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AN ANTI-MOLINIST ARGUMENT

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I. Middle Knowledge: The Issue

A vigorous debate about Luis de Molina's theory of divine providence[1] has developed in recent years in analytical philosophy of religion. Molina was attempting to reconcile providence with a firmly incompatibilist conception of human free will. (And I will accordingly assume throughout this paper that free actions are neither causally determined nor logically or metaphysically necessitated.) Molina held that God eternally[2] knows, with infallible certainty, about every possible free creature, exactly what that creature would freely do in any possible situation. Molina called this kind of knowledge "middle knowledge" (*scientia media*) because he thought it occupied a middle position, in certain respects, between two other components of the divine omniscience—between knowledge of necessary truths and knowledge of what depends on God's own will.

Middle knowledge would obviously be an immensely powerful resource for anyone trying to govern free creatures. If you knew exactly how every possible free creature would respond to every possible combination of incentives, you would probably not need omnipotence to establish yourself as emperor of the world, if that is what you wanted. Equipped with middle knowledge, an omnipotent God would be able to maintain providential control of the world without interfering with the freedom of creatures. Knowing under what circumstances and by what creatures a given action would be

freely performed, God could bring about their performance of it, without directly causing it, by causing them to be in those circumstances.

There are results, of course, that God could not bring about in this way—the performance of given actions by given creatures in circumstances in which those creatures would not perform those actions (as God, by virtue of having middle knowledge, would know). Molinists differ as to how great a problem that might be for God. Suarez, focusing on the reconciliation of divine providence with human freedom, thought it "incredible" that God would not be able, with the use of middle knowledge, to obtain just about any free act of a creature.[3] Plantinga, devising a free will defense against the problem of evil, argues that the very most desirable patterns of creaturely free action might be unobtainable for God.[4]

Middle knowledge must be distinguished from simple *fore*-knowledge. The object of the latter is what will in fact happen, and is expressed by categorical propositions. The object of middle knowledge is what would happen under various conditions, many of which will never be actual. It is expressed by subjunctive conditional propositions, many of which are strictly counterfactual conditionals. It has become customary in the analytical philosophical literature on this subject to call all of them *counterfactuals of freedom*. A counterfactual of freedom is a subjunctive conditional stating what would be done *freely* by a certain possible creature (or by more than one) under certain possible circumstances.

Counterfactuals of freedom must be contingent. If they were necessary, then the circumstances stated in the antecedent would necessitate the action described by the consequent, and the latter would therefore not be free. Alone among contingent facts, however, true counterfactuals of freedom are prior to the will of God, in the order of explanation, according to the Molinist view. For they are data that God takes into account in deciding what to do. Moreover, God's causing their truth would amount to God causing the supposedly free actions of creatures to follow from the circumstances in which they are performed, and would thus seem to be inconsistent with the freedom of the creatures. Who or what, we may ask, does cause the truth of counterfactuals of freedom, if God does not? This is a good question, and forms in a way the topic of the present paper.

The controversy about middle knowledge is primarily about counterfactuals of freedom, and only secondarily about divine knowl-

edge. Philosophical theologians generally agree that an omniscient God would know any true counterfactuals of freedom. But are there any? My admiration for Molina is great. His theory is one of the most brilliant constructions in the history of philosophical theology. But I think it fails because counterfactuals of freedom are in general false. More precisely, I believe that all counterfactuals of freedom about possible but non-actual creatures, and all that have false consequents, are false, and that if counterfactuals of freedom with true consequents about actual creatures are true at all, their truth arises too late in the order of explanation to play the part in divine providence that it is supposed to play according to Molina's theory.

One reason for doubting the truth of counterfactuals of freedom is that it is hard to see what would ground it. The categorical predictions involved in simple foreknowledge may be true by corresponding to future events, or so we may assume here for the sake of argument, in agreement with many philosophers. But in the case of counterfactuals of freedom that are about non-actual creatures or have false consequents, the conditionally predicted actions are not there to be corresponded with because they never actually occur. The truth of counterfactuals is commonly grounded in a logical or causal necessitation of the consequent by the antecedent, but such necessitation is incompatible with the freedom ascribed to actions in counterfactuals of freedom. So I do not see how these counterfactuals can be true.[5]

A quite different anti-Molinist argument, related to the question who or what brings about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom (if they are true) has been developed by William Hasker.[6] Molinists may wish to hold that in the case of a true counterfactual of freedom with a true antecedent it is the agent of the free action described in the consequent who brings it about that the conditional is true.[7] Ascribing this control to the agent seems obviously in keeping with an emphasis on the freedom of the agent. Hasker argues, however, that it follows from Molinist principles that "in general, it is not true that the truth of a counterfactual of freedom is brought about by the agent" (p. 48). He then (pp. 49-52) uses this conclusion to argue that Molinist views imply that if it is true that

In circumstances C, person P would freely do action A,

then, in circumstances C, P would not have the power not to do A, and thus would not be free after all with respect to doing A or not.

Hasker's argument is ingenious, and, if sound, constitutes, as he claims, a decisive refutation of Molinism.

I am strongly inclined to think that an argument along Hasker's lines is sound. Intuitive reasons for thinking so may be put very roughly as follows. Suppose it is not only true that P would do A if placed in circumstances C; suppose that truth was settled, as Molinism implies, prior to God's deciding what, if anything, to create, and it would therefore have been a truth even if P had never been in C—indeed even if P had never existed. Then it is hard to see how it can be up to P to determine freely whether P does A in C.

The detailed working out of Hasker's argument is quite complex, however, and involves some ideas that are potentially controversial as well as intrinsically interesting. I believe that by focusing on an idea that Hasker does not use in this context, the idea of *explanatory priority*, the argument can be simplified, and points of controversy avoided—though perhaps another is introduced. This recasting of Hasker's anti-Molinist argument is my project in the present paper.

II. The First Stage of the Argument

The first stage of his argument, in which he tries to show that Molinism implies that we do not bring about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom about us, is sufficiently complicated that I will not try to reproduce it here. It depends on a thesis, for which Hasker argues and which may be correct, but on which I would rather not depend, that counterfactuals of freedom, on the Molinist view, must be more fundamental features of the world than particular events are, for purposes of the logic of counterfactuals (pp. 45-47).[8] This thesis is avoided by the following alternative argument.

(1) According to Molinism, the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to God's decision to create us.
(2) God's decision to create us is explanatorily prior to our existence.
(3) Our existence is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.
(4) The relation of explanatory priority is transitive.
(5) Therefore it follows from Molinism (by 1-4) that the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is

explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.
(6) The relation of explanatory priority is asymmetrical.
(7) Therefore it follows from Molinism (by 5-6) that none of our choices and actions is explanatorily prior to the truth of any true counterfactual of freedom about us.
(8) Whatever we bring about is something to which some choice or action of ours is explanatorily prior.
(9) Therefore it follows from Molinism (by 7-8) that we do not bring about the truth of any counterfactual of freedom about us.

The central idea in this argument is that of explanatory priority, or an order of explanation. I think it is roughly the same as the idea that Scholastic philosophers expressed by the term '*prius ratione*' (prior in reason), but I do not mean to be committed here to any predecessor's version of it. Like the Scholastics, I do mean to distinguish this sort of priority from temporal priority. Even if there was no time before God decided to create us, or if God is timeless, God's knowing various things can be explanatorily prior to God's deciding to create us. And it is clear that according to Molinism (as claimed in premiss (1)), God's knowledge (and hence the truth) of all the true counterfactuals of freedom about us is prior in the order of explanation to God's deciding to create us, since (by the perfection of God's providence) they were all taken into account in that decision.

The most debatable point in this argument, in my opinion, is the assumption (6) that the relation of explanatory priority is asymmetrical. This assumption would not be plausible if applied to *all* sorts of explanations. Two theories, for instance, can mutually illuminate each other. More to the point, two decisions—two free decisions, indeed—made by the same person at the same time can help to explain each other. But with respect to the specific explanatory relationships among facts and events that figure in my argument, I think it is plausible to rule out the possibility of a closed explanatory loop. I will not claim more than plausibility for the assumption, however. The question of the possibility of closed explanatory loops is one that naturally arises in connection with issues about divine foreknowledge and providence; and our judgment about it is apt in any case to have some effect on our conclusions in this area.

Of the remaining premisses of the argument, (2) and (3) seem to me obviously correct. The transitivity of explanatory priority (4) is

less debatable than its asymmetry.[9] And premiss (8) can be defended as a partial definition or analysis of bringing about.

III. The Second Stage of the Argument

Having reached the conclusion that created, supposedly free agents do not bring about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom about them if Molinism is true, Hasker argues that it follows that such agents do not have the power to act otherwise than they in fact do, and hence are not really free. This argument employs a "power entailment principle,"

> (PEP) If it is in A's power to bring it about that *P*, and "*P*" entails "*Q*" and "*Q*" is false, then it is in A's power to bring it about that *Q* (p. 49).

Now suppose A performs action X. Or in Hasker's concrete example, suppose Elizabeth accepts a research grant in circumstances C. Was it in her power to bring it about that in circumstances C she does not accept the research grant? Hasker thinks that on Molinist assumptions her non-acceptance in those circumstances would *entail* the counterfactual of freedom, "If Elizabeth were offered a research grant in circumstances C, she would not accept it." But given that we do not bring about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom about us, Hasker thinks "[i]t follows that Elizabeth does *not* have it in her power to" bring about the truth of this counterfactual about her, "and lacking this, she also—by (PEP)—lacks the power to reject the offer.

(PEP) is not only interesting, and highly relevant to other issues about divine foreknowledge. It is also a principle for which Hasker, drawing in part on work of Thomas B. Talbott, offers persuasive arguments (pp. 108-115). It seems correct to me. It may remain controversial, however;[10] and there are least two other points in the second stage of Hasker's argument that may be thought debatable (though probably not *very* debatable).

One is the premiss that on Molinist assumptions, Elizabeth's refusal of the grant would *entail* the counterfactual of freedom of which it constitutes the consequent. Behind this premiss lies the assumption that for Molinism it is a *necessary* truth that every counterfactual of freedom whose consequent is true is true. I think that is the normal interpretation of Molinism, and any other interpretation would imply

that God might have lacked middle knowledge. But some Molinist, intent on refuting Hasker, might conceivably wish to fiddle with this assumption.

The other debatable point is Hasker's assumption that if Molinism implies, as he argued, that we *do not* bring about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom about us, it also implies that we do not have the *power* to bring about their truth. The assumption is plausible, but I am not sure it has been proved. In particular, I do not take it to have been proved by my recasting of the first stage of Hasker's argument.[11]

In order to avoid these points of potential controversy, I prefer to take a different line in this stage of the argument, making use again of the idea of explanatory priority. In doing so, indeed, I do not need the conclusion of the first stage of the argument, but only the first part of my argument for it:

(1) According to Molinism, the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to God's decision to create us.
(2) God's decision to create us is explanatorily prior to our existence.
(3) Our existence is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.
(4) The relation of explanatory priority is transitive.
(5) Therefore it follows from Molinism (by 1-4) that the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.

Thus far I follow my argument of the first stage. At this point I add a premiss articulating something that is undoubtedly a feature of Molinism:

(10) It follows also from Molinism that if I freely do action A in circumstances C, then there is a true counterfactual of freedom F*, which says that if I were in C, then I would (freely) do A.

And I draw an obvious conclusion from (5) and (10):

(11) Therefore it follows from Molinism that if I freely do A in C, the truth of F* is explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

My key premiss in this stage of the argument expresses the idea that if my action is free in the incompatibilist sense, the action must be the first thing, in the order of explanation, that absolutely precludes my refraining from it:

(12) If I freely do A in C, no truth that is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C is explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

I put it this way, rather than saying 'If I freely do A in C, no truth that is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C is explanatorily prior to my doing A in C,' in order to allow for a case in which I make several choices simultaneously, each of which helps to explain the others, and more than one of which is inconsistent with refraining from A. I think that would be quite consistent with my doing A *freely*. What is inconsistent with my acting freely is for my refraining to be excluded by something that is prior in the order of explanation to the totality of my voluntary action in the situation C.

The remaining premiss is obviously correct:

(13) The truth of F* (which says that if I were in C, then I would do A) is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C.

Given these theses, it can be proved, by reduction to absurdity, that if Molinism is true, my doing A in C is not free:

(14) If Molinism is true, then if I freely do A in C, F* both is (by 11) and is not (by 12-13) explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

(15) Therefore (by 14) if Molinism is true, then I do not freely do A in C.

Since this argument applies to any creature's doing any putatively free action in any circumstances in exactly the same way as to my doing A in C, it shows, if sound, that creatures do no free actions if Molinism is true—which is of course contrary to an essential tenet of Molinism.

One of the attractions of this version of the second stage of Hasker's argument is that in relying on only a part of my argument for the first stage, it appears to avoid relying on the assumption that the relation of explanatory priority is asymmetrical. It does depend on the transitivity of the relation (premiss 4), but I think that is hard

to deny, as applied to this case. The premiss (12) in which I attempt to state a requirement of incompatibilism regarding free action is easily the most debatable assumption remaining in the argument. It will have strong intuitive appeal for some incompatibilists, I think, but Molinists can be expected to attack it. It is certainly incompatible with their aims regarding the relation of divine predestination to human freedom, as well as their views about middle knowledge.

One line of attack on it would begin with an argument that it covertly presupposes the asymmetry of explanatory priority. For it may be claimed that the intuition behind (12) could be equally well satisfied with

(12′) If I freely do A in C, my choosing and acting as I do in C is explanatorily prior to any truth that is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C.

It would be hard, I think, for an incompatibilist to reject (12′). And since F* is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C, (12′) implies that my choosing and acting as I do in C is explanatorily prior to the truth of F*. But if the relation of explanatory priority is not asymmetrical, then the priority of my deed is not inconsistent with F*'s (also) being explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C; and my *reductio* argument for (15) collapses.

I could reply to this objection by maintaining that the asymmetry assumption is correct, as applied to the case at hand. And I do believe that the specific explanatory loop that must be postulated by a Molinist who relies on the objection is implausible. How can my acting as I do contribute to explaining a truth that is explanatorily prior even to God's deciding to create me?

I think I can mount a stronger defense, however, by refusing the substitution of (12′) for (12). The objection under consideration amounts to the claim that (12) owes its plausibility to (12′), and is (implicitly) derived from (12′) by way of the asymmetry assumption. But I believe the plausibility of (12) is not in fact reducible to that of (12′). The intuition that supports (12′) may be expressed by saying that if my action is free, it must contribute something to the explanation of my not acting otherwise, and hence to the explanation of any truth that is strictly inconsistent with my acting otherwise. That is an intuition that compatibilists may share, insofar as they generally agree that the choosing or doing of an agent acting freely must be causally efficacious (though acceptance of (12′) will involve

compatibilists in explanatory loops if they believe that free actions are *strictly* necessitated, in the relevant sense, by their explanatory antecedents). But (12) expresses a more distinctively incompatibilist intuition, that the explanatory antecedents of the totality of my choosing and doing, in a situation in which I act freely, must leave the omission of the free action "open," at least in the sense of not being strictly inconsistent with the omission. (12′), in other words, is a thesis about what a free action must explain, or contribute to explaining; whereas (12) is a thesis about how a free action cannot be explained, and about the sense in which it must be true that I "could have done otherwise" when I act freely. So understood, (12) should appeal to incompatibilists and need not depend on (12′). It therefore also need not depend on an assumed asymmetry of explanatory priority.[12]

Notes

1. Luis de Molina, *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione concordia* [generally abbreviated, *Concordia*], ed. John Rabeneck (Oña and Madrid, 1953). The relevant portion (Part IV) of the *Concordia* has now been translated into English by Alfred J. Freddoso under the title *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).
2. In the present paper I shall not attempt to answer the question whether 'eternally' is to be understood as meaning *timelessly* or *at all times*.
3. Francisco Suarez, *De scientia Dei futurorum contingentium*, bk. 2, c. 4, n. 4, in his *Opera omnia* (Paris, 1856-78), vol. 7, p. 354.
4. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), ch. 9.
5. I have developed this argument more fully and carefully in "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977): 109-117, reprinted as ch. 6 of my book, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
6. In several publications. I will be discussing the form it receives in his book, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989). Parenthetical page references hereafter, if otherwise unidentified, will be to this work.
7. Hasker (p. 40) says he has heard this asserted by a noted friend of middle knowledge. I doubt that Molinists should maintain it. Freddoso (in the Introduction to his translation of Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, p. 75f.) denies that it is part of Molinism—though he denies it only on the assumption that 'bring about' is used "in a straightforward causal sense"—which is not Hasker's assumption (p. 39*n*).

8. Freddoso selects this thesis for attack in the Introduction to his translation of Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, p. 75f. He cites an unpublished paper by Thomas P. Flint as containing a fuller Molinist treatment of this subject.
9. This claim may itself be debated. Hasker has pointed out to me that transitivity of any relation, combined with its irreflexivity, entails its asymmetry. And initially we will surely think that the relation of explanatory priority is irreflexive—that nothing can be prior to itself. If we are seriously entertaining the hypothesis of a closed explanatory loop, however, a failure of irreflexivity may be exactly what we are envisaging. If a marvelous time machine transported me to the past, for example, and I there met my younger self and my older self talked my younger self out of committing suicide, the resulting explanatory loop could fairly be described, I think, by saying that my not committing suicide would be explanatorily prior to itself. (I do not mean to make a pronouncement here, either way, about the possibility of such an explanatory loop, or of time travel.) In any event I think it highly unlikely that the *transitivity* of explanatory priority fails in any way that would invalidate the inference from (1), (2), and (3) to (5).
10. It is the point in this stage of the argument that Freddoso selects for attack, on behalf of Molinism, in his Introduction to Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, pp. 76-78.
11. The issue here would be whether the thesis ascribed in (1) to Molinism, if true, could nonetheless be falsified by us if we did something we will not in fact do—whether there are acts we could perform but won't that would reverse the order of explanation discussed in the first stage of the argument, by depriving the truth of counterfactuals of freedom of its independence of the truth of their antecedents. An affirmative answer to this question seems to me bizarre, and unlikely to be appealing to Molinists, but I'd rather not undertake here the burden of justifying its exclusion.
12. This paper grew out of discussion at a symposium on Hasker's book that I attended at the Pacific Division convention of the American Philosophical Association, March 30, 1990. The principal participants, besides Hasker, were Thomas Flint and Stephen Davis. I am indebted to their discussion, and to Hasker for comments on a version of this paper, as well as to Marilyn McCord Adams for discussion of this topic.