

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 18 | Issue 1

Article 1

---

1-1-2001

## "A Death He Freely Accepted": Molinist Reflections on the Incarnation

Thomas P. Flint

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Flint, Thomas P. (2001) "'A Death He Freely Accepted': Molinist Reflections on the Incarnation," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol18/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# “A DEATH HE FREELY ACCEPTED”: MOLINIST REFLECTIONS ON THE INCARNATION

Thomas P. Flint

Traditional Christians face a puzzle concerning the freedom and perfection of Christ. Jesus the man, it seems, must have possessed significant freedom for him to serve as a moral example for us and for his death to have been truly meritorious. Yet Jesus the Son of God must be incapable of sinning if he is truly divine. So if Jesus is both human and divine, one of these two attributes – significant freedom or moral perfection – apparently needs to be surrendered. In this essay, it is argued that if (and perhaps only if) a Molinist approach to divine providence is embraced, one can plausibly affirm both the freedom of the man and the impeccability of the Son.

The Second Eucharistic Prayer employed in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church includes a passage which raises a thorny but fascinating Christological puzzle. Describing the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, this passage, addressed to God the Father, reads:

Before he was given up to death, a death he freely accepted, he took bread and gave you thanks.

The Christologically curious part of the passage comes in that initial appositive – “a death he freely accepted.” What are we to make of this phrase? It seems to be saying that Jesus the man – the very one who took bread into his hands – was free to *reject* death on a cross. Now, on the one hand, such a claim makes sense. After all, how meritorious could his death have been if Jesus had no say in accepting it, if he was not freely offering up his life for us? And yet, on the other hand, is it really tenable to hold that Jesus could have refused death on a cross? Didn’t his Father clearly will that he accept such a death? In failing to abide by his Father’s will, a will of which he was fully aware, would not Jesus have been acting sinfully? But how can Jesus act sinfully if he is truly divine?

The general problem toward which this specific example points is as simple to state as it is resistant to simple resolutions.<sup>1</sup> Shouldn’t we think that Jesus the man was free in a morally significant way? And shouldn’t we think that Jesus the Son of God was incapable of sinning, and hence *not* free in a morally significant way? But if Jesus is, as orthodoxy requires, both truly human and truly divine, then which is to be sacrificed – the significant freedom that accompanies humanity, or the moral impeccability



that accompanies divinity?

Many contemporary philosophers and theologians have shown little reluctance to make one or the other sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> Now, if need be, I think we could follow their lead.<sup>3</sup> But I can't see how, in my own case at least, it could be anything other than a grudging surrender of one or the other attribute (freedom or impeccability). What we would really like, I should think, is a plausible way of holding on to both, or at least a tenable means of not flatly rejecting either.

Of course, in philosophy as in life in general, we often can't get what we'd really like, and hence need to muddle through as best we can. Those of us from northern climes are often quite adept at stiffening our upper lips and dourly making do. But I suspect that this is one of those happy cases where we needn't just make do. If we are willing to follow the lead of a certain Medieval Mediterranean master, we can attain a much more felicitous resolution of our dilemma.

The medieval I have in mind is Luis de Molina, whose picture of divine providence has enjoyed something of a revival in recent years. According to Molina, God can exercise providence thanks to his middle knowledge — his knowledge of contingent truths over which he has no control. Of greatest interest among the contents of his middle knowledge are counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, conditionals that, loosely speaking, afford him knowledge of how any creature who does or might have existed would freely act in any situation in which that person might have been created and left free.<sup>4</sup> By examining these counterfactuals and carefully selecting the situations in which his free creatures are placed, God is able to arrange things so that his ends are achieved with certainty even though the freedom of his creatures is maintained.

This thumbnail sketch of the Molinist account gives one only a faint image of what is widely agreed, by proponents and detractors alike, to be a fascinating and intricate attempt to understand God's relationship to his world. For our purposes, though, this faint image should suffice. Of course, this picture of providence has been hotly debated in recent years. My own view, to put it succinctly, is that the Molinist account is the inevitable offspring of two theses to which orthodox Christians are quite properly strongly attracted. These two theses are (1) that God is provident in the strong traditional sense, a sense which entails his foreknowledge of and sovereignty over each and every event that occurs, and (2) that humans are free in the full-blooded libertarian sense. As I see it, orthodox Christians have solid *prima facie* reasons for accepting each of these two theses, and hence have solid *prima facie* reasons for embracing Molinism. The burden of proof, then, is on the opponents of Molinism to find lethal objections to this means of understanding providence. Thus far, it seems to me, it is a burden that the detractors of Molinism have failed to carry: the arguments against middle knowledge are a far cry from offering the compelling reasons that a Christian should demand from those asking that she renounce the Molinist position. Hence, the most reasonable position for a Christian is to embrace the picture of providence that middle knowledge makes possible.<sup>5</sup>

This view of the dialectical situation, one that I and others have defend-

ed extensively elsewhere, is extremely controversial. But that controversy is not my topic in this essay. What I shall endeavor to do here is perhaps best thought of as arguing for the conditional claim that *if* the overall Molinist picture of providence *is* correct, then accepting the doctrine of the Incarnation doesn't force us to make the hard choice between freedom and perfection outlined above. After outlining a version of our Christological puzzle more carefully in the next section, I will show how Molinism seems to offer a uniquely appealing solution, a solution which I will then briefly defend against three objections.

