoiding those under which He knows that the creature would not act according to the divine purpose. This presupposes, of course, that for every possible honorable free act of every possible free creature, in any possible outward circumstances, there are some incentives or helps of grace that God could supply, to which the creature would respond favorably though he could have responded unfavorably. But this is a very plausible presupposition if we assume, as Suarez does, that the theory of middle knowledge

<sup>26</sup> This argument is crisply stated by Nelson Pike, "Plantinga on the Free Will Defense: A Reply," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 63 (1966), p. 93f. "Will" replaces "would" in Pike's formulation, but it is clearly middle knowledge that is involved.

<sup>27</sup> Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (*op. cit.*), compare p. 165 with p. 189.

<sup>28</sup> Suarez, *DSDFC*, Bk. 2, c. 4, n. 4 (p. 354).



is correct, and that there is an infinite variety of natural and supernatural ways in which God can work on us inwardly, assisting our reasoning, affecting our feelings and perhaps our beliefs and desires, without causally determining our response.<sup>29</sup>

And if it is plausible to suppose that for every possible *particular* occasion of action there are possible divine operations that would elicit a favorable free response, is it not also plausible to suppose that for many possible free creatures, and even for whole worlds full of them, there are possible series of divine operations to which those creatures would respond by *always* freely doing right, never doing wrong? Molina held that both Jesus and Mary were preserved from all sin throughout their whole lives by God supplying them with gifts and aids that He knew would always elicit a favorable free response from them.<sup>30</sup> Presumably He could have done the same for others.

If the hypothesis of universal trans-world depravity is implausible, it might seem that I offer theodicy a better alternative. I deny the possibility of middle knowledge, because I deny that the relevant subjunctive conditionals are true. In particular, I deny that the following is true:

- (12) If God had acted differently in certain ways, He would have had creatures who made free choices, but none of whom ever made wrong choices.

In other words, I deny that God could have made

free creatures who *would* always have freely done right. The supposition that He could have done so is burdened with all the difficulties about truth of conditionals that afflict the theory of middle knowledge. Since (12) is not true, a reproach against God cannot rightly be based on its truth. And God cannot know that (12) is true, and cannot rightly be blamed for not using such knowledge.

My views about the truth of conditionals, however, do not tend to show that the following could not be true:

- (13) If God had acted differently in certain ways, He would *probably* have had creatures who made free choices, but none of whom ever made wrong choices.  
(14) If God had acted differently in certain ways, He would *probably* have had better behaved free creatures, on the whole, than He actually has.

In fact (13) seems to me rather implausible. Without middle knowledge God must take real risks if He makes free creatures (thousands, millions, or trillions of risks, if each free creature makes thousands of morally significant free choices). No matter how shrewdly God acted in running so many risks, His winning on *every* risk would not be antecedently probable. But I think (14) is very plausible. These judgments suggest that the necessity of permitting some evil in order to have free will in creatures may play a part in a theodicy put cannot bear the whole weight of it, even if the possibility of middle knowledge is rejected.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Bk. 2, c. 4, n. 5 (p. 355).

<sup>30</sup> Molina, *Concordia*, qu. 14, art. 13, disp. 53, memb. 4, n. 15-24 (pp. 399-405).

<sup>31</sup> I am indebted to several, including David Kaplan, and especially David Lewis and Alvin Plantinga, for discussion and for comments on an earlier version of this paper, which was read to an American Philosophical Association symposium. An abstract of the earlier version, "Middle Knowledge," appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 70 (1973), pp. 552-554. Work on the present version was supported by the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities.