


April 2017

Examination of Molinism

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Recommended Citations

MLA:

Steele, Olivia Grey "Examination of Molinism," *The Kabod* 4. 1 (2017) Article 2.
Liberty University Digital Commons. Web. [xx Month xxxx].

APA:

Steele, Olivia Grey (2017) "Examination of Molinism" *The Kabod* 4(1 (2017)), Article 2. Retrieved from
<http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod/vol4/iss1/2>

Turabian:

Steele, Olivia Grey "Examination of Molinism" *The Kabod* 4 , no. 1 2017 (2017) Accessed [Month x, xxxx]. [Liberty University Digital Commons](#).

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Dr. Leverett

THEO 350 Petition Paper

November 2016

EXAMINATION OF MOLINISM

What is the driving force behind salvation? Is it God's sovereign will, enacting His efficacious grace upon the heart of man? Or is it the free will of man himself, choosing to accept the grace that has been extended to him? This is the age-old question behind the argument of sovereignty versus free will. In typical evangelical circles, there are two basic schools of thought that are supposed to represent either side. Along the Calvinist line of thinking, believers are chosen, predestined by the Lord to be saved, and as such, the Lord's grace is undeniable. Whereas Armenians believe that while there is prevenient grace extended to all, the final choice lies with the individual, who has the control over what decision they choose. However, what if there was a place in the middle? This place would be where God's sovereignty and free will would not just coincide, but coexist in perfect harmony. God, through His omniscience and omnipotence, can predestine an individual for salvation while keeping the free will of that individual intact.

This is the idea that Luis de Molina, a sixteenth century Jesuit theologian, began to propagate. He developed a system of theology in which these two opposing views could exist together, in which neither God's sovereignty nor man's free will was eradicated. This system, known as Molinism, stands on three main principles: a wholly libertarian account of man's free will, the conviction that the grace the Lord extends to complete salvific acts is not in itself intrinsically efficacious, and the assumption of the truth of the concept of *Scientia media*, or

Middle Knowledge.¹ This idea being situated between the Lord's natural knowledge and His free knowledge. Natural knowledge is the acknowledgement of all fundamental, unchangeable truths in which God's will plays no part in the reality of these truths. It is the Lord's knowledge of the possible, what *could* be. Whereas free knowledge is the Lord's knowledge of the future based on what He desires to happen. It is His knowledge on what is certain, what *will* be.² In between these two, asserted Molina, was the Lord's *Scientia media*.

The basis of middle knowledge is that, "God has knowledge of metaphysically necessary states of affairs via natural knowledge, of what of what He intends to do via free knowledge, and in addition, of what free creatures would do if they were instantiated."³ Along this line of thought, God possesses complete knowledge of all that could possibly happen. He considers the reality of all the different circumstances that would bring about certain future events. Then using this middle knowledge, this seeing of what would be the case if certain circumstances and events came to be, God chooses which option is most aligned to His will. This *Scientia media* is not entirely in the realm of free knowledge, for its content is not based on what the Lord wills. However, it is not entirely natural knowledge either, because its content is conditional.⁴

This concept of Middle Knowledge is what separates Molinism from another main line of Catholic thought, Thomism. Thomism, viewed by some as a form of moderated determinism, is a Catholic theological system appropriated by those prone to emphasize the Lord's sovereignty over

1. Joseph Pohle, "Molinism," New Advent, 1911, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10437a.htm>.

2. Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 220-21.

3. John D. Laing, "Middle Knowledge," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d., accessed October 1, 2016, www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn/.

4. Ibid.

man's free will, (as does Molinism.) While the Molinist asserts that God holds the answer to all future conditionals based on His Middle Knowledge, He Himself does not decide whether a reality is true or false; rather He sees their contingent circumstances and then bases His decisions upon the foreseen outcomes. In contrast, the Thomist states that the reason the Lord knows the future of reality is because He Himself decides what will and will not come to pass. In this view, God possesses what Elizabeth Anscombe calls "executive self-knowledge"⁵. What we will do is known by Him because He actively wills that we should do it. This is aptly stated by Robert C. Koons: "Thus, the Thomist can assert that, in the final analysis, God's knowledge and God's will (that is, His faculty of knowing and His faculty of willing) are one and the same."⁶ In holding to this belief, the Thomist asserts that grace is thus intrinsically efficacious; contradicting the Molinist's principle of grace as being extrinsically efficacious.

Thomism does not emphasize the free will of man, and thus does not have a need for the concept of Middle Knowledge. Molina fought desperately to maintain the concept of man's free will; Middle Knowledge being the key that allowed him to do so. Middle Knowledge is the cornerstone of Molina's philosophy, the basis upon which everything else rises or falls. Taken at face value, Molinism seems to be the perfect solution. A system of theology in which sovereignty and free will can coexist in perfect harmony. However, when this philosophy is examined, problems and questions arise from it, proving that it is not a simple addition to theology.

5. Kieran Setiva "Intention," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014, accessed November 1, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intention/>.

6. Robert C. Koons, "Dual Agency: A Thomistic Account of Providence and Human Freedom," (Austin: University of Texas, 2002), 5, accessed November 3, 2016. www.robkoons.net/media/69b0dd04a9d2fc6dffff80affffd524.pdf.

All who hold to Molina's ideas champion the concept of middle knowledge. However, there is much disagreement as to the way that concept plays out practically. *How* does God discern the conditional future contingents, or "futuribilia" that determines His decrees?⁷ Molina himself argued for a type of "super comprehension" that the Almighty possesses. With this Godly superpower, the Lord can understand the will of His creation on a more intimate level than they themselves could attain. Because of this comprehension of their character, He can discern their will. From this discernment, the Lord can then decree which reality will be the present one.

However, later professors of Molinism asserted that the idea of super comprehension was not a possible solution to this question. There is such an infinite number of possible paths for any which person's nature to take that is inconceivable for the Lord to possess complete knowledge in the matter of their individual will. Furthermore, man's free will cannot be mechanically related in a cause and effect relationship with circumstances; it would imply that it is not truly unrestricted. Instead, God has direct knowledge of futuribilia unrelated to His insight into a person's nature. Therefore, it would be completely reasonable to ascertain that God knows the conditional future contingents in relation to His own free decrees.

Another point disagreed upon is the question of reasoning behind the efficacious grace the Lord extends. While Molina himself asserted that it is man's free consent alone that rendered grace efficacious, others stated that in addition to the free will of a person, God must also confer a congruous grace that will guarantee the desired free will choice. Along this line of thought, the Lord's use of middle knowledge is essential in knowing the exact amount of sufficient grace to

7. Alfred J. Freddoso, "Molinism," n.d., accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/molism.htm>.

extend to a person for salvation to be freely, yet securely, chosen by them, which then renders the grace efficacious. He predetermines before the situation is ever a reality that the person should freely elicit a salvific act, then consults His Middle Knowledge to determine what grace must be issued to make this reality true.

Molina and those who agreed with him argued that this meant man's choice was based on God's manipulation of the circumstances, thus it was no real choice at all. They fiercely sustained that the concept of the free will of man was essential to this theological system and so sought to protect it. They did so by maintaining that while the Lord is aware of the grace needed to elicit a salvific act, and does indeed provide that sufficient grace, it is the free consent of the man alone that makes it efficacious.

Finally, the main point that is disagreed upon is how the mechanics of predestination play out in this theology. Does the Lord sovereignly elect some to salvation and only then consult His Middle Knowledge to determine the grace that is necessary, or does He create a world in which He foresees a person's confirmation of the grace extended, and only then accept them into the elect? Some say that God first elected those He wanted, then consulted His middle knowledge to determine what world contained those circumstances and the sufficient grace needed to bring about the desired circumstances. However, others (such as Molina himself) maintain that the Lord first chose a certain reality to bring into existence before He foresaw each person's use of grace in that world. Once that choice was in effect, the person is then elected based on the Lord's foreknowledge of their perseverance.