## I

The orthodox Christian doctrine concerning the Incarnation is that Jesus Christ is both truly and fully divine and truly and fully human. More precisely, the second person of the Trinity, though eternally possessing the divine nature, took on at a certain point in time a human nature. What exactly was assumed by the Son when he became incarnate depends upon what exactly human beings are; but whatever we human individuals are – bodies, souls, body-soul composites, or something else – that is what the Son assumed. In keeping with much of the tradition in these discussions, I will speak of the Son as assuming an *individual human nature*, and will (again, largely in deference to tradition) presume that individual human natures are body-soul composites, though nothing of importance will hinge on this supposition.<sup>6</sup>

The doctrine of the Incarnation implies that the individual human nature assumed by the Son has a rather unusual ontological status.<sup>7</sup> Most of us just *are* individual human natures, so that whatever can be said of my individual human nature can equally be said of the person I am. To once again employ traditional language, most individual human natures just are *supposita*, or ultimate subjects of predication. In the case of the Incarnation, though, the individual human nature assumed by the Son cannot be thought of as a separate person from the Son, for that would involve us in Nestorianism. Rather, in this unique case, what we must say is that this individual human nature, this particular body-soul composite (or whatever), is *not* a suppositum; the ultimate subject of any of its properties is not it, but rather the Son, the person who is united to and sustains in being this individual human nature. Aquinas and others imply at times that a mereological model of the Incarnation can prove helpful, a model according to which the individual human nature is seen as analogous to a part, with the Son as the whole of which it is a part; just as many of a part's properties are most properly predicated of the whole, so the characteristics of the individual human nature are ultimately characteristics of the Son.<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to find an elegant way to name the individual human nature that the Son assumed, a way which will allow us to say what Christians have traditionally wanted to say. For example, we could legislate that the word "Jesus" is to be used to refer only to the human nature of the Son; but, since the human nature is not itself a person, and is not identical to the Son, this would force us to say that Jesus is not a person, and that Jesus is not the Son of God. Needless to say, few Christians would feel comfort-

able making such assertions. Similar problems, I think, arise for other obvious candidates here — “Christ”, “the Son of Man”, “the Lamb of God” and the like. With considerable reluctance, I have decided, for the sake of clarity, to abandon any pretense of elegance. Thus, I will label Christ’s human nature as CHN. So CHN refers to the particular body-soul composite that was and is supernaturally united to the second person of the Trinity.

CHN, then, was born of the Virgin Mary, walked along the Sea of Galilee, performed various miraculous cures, accepted death on a cross, and so on. In saying this, of course, we are not saying that CHN was the *person* who did or endured all these things. For CHN is not a person at all; the person who did these things was the Son. Still, since the Son did these things via the created intellect, will, and body of CHN, and since that intellect, will and body were mysteriously united to the Son in such a fashion that the Son subsisted in that nature “as in one made his very own by the Incarnation,”<sup>9</sup> it is entirely appropriate to see CHN as the proximate, and the Son as the ultimate, possessor of the properties involved — much as, for example, my hand might be the proximate, and me the ultimate, possessor of the property of touching an iguana.

So CHN did many things during its time on earth.<sup>10</sup> Did CHN also do some things freely? More specifically, did CHN perform some actions in situations that left it free, but where failure to act as it did would have been sinful?<sup>11</sup> Here we encounter the puzzle with which we began this essay.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, it seems that we must say that CHN couldn’t have sinned. For what CHN does, the Son does, and the Son, being essentially divine and hence essentially morally perfect, cannot sin. On the other hand, to say that CHN was not free to sin seems to diminish if not to eradicate the meritorious nature of CHN’s redeeming activity. How can we say that CHN freely accepted death on a cross if the option to reject the Father’s will — the option that surely appears to be genuinely open during the agony in the Garden of Gethsemani — was not in fact open to CHN? Similarly, how can we find the life of Christ as a model for our own if we say that, unlike us, CHN lacked significant moral freedom? The author of Hebrews (4:15) says that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin”; how can we say this (and mean it) if we think of CHN, not merely as sinless, but as incapable of sinning?

Various attempts at solving this puzzle might appeal to those who are willing to modify or abandon either Molinism or the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation.<sup>13</sup> For example, some would insist that neither CHN nor the Son is essentially morally perfect. Perhaps God took a risk by becoming incarnate; perhaps what he risked was the loss of his own moral perfection, a loss he would in fact have suffered had CHN sinned. Other, more risk-averse theorists might simply reject the claim that it was important that CHN possess significant moral freedom; perhaps, they might say, the appearance to CHN that it was free was all that was needed. Still others might insist that it is our libertarian assumptions that are causing the problem; jettison these assumptions, grant that CHN’s will could remain free even if its deliverances were causally determined by God, and our puzzle

dissolves. I will not pause to consider these approaches in detail, but will simply register my belief that no traditional Christian should feel comfortable embracing any of them.

Suppose, then, that these non-Molinist alternatives fail. Does Molinism have anything better to offer? Molina, at least, thought that it does. By embracing the theory of middle knowledge, he implies, we can solve our puzzle in such a way that the essential impeccability of the Son is maintained, the freedom of CHN to sin is ensured, and the full-blooded libertarian picture of freedom is retained.

## II

In Part 4 of Disputation 53 of the *Concordia*, Molina responds to eight objections to his views that had been raised by Francisco Zumel. In the last of these objections, Zumel argues that God must have determined Christ's free actions,

especially that act by which he fulfilled the Father's command concerning the redemption of the human race by his own death. For Christ, since he was at the same time God, was in no way able to sin, and hence was not able not to elicit the act by which he was to fulfill that command. And yet he elicited that act freely; otherwise, he would not have merited anything by it, and, consequently, he would not have redeemed the human race by it – which is heretical.<sup>14</sup>

Since Christ acted freely yet couldn't sin, Zumel contends, Molina's libertarian leanings need to be replaced with a recognition that divine determination of an act is fully compatible with that act's being free.

In his response to this objection – the longest by far of his responses to Zumel – Molina begins by noting “that what is owed to the human nature assumed by the Word by reason of the assumption or grace of union is far different from what belongs to it because of the mere assumption, excluding all the other gifts that are owed to it by reason of the grace of union.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, some characteristics are such that it is logically necessary that they be present in an assumed human nature; others, though not necessary, are “owed” to the human nature, in the sense that it would be extraordinary if they were not present. Among these later characteristics are those that Molina refers to as the glory of the soul and the glory of the body. Each of these is a natural effect of the beatific vision which, according to tradition, CHN always enjoyed. The glory of the soul, which graciously bestows a clear vision of the truth and an uncorrupted will on its recipient, renders one unable to do evil; the glory of the body consists in possession of the kind of perfected human body we see Jesus possessing after the Resurrection. Though it might have been expected that God would bestow both the glory of the soul and the glory of the body on CHN from the moment of its conception, there was no necessity to his doing so; should he have a good reason, he could miraculously withhold these gifts. And as Molina saw it, he did indeed have a good reason:

even though by reason of the grace of union all those things were owed to Christ or to his humanity that he had *after* the Resurrection, nonetheless, since (i) the Incarnation was by the same token arranged by God in order that Christ might by his merits and death redeem the human race, and in order that by his most holy and perfect life he might furnish mortals with an especially shining example, an example by which they would be instructed in every kind of virtue and perfection, and by which they would be strongly stimulated and impelled toward imitating him, and since (ii) it was more glorious for Christ to gain the glory and exaltation of the body by his own proper merits than for him to have had this glory immediately from the very beginning, it follows that . . . he did not receive the glory of the body until the Resurrection. Nor was it just this bodily glory that God miraculously prevented from arising out of the glory of the soul; but at the same time the vision of the divine essence, along with the beatific love and enjoyment, was also communicated by God to the human nature in such a way that by preventing (in a manner surpassing the nature of these goods) the effects that ought to have resulted from them by a necessity of nature, He left Christ's will susceptible to anguish and sadness and hence free to fulfill or not to fulfill the precepts that bound him under pain of guilt – just as if the glory of the soul had not existed in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

According to Molina, then, God saw to it that CHN, though receiving a multitude of gifts from the Father, did not receive those gifts that would have rendered it incapable of sinning. Rather, in order that CHN's actions might prove truly meritorious, the Father saw to it that CHN was placed in what we might call *freedom-retaining circumstances* – circumstances in which the full natural effects of the beatific vision were blocked so as to retain CHN's freedom “not to do those things that he was obligated by precept to do.”<sup>17</sup> So Molina clearly provides a picture according to which CHN is significantly free in the full libertarian sense.

By thus championing the freedom of CHN, though, have we not abandoned the traditional belief that an incarnate God could not sin? Molina thinks not. Though his argument here is not as complete as one might like, the lacunae are fairly easy to fill in. The crucial lines, I think, are the following:

. . . it involves a contradiction for Christ to sin, not because Christ as a wayfarer [i.e., CHN] lacks the ability to transgress commands, but rather because it is impossible for God to permit it, and because it is incompatible with the infinite goodness of the divine Word that he should sin, even through his assumed nature, and thus that God should permit it. Therefore, it pertained to divine providence to arrange things in such a way that while Christ's freedom was preserved, a freedom required for merit and for the purposes explained above, he would in no way sin; and this is in fact what happened.<sup>18</sup>

Molina is explicit, then, in maintaining (in effect) that there is no possible

world in which an assumed human nature sins. So, given that CHN is assumed, it follows with certainty that CHN does not sin. Still, CHN is able to sin. That is to say, CHN has access to worlds in which CHN sins. What follows, it seems clear, is that CHN has access to worlds in which CHN is not assumed. That is to say, CHN has the power so to act that CHN never would have been assumed had it so acted. Given that CHN was assumed, then, what follows is that God must have arranged things in such a way that, though CHN could have sinned given that arrangement of freedom-retaining circumstances, it in fact did not. Nor could God's having arranged things in this way just be a happy coincidence, a bit of good luck for a Father keeping his fingers crossed that CHN would remain sinless. Molina clearly thinks it, not just false, but impossible that both CHN be assumed and CHN sin in the circumstances in which the Father allows it to be placed. But the only way God could have had certainty concerning CHN's remaining sinless would be if he had middle knowledge that CHN would freely remain sinless if placed in certain freedom-retaining circumstances. Given this middle knowledge, he could then decide both to assume CHN and to see to it that CHN is placed only in circumstances in which God knew it would in fact freely refrain from sinning. So Molina's solution to our puzzle about the Incarnation depends upon both God's knowing counterfactuals of creaturely freedom about CHN and his utilizing that knowledge in determining the situations in which to place CHN.

Perhaps an example will help here. Suppose God saw, prior to his decision as to which creatures to create in which circumstances, that each of the following counterfactuals was true:

- (1) If CHN were placed in freedom-retaining circumstances *C*, CHN would freely sin.
- (2) If CHN were placed in freedom-retaining circumstances *C\**, CHN would freely refrain from sinning.

Given his knowledge of (1), God would know that, should he assume CHN, he could not place CHN in *C*, for to do so would lead to the incarnate Son's sinning, a state of affairs which, to quote Molina again, "it is impossible for God to permit." On the other hand, he would also know on the basis of (2) that, other things being equal, he could if he so chose assume CHN and place CHN in *C\**. Of course, other things might not be equal. Perhaps *C\** is not a state of affairs that it is feasible for God to actualize – that is, perhaps it involves some free creature's performing a certain free action that, as a matter of fact, it would not perform no matter what God might do.<sup>19</sup> Or perhaps *C\** represents only a momentary set of circumstances. Perhaps *C\** needs to be complemented by other circumstances to give us the totality of circumstances in which CHN is placed over the course of its life. And perhaps, no matter how *C\** were thus enriched, the fact is that CHN would at some point or other sin if placed in those enriched circumstances — assuming, of course, that the circumstances



themselves do not include CHN's being assumed. So the fact that (2) is true does not entail either that the Son might assume CHN or that the Son might assume CHN and place it in  $C^*$ . But suppose that the other counterfactuals of creaturely freedom were more amenable. Suppose they dovetailed with (2) so as to provide God with knowledge of certain contingent counterfactuals with suitably enriched feasible antecedents (antecedents specifying what we might call *lifelong* circumstances) – counterfactuals such as

- (3) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances  $D$ , CHN would freely refrain from sinning.<sup>20</sup>

Then God would know that he could indeed assume CHN and place CHN in  $D$ . CHN would indeed be free to sin in  $D$ , but given his certainty of (3), God would also be certain that CHN would not in fact sin. Hence, both the freedom of the assumed human nature and the impeccability of the person assuming that nature would be assured.

Let us say that an individual human nature is *assumable* just in case, for some lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances, that nature would freely refrain from sinning if placed in those circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Let us also call a counterfactual of this sort a *counterfactual of assumability*. (3), then, is a counterfactual of assumability; and what it tells God is that CHN is assumable.

Molina's solution to our puzzle thus seems complete. Given that God has middle knowledge, it appears that the freedom of CHN to sin, freedom in the true-blue libertarian sense, is fully compatible with the impossibility of the Son's sinning. Death on a cross, then, truly was "a death he freely accepted", even though the Son could not have ignored his Father's will by refusing that sacrificial and atoning act.

### III

There are many ways in which this Molinist solution to our puzzle might be called into question. Here, I will limit myself to a very brief consideration of three such objections.

First, one might ask, who is the "he" referred to in "a death he freely accepted"? The natural response, it would seem, is that Jesus is the "he" of whom we are speaking here. But Jesus, according to orthodox Christian belief, is none other than the Son. So we need to say that this was a death that the Son freely accepted. But the Molinist solution does not allow us to say this, for it denies that the Son was able to disobey his Father's will. All it really warrants is the claim that CHN freely accepted this death. But CHN is not the same as the Son. So the Molinist solution does not in fact permit us to say what we need to say here.

The first thing to note about this objection is that it is less a criticism of the Molinist solution than it is an attack upon the traditional Christological claims which that solution seeks to defend. For what it implies is that the traditional Christian has wanted to say both that the Son is able to sin and that the Son is not able to sin, and if such a criticism is correct, then the

Christian view as traditionally expressed is straightforwardly inconsistent, and there is not really a coherent picture for the Molinist or anyone else to defend.

Though much might need to be said in order to offer a full response to this objection, many would feel that it is sufficient to point out that, though the Son is indeed the ultimate subject of the properties we ascribe to CHN, he is sometimes that subject only in a remote or qualified sense. Take, for example, the property of having been created. This is a property that applies directly and immediately to CHN. Since the Son is the ultimate subject of CHN's properties, it follows that the Son is in some sense the person in question who has this property of having been created. Yet to say in a simple, non-qualified way that the Son was created is clearly to flirt with heresy. What we need to say, then, is that the Son has the property of having been created only in some relative or qualified sense. Various ways of speaking that highlight such qualifications are well known. For example, rather than say "The Son was created", we might say "The Son qua human was created," or "The Son with respect to his human nature was created". In this way, the tradition has suggested, we can both uphold the orthodox Christian position and avoid even the appearance of contradiction. And, of course, if such a move succeeds in the case of a property such as having been created, it can also be employed in the case of freely following the Father's will.

Though I think this response goes a long way toward resolving this first problem, some might feel that it simply papers over a hole in the traditional Christian view that should be more honestly acknowledged. Consider again the mereological model of the Incarnation we have already mentioned, and the fact that sometimes properties of parts simply are not strictly speaking properties of their wholes – the property "is smaller than a breadbox", when said of an elephant's eyelash, is an obvious example. Consider, then, the property of "freely accepting death on a cross". Is this not a property that is, strictly speaking, ascribable to CHN, but not to the Son? Many would no doubt feel that the answer is clearly yes. The Son does not freely accept death on a cross, any more than an elephant is smaller than a breadbox. No one would think we can get around this obvious pachydermal fact by saying that the elephant qua eyelashed is smaller than a breadbox; why think that saying that the Son qua human is free to sin makes any more sense? To employ "qua" or "with respect to" language is little more than a ploy designed to disguise the fact that, strictly speaking, properties such as "freely accepted death" or "was created" simply cannot be ascribed to the Son.

Again, a full resolution of this matter would take us far beyond the confines of this paper. But the way in which this conflict is resolved, it seems to me, is largely irrelevant to an evaluation of the Molinist solution to our initial puzzle. For the question really is this: Does the fact that CHN is able to sin allow us to say that the Son, though impeccable, is able in some qualified way to sin? If it *does*, then clearly our first objection is answered. If it does *not*, then we seem to have little choice but to say that many properties traditionally ascribed to the Son — properties such as "being human" or "freely accepting death on a cross" — are strictly speaking properties only

of CHN; claims ascribing such properties to the Son would then have to be viewed as literally false, though we might well remain tolerant of their use in liturgical and other contexts where a pedantic concern for philosophical precision is often out of place. But however we think the traditional Christian should end up answering our question, the Molinist endeavor to defend both CHN's freedom and the Son's essential moral perfection will remain as a seemingly viable solution to our puzzle. Therefore, I cannot see this first objection as lethal to the Molinist stance.

Our second objection, unlike the first, takes aim squarely at the Molinist dimension to our solution. We have suggested that the freedom of CHN and the impeccability of the Son can both be maintained if we assume that God's middle knowledge afforded him full cognizance of how CHN would act in any lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances. But middle knowledge, the objector might point out, is usually thought of as knowledge of how free *persons* would act. And this poses a problem because, according to the Molinist (and to all orthodox Christians), CHN is *not* a person, but only a human nature assumed by a divine person. So how could middle knowledge provide God with knowledge of how CHN would act?

The way in which the Molinist needs to respond to this objection, I think, is fairly clear. What she needs to say is that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that God knows via middle knowledge make reference not to *human persons*, but to *individual human natures*. In most cases, of course, this amounts to a distinction without a difference: most of us humans just *are* individual human natures. But in the case of the Incarnation, the distinction is crucial. By stipulating that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom refer to natures rather than persons, the Molinist leaves unchanged God's knowledge of counterfactuals about us unassumed natures, but opens conceptual space for the Molinist solution to our puzzle that we outlined in the previous section. Hence, though this shift does constitute a slight change from the position Molinists have traditionally defended, the shift comes with no cost but great benefits. It is thus a shift well worth making.<sup>22</sup>

Our third objection questions two elements of the Molinist strategy we have employed: the claim that God could have middle knowledge of the relevant types of counterfactuals, and the assumption that CHN's freedom has been maintained by such an approach. We suggested that CHN is assumable just in case a counterfactual of assumability such as

- (3) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances *D*, CHN would freely refrain from sinning

is true. Implicit in this suggestion is the idea that God might choose *D* (rather than, say, *D\**) as the circumstances in which to place and assume CHN because he knew other counterfactuals such as

- (4) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances *D\**, CHN would freely sin.

But, our imagined objector begins, to suggest that either of these conditionals could be part of middle knowledge is to ignore the fact that their antecedents are radically incomplete, for they make no reference to whether or not CHN is assumed. Molinists have typically insisted that the counterfactuals on which God bases his creative decisions must have antecedents that include at least all exercises of causal power prior to the relevant time.<sup>23</sup> Since to assume a human nature is clearly an exercise of God's causal power, the antecedents of those conditionals that God knows by middle knowledge must indicate whether or not a particular human nature such as CHN is or isn't assumed by God. But when we try to incorporate such information into the antecedents of (3) and (4), we quickly discover a problem. For consider

- (3\*) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances  $D$  and assumed by God, CHN would freely refrain from sinning.

and

- (4\*) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances  $D^*$  and assumed by God, CHN would sin.

(3) and (4) were supposed to be useful to God by informing him which circumstances to place CHN in if he wished to assume that nature. But the distinction between  $D$  and  $D^*$  — the former a set of circumstances that *contingently* implies CHN's *not* sinning, the latter a set that *contingently* implies its *sinning* — disappears once we consider (3\*) and (4\*). For how could either of these conditionals be a contingent truth or falsehood? Recall Molina's claim that it is impossible that God permit an assumed nature to be placed in circumstances in which it sins.<sup>24</sup> Doesn't this imply that it is metaphysically necessary that, if a certain nature is assumed, the nature in question does not sin? So doesn't (3\*) turn out to be, not just true, but necessarily true? And doesn't similar reasoning show (4\*) to be necessarily false? But if so, how could either of these conditionals be part of middle knowledge, given that such knowledge includes only contingent truths? Finally, how could the actions described in the consequents of these conditionals be free in the libertarian sense? Take (3\*). Suppose, letting  $A$  stand for CHN's being assumed and  $\sim S$  stand for his not sinning, we represent (3\*) by the shorthand

$$(3^*) \quad (A \ \& \ D) \rightarrow \sim S.^{25}$$

What we have seen is that being assumed is by itself logically sufficient for CHN's not sinning. That is,  $A$  by itself entails  $\sim S$ . So (3\*) is true only because

$$(3^{**}) \quad (A \ \& \ D) \Rightarrow \sim S.^{26}$$

But it seems fair to assume that CHN has no choice about either  $D$  or  $A$ :  $D$

is the set of circumstances in which CHN makes choices, and  $A$  would seem to be up to God, not up to CHN. So CHN's not sinning is a logical consequence of circumstances over which CHN has no control. But then, how could its not sinning possibly count as free and meritorious behavior?

A full Molinist response to this objection would be a lengthy and complicated matter. Still, even without going into great detail, we can, I think, see that the Molinist has good reason to deny both the claim that (a) counterfactuals such as (3) and (4) could be not be part of middle knowledge because neither (3\*) nor (4\*) is contingent, and the allegation that (b) the necessary status of conditionals such as (3\*) threatens the freedom of the assumed human nature. I shall address (a) and (b) in turn.

First, regarding (a), consider (3), the claim that  $D$  counterfactually implies  $\sim S$ . By enlarging (3)'s antecedent to include  $A$ , we do indeed get with (3\*) a proposition that cannot be considered part of middle knowledge. But this fact by itself does not preclude (3)'s being part of middle knowledge. For consider what happens if we enlarge the antecedent of (3) by asserting that CHN is *not* assumed. That is, consider

$$(3') \quad (\sim A \ \& \ D) \rightarrow \sim S.$$

If God has middle knowledge, then presumably a proposition such as (3') could be part of it, for (3') has a complete antecedent that does not entail its consequent. But if (3') is part of middle knowledge, then so is the conjunction of (3') and (3\*<sup>27</sup>). This conjunction, however, entails (3). So if (3') is part of middle knowledge, then so is (3).<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the fact that (3\*) is a necessary truth in no way disqualifies (3) from being an element of middle knowledge.

With (4), things are slightly less clear. Still, there seems to be strong reason to think that conditionals of this form also could be part of middle knowledge. For though (4\*) is indeed necessarily false, the same does not go for

$$(4') \quad (\sim A \ \& \ D^*) \rightarrow S.$$

Now (4'), like (3'), has a complete antecedent that does not entail either the truth or the falsity of its consequent. So (4') could be part of God's middle knowledge. Suppose it were. Could it also be the case that (4) — i.e., ( $D^* \rightarrow S$ ) — was *not* part of middle knowledge? It's hard to see how this could be so. For to think of (4') but not (4) as part of middle knowledge would be to view assumption as a kind of divine trump card, an addition to the agent's circumstances that on its own changes what the agent would do. The fact that a human nature is assumed, we might well expect, would affect what the agent does, but only insofar as it affects the circumstances in which the agent is placed — the natural influences it encounters, the graces it receives, and so forth. But all such factors are, in our example, included in  $D^*$ . To think that God, knowing that (4') was true, could simply tack on  $A$  to  $D^*$  and thereby effect CHN's sinlessness seems preposterous.

A slightly more formal way of arguing here might go as follows. For the reasons offered in the last paragraph, the following principle seems eminently plausible:

- (P) Necessarily, if an individual human nature is assumed in freedom-retaining circumstances such that, had it been in those circumstances but not been assumed, it would have freely done *X*, then the individual human nature freely does *X*.

Applying (P) to our example, we know that

$$(5) \quad \{A \ \& \ D^* \ \& \ [(\sim A \ \& \ D^*) \ \rightarrow \ S]\} \Rightarrow S.$$

But

$$(6) \quad (A \ \& \ D^*) \Rightarrow \sim S$$

is obviously true; in no possible world does an assumed nature sin. Together, (5) and (6) entail

$$(7) \quad \sim \diamond \{A \ \& \ D^* \ \& \ [(\sim A \ \& \ D^*) \ \rightarrow \ S]\},$$

which in turn entails

$$(8) \quad [(\sim A \ \& \ D^*) \ \rightarrow \ S] \Rightarrow \sim(A \ \& \ D^*).$$

But God, we are assuming, has middle knowledge of (4'), the antecedent of (8). So he also has middle knowledge of the consequent of (8).<sup>29</sup> And this means that God knows, prior to any free action on his part, that bringing about (*A* & *D*<sup>\*</sup>) was not an option open to him. That is, God knew by middle knowledge that, should he decide to place CHN in *D*<sup>\*</sup>, he could not also assume CHN – i.e., that

$$(9) \quad (D^* \rightarrow \sim A).$$

But from this it follows that the conjunction of (9) and (4') both is part of middle knowledge and entails (4). So (4) too would be part of middle knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

We have seen that (a), the contention that God could not have middle knowledge of counterfactuals such as (3) and (4), seems to be on shaky ground. But what of (b), the suggestion that truths such as

$$(3^{**}) \quad (A \ \& \ D) \Rightarrow \sim S$$

point to CHN's lack of freedom in situations in which CHN is assumed? This suggestion would have merit were it true that CHN had absolutely no control over *A* and *D*. But the Molinist at least would see no reason to assent to this lack of control. For CHN, the Molinist is assuming, was free to sin. And were CHN to have sinned, CHN would not have been assumed. So CHN had the power to do something such that, were CHN to have done it, the antecedent of (3<sup>\*\*</sup>) would not have been true.<sup>31</sup> And this means that the truth of (3<sup>\*\*</sup>) does not imply that CHN was the prisoner of (*A* & *D*).