Besides these oppositions within the system of Molinism itself, there are also a few objections from the critics of this theological system that are worth dissecting. Firstly, there are those that reject Molinism's strong assertion of libertarian free will. They say that in this strong

emphasis on freedom, the providence of God is compromised. These critics assume that Molinists believe that God cannot will the free action of creatures. In that belief, Molinists are limiting God to human capabilities, taking away His mystery of being able to keep a creature's free will while still maintaining His sovereignty. Therefore, critics of libertarian free will propose what is known as "compatibilist freedom" instead.⁸ The principle behind this concept is that one is not limited to just a choice between two competing alternatives, but can choose in accord with their own desires.

However, while these critics may have a point in stating that Molinism overemphasizes free will, this concept of compatibilist freedom by no means solves the issue. While they state that humans must be allowed to choose from their desires to experience true freedom, in the end, there is only the choice of belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, or rejection of that grace. It truly is simply a choice between two competing alternatives. Furthermore, if one does not accept that the Lord enacts libertarian freedom, a huge theological fallacy occurs. Compatibilists do not want to assert that God must only act in one certain way. However, they cannot think of any other result that does not end in either heaven or hell for the individual. Therefore, it can be concluded that a choice in accord with one's desires cannot be proven logically.

Grasping the difference between strong and weak actualization would also be extremely beneficial in deterring the objection to libertarian free will. While one may often think of God as creating the world, when the concept of Middle Knowledge is introduced, they find their point of view redefined. It is a truth that the Lord created the heavens and the earth. It is also a truth that He actualized this particular world with its distinct choices and circumstances. This can be

8. Laing

defined as strong actualization (God causing something to happen). With weak actualization the Lord places a free human being in circumstances that guarantee the desired event will be actualized. In the combination of the strong and the weak rests the balance between God's sovereignty and human freedom.

In the second rejection of Molinism, the concept of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom is criticized. While contingents are propositions of how free man will choose in various situations, and counterfactuals are propositions of how things would be if situations were different than they are or will be, counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are what a free man would have chosen if things had been different.⁹ This third concept is the breeding ground for contention because it brings the *Scientia media*, the cornerstone of Molina's system, into question.

Critics attack counterfactuals of creaturely freedom by attacking the principle of the conditional excluded middle. The conditional excluded middle states that when one is presented with two conditional states, both bearing the same antecedent but opposite consequents, one must be true and the other must be false. It is supposed that per Middle Knowledge, *pairs* of these conditional statements are always extended as the choice and either one or the other must be true. (This assumption can be derived from the aforementioned strongly held belief in libertarian freedom which gives two competing alternatives as the choice.) There have been situations and statements given however, that seem to deny the validity of this principle. These statements have two equally similar chances of being true, thus disproving the conditional excluded middle.¹⁰

9. Ibid.

10. Jeremy Goodman, "Counterfactuals and Comparative Similarity," (2015), 1-5, accessed November 7, 2016. <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~newc3660/CounterfactualsWithoutCloseness.pdf>.

However, one can respond that the inability to determine the truth of which possible situation is closest to the actualized circumstances is not due to a sincere indeterminacy, but rather to lack of knowledge about the actual world and about the criteria of similarity. Further, even if this principle is in fact proven to be a false one, the principle of Middle Knowledge may remain unaffected. The concept of bivalence still stands because there is only the presence of the single variable.

Those against Middle Knowledge combat this by retorting with the argument that this theological system leads to determinism. There are no true free actions completed by humanity, for in His use of Middle Knowledge, God ensures every choice for them. They say that since there is no risk involved on the part of the Almighty when the combination of His middle and free knowledge is in use, we cannot label man's choice as true creaturely freedom. God does not just know the future, He planned for it.

Molinists reply with questioning why divine risk would be necessary for creaturely freedom to exist. In the Lord's possession of divine foreknowledge, (and thus the elimination of His risk) it may be true that He removes the element of surprise. However, one cannot conclude that Jehovah does specifically plan for everything that will occur. Therefore, there is no basis for the conclusion that the removal of risk coincides with the abolition of human free will.

However, even if the Lord's divine foreknowledge does not destroy the free will of man, it must be admitted that some counterfactuals could be true regardless of the choice of the individual. Therefore, it is not a question of whether God interferes, but of whether the individual ever had a contrary choice. It would be beneficial to pursue the assertion by Molinists that individuals have counterfactual power over the past, which is the individual's power to

previously act in such a way that would change the circumstances in the past, and thus their present reality.¹¹ In following the logic of this argument, the claim that events which had casual consequences in the past are solid statements about the past can be denied.

What is one to say to the critic who asserts that if God truly was sovereign, why could He not use His Middle Knowledge to discern a world in which, when actualized, would result in all humanity acting to make His extended grace efficacious? Why need there be those reprobated if there could have been a different world in which all choose the way of salvation? One can respond to this argument with a question of their own – why are we to assume that there is such a feasible possibility in which every single man of his free will chooses salvation?. Furthermore, what if God did not actualize a world in which some are damned and some are saved? William Lane Craig elaborates on this point, stating,

God...has instead elected to create only persons who would freely reject Him in any world which is feasible for Him to actualise, persons who, accordingly, freely possess the property of transworld damnation. God in His providence has so arranged the world that as the Christian gospel went out from first century Palestine, all who would respond freely to it if they heard it did hear it, and all who do not hear it are persons who would not have accepted it if they had heard it.¹²

There are those who still seek to prove the falsity of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, and they try to do so by the most well-known argument, the grounding objection. This principle states that there is no basis for the truthfulness of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

11. Laing

12. William Lane Craig, “No Other Name: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ”, *Faith and Philosophy* 6, (1989): 172-88, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/middle2.html>.

If their basis is found in the Lord, as briefly aforementioned, it leads to determinism. However, they cannot be grounded in man for the following reasons: these counterfactuals must be facts prior to the individual's existence; this existence is dependent on God's will which would make the counterfactuals dependent on the same; and actions performed because of a person's psychological makeup cannot be promoted as truly free, so propositions that define actions and choices cannot be considered counterfactuals of freedom. While these are all solid disagreements to the grounding of counterfactuals, there are also several solid retorts given by Molina's advocates.

One response is their assertion that counterfactuals of freedom need not be grounded. They are viewed as hard fact. Molina's advocates also propagate that the idea of casual connection existing in these counterfactuals is based on the assumption of the falseness of libertarian freedom. Both of these assumptions cannot be proven with any solid evidence. Another rebuttal to the grounding objection is that futurefactual propositions are either true or false, though there is nothing to presently ground them. In the same way, counterfactuals are either true or false, regardless of a present truth to ground them. Finally, some Molinists argue for the suggestion that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are grounded in the individual involved as they exist as an idea in the precreative mind of God. Possibility for actuality remains, since the grounding is in the individual, and the previous problems with this are avoided as their existence is in the mind of God as an idea.

In the final argument against Molinism that is to be examined, critics are prone to say that there is no usefulness of Middle Knowledge in God's creative decision because it creates circular reasoning. God's creative activity must be successive to the truth of counterfactuals, for they inform His decisions. However, which counterfactuals are true are based in which world is

actual. Therefore, this actuality must be enacted prior to God's knowledge of the true counterfactuals, thus making it impossible.

Molinists deny that the truth of counterfactuals has its basis in the actual world. They also argue that, once again, this analysis rests upon the assumption that libertarian freedom and divine foreknowledge are automatically discordant. It can also be asserted that as a finite human being trapped within the confines of time, man is limited to temporal succession. However, all that the Lord knows, He has known for eternity. While there is an element of logical succession with an assumption that certain propositions are contingent on others, one cannot grasp logic that can contend with natural, middle, and free knowledge outside the confines of temporal succession.

As one has certainly realized, this theological system may seemingly bring more problems to light than solve the questions it sets out to answer. However, one must realize that Molinists do not claim to know the exact method of operations when it comes to Middle Knowledge, nor is that their main concern. In the assumption of Molinism's truthfulness, a system is created in which the sovereignty of the Lord and the free will of man coexist and intertwine into man's salvation. Though it may not be a system in which every component contains truth, it could be considered by many to be the best human explanation on how these two volatile subjects can coincide. No matter what any would wish, there comes a point in the argument when the unanswered questions simply must be attributed to one of the mysteries that will one day be revealed to us in eternity.

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