Not surprisingly, the Molinist response to this objection based on (3<sup>\*\*</sup>) is

reminiscent of the typical Molinist response to the claim that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom. For no Molinist will deny that propositions such as

- (10) (God knows that Cuthbert will call Bert tomorrow)  $\Rightarrow$  (Cuthbert will call Bert tomorrow)

are true. But their truth, the Molinist insists, gives us no reason to question the reality of human freedom. For the fact (if it is a fact) that Cuthbert will call Bert is compatible with the claim that Cuthbert is free not to call Bert; and, of course, if Cuthbert were not to call Bert, God would not have foreknown that Cuthbert would call. Truths such as (10), then, do not threaten human freedom because their antecedents are not fixed facts over which the humans in question have no control. And what goes for (10), the Molinist concludes, goes for (3\*\*) as well.<sup>32</sup>

There are surely other objections that might be raised against our Molinist solution. Still, I know of none that is stronger than the three we have considered. Assuming, then, that the general objections to the overall theory of middle knowledge have been met, we seem to have in Molinism a powerful means of solving our Incarnational puzzle.

Indeed, I think that Molinism is unique in offering us a genuinely plausible solution. For consider how the two principal alternatives to Molinism could address the problem. Thomism is the general name I have borrowed for the picture of providence which results from combining the strong traditional notion of God's providence with a non-libertarian picture of freedom.<sup>33</sup> Thomists such as Zumel clearly have a solution to our puzzle readily available: CHN was free, but free in a sense compatible with direct determination of its actions by the Son's divine nature. While such a solution seems within the pale theologically, the ideas of freedom and of divine determination on which it is based are so implausible and lead to such severe problems, especially with regard to the problem of evil, that it surely must be deemed dramatically inferior to the Molinist approach we have advanced.<sup>34</sup>

The same verdict holds for the third general account of providence available, that offered by advocates of the "openness" of God. Openists concur with Molinists in affirming the libertarian picture of freedom, but reject the traditional notion of providence that Molinists and Thomists share. God, openists insist, has no knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, and no universal knowledge of or genuine, specific control over the future. Though their view of freedom avoids the problems with evil which bedevil the Thomists, openists seem to have no way to maintain both the freedom of CHN and the essential impeccability of the Son. For if CHN is significantly free but God lacks middle knowledge, then God's interactions with CHN are based on his knowledge of how CHN (even the assumed CHN) would *probably* act in various different situations. But this means that God, even if he places CHN in the most favorable freedom-retaining circumstances, is taking real risks with CHN: he's betting that CHN won't *in fact* perform those sinful actions that he knew he *probably* wouldn't perform. And, of course, it's entirely possible that God lose some

of those bets. So the openists, it seems, must say either that CHN flatly lacks significant moral freedom or that there are possible worlds in which CHN is both assumed by the Son and sins. Neither of these alternatives, it seems clear to me, is nearly so attractive as that offered us by Molinism.

#### IV

My conclusion is easy to state. If Molinism is endorsed, then one apparently has a viable means of reconciling the freedom of Jesus the man with the essential moral perfection of Jesus the Son of God. If Molinism is rejected, no such avenue of reconciliation is in view.<sup>35</sup>

*University of Notre Dame*

#### NOTES

1. Note also that the general problem would remain even if one disagreed with my appraisal of the specific case discussed in the preceding paragraph – e.g., if one felt that Jesus would have had no obligation to abide by the Father’s will that he accept death on a cross. I must confess that I find it hard to believe that the man in the Garden of Gethsemani would have been doing nothing wrong by frustrating the divine plan to bring salvation to mankind through his voluntary acceptance of death. Hence, I have no difficulty accepting the assumption (which, as we shall see, was shared by Molina and his opponents) that Jesus’s refusal to align his will with the Father’s would in this case have been morally wrong. For those who do find this assumption difficult, though, the problem under discussion still arises so long as they grant that Jesus at some point in his life was free with respect to *some* morally significant choice. Those who refuse to grant even this are absolved from needing to think further on this topic, though they might want to reconsider their reasons for adopting a view that many will think needlessly diminishes the human nature of the Incarnate.

2. Let me mention two prominent philosophical examples. Thomas V. Morris, when discussing whether it makes sense to think of an incarnate God being tempted, explicitly denies that Jesus the man could have done evil. Morris tries to reconcile this denial with an affirmation of a type of freedom for Jesus, but it clearly is not the full-blooded libertarian notion of freedom that he generally champions. See his *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 150-153. On the other side, Nelson Pike has famously argued that the essential moral impeccability of God needs to be denied if his omnipotence and moral praiseworthiness are to be upheld. See his “Omnipotence and God’s Ability to Sin,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969), pp 208-216.

3. More precisely, I think we could follow the lead of those who deny Jesus the man any sense of significant freedom. To surrender moral perfection as part of the divine nature seems to me a dead end for orthodox Christians.

4. Strictly speaking, the conditionals in question cannot be about the creatures themselves. Since they need to guide God in his creative decisions, the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom need to be true or false logically prior to its being determined that the relevant creature will even exist. So some of the conditionals will surely be about “possible but non-actual beings.” Since most



Molinists have agreed that there *are* (again, strictly speaking) no possible-but-not-actual beings, they have generally seen counterfactuals of creaturely freedom as referring to creaturely essences rather than to the creatures themselves. For more on this issue, see my *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), especially pp. 46-50. As will be seen below, though, the Molinist might want to make a further slight emendation to this account; see note 22.

5. The position outlined in this paragraph is presented at length in the first two parts of my *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*.

6. I maintain the tradition here at the risk of confusing those contemporary readers who view a *nature* as a kind of property. Clearly, the kind of natures I am speaking of here are concrete particulars, not abstract entities. Readers bothered by my usage of the term may be comforted by Aquinas's apt Aristotelian aphorism, "*nature* is a word used in many ways" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, Ch. 41, Sect. 2).

7. The picture of the Incarnation offered in this paragraph is, as I understand it, that traditionally offered at least by Catholic theologians. Many contemporary theorists would reject this picture, suggesting instead, e.g., that the Incarnation did not involve the Son's assuming a distinct, created human soul, but only his acquiring certain properties (such as being related to a human body in a certain way) that entailed his becoming human. (For one prominent example of such an alternative picture, see Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), Ch. 9, especially pp. 212-215.) Though I cannot here defend what I see as the more traditional view, I should at least register my conviction that the alternatives of which I am aware seem noticeably inferior with respect to allowing us to avoid heresies such as Apollinarianism and monothelitism.

8. For an enlightening discussion of the mereological model, along with references to Aquinas, see Alfred J. Freddoso, "Logic, Ontology and Ockham's Christology," *New Scholasticism* 57 (1983), pp. 293-330, especially pp. 305-312. It should be noted that, as Jeffrey Brower has pointed out to me, Aquinas did not rely solely upon this model in his endeavors to explicate the doctrine of the Incarnation. For example, in *Summa Contra Gentiles* (IV, 41, 10-13), he emphasizes an instrumental rather than a mereological model. Christ's human nature, he suggests, is the instrument of the Word in much the same way that the human body is the instrument (or organ) of the human soul. For an influential earlier presentation of this analogy, see Augustine, *Letters*, Vol. III (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), pp. 23-28.

9. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 41, 7.

10. Some might object to the implication that CHN is an agent; what is not a person, they might say, cannot be an agent. Though I have some sympathy with this objection, and though I wonder whether the issue here might not be more terminological than substantial, it would seem peculiar to deny that CHN did things. If a particular human mind and human will together form a volition to write in the sand, and if the body to which they are united makes the commanded bodily motions, does it not just follow that this particular body-soul composite is doing something – namely, writing in the sand? Subsequent discoveries concerning the assumption of this body-soul composite by a divine person might lead us to view the assuming person as the ultimate possessor of the property of writing in the sand, but I see no reason to think that such discoveries should lead us to call into question our initial judgment that the body-soul composite was at least the proximate possessor of that property.

11. Should pronouns referring to CHN be masculine or neuter? Though

reasonable arguments in either direction could be made, I have chosen the latter alternative, largely because the use of “he” might be seen as giving aid and comfort to Nestorianism.

12. It is perhaps worth noting what should be obvious – that this puzzle is hardly a novel one. Freddoso refers to it as “one of the thorniest problems of traditional Christology”; see his translation of Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 273, fn. 36. (Further references to this work will refer to it simply as Molina, *Concordia*.) See also note 13 below.

13. The article by Walter Drum on “Incarnation” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 7 (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1910) notes on p. 715: “That Christ was free in the matter of death, is the teaching of all Catholics; else He did not merit nor satisfy for us by His death. Just how to reconcile this liberty of Christ with the impossibility of His committing sin has ever been a crux for theologians. Some seventeen explanations are given.” Unfortunately, the article fails to lay out all seventeen!

14. Molina, *Concordia*, Disputation 53, Part 4, Section 17 (p. 265). Molina here is quoting from Zumel’s *In Primam Divae Thomae Partem Commentaria*.

15. *Ibid.*, Disp. 53, Pt. 4, Sec. 19 (p. 266).

16. *Ibid.*, Disp. 53, Pt. 4, Sec. 22 (p. 269).

17. *Ibid.*, Disp. 53, Pt. 4, Sec. 23 (p. 271).

18. *Ibid.*, Disp. 53, Pt. 4, Sec. 23 (p. 270).

19. For more on the notion of feasibility, see my *Divine Providence*, especially pp. 51-54.

20. For counterfactuals such as (3) to be contingent, and thus part of God’s middle knowledge, they clearly need to be thought of as having antecedents that do not themselves entail CHN’s being assumed. For further discussion of this point, see the third objection discussed below in Section III.

21. I assume that a nature freely refrains from sinning only if the circumstances in which it is placed leave it genuinely free to sin. Hence, I am assuming that a nature in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances faces morally significant choices.

22. For the reasons given in note 4, the Molinist should probably say that, strictly speaking, counterfactuals of creaturely freedom make reference, not to individual human natures (which exist only contingently and only logically posterior to God’s creative decision), but to the essences of such natures (where such essences are seen as necessarily existing beings).

23. Though this is a claim Molinists have generally endorsed, they probably ought not to have done so. See my “A New Anti-Anti-Molinist Argument,” *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), pp. 299-305.

24. Actually, talk of *permission* here may be misleading, since it might be thought to imply that, in some possible world, there *are* circumstances in which an assumed nature sins. It seems clear that Molina would deny that there are any such worlds.

25. I use “ $\rightarrow$ ” to represent counterfactual implication.

26. I use “ $\Rightarrow$ ” to represent entailment – i.e., strict implication. Hence,  $(A \Rightarrow B)$  means that  $A$  entails  $B$  – i.e., that  $\sim(A \& \sim B)$ .

27. The justification for this claim is *not* the general thesis that middle knowledge is closed under entailment, for that general thesis is false. Any necessary truth is entailed by any element of middle knowledge; but necessary truths are part of God’s natural, not his middle, knowledge. (For more on the distinction between natural and middle knowledge, see my *Divine Providence*, pp. 38-42.) Middle knowledge, though, *is* closed under *contingent* entailment. That is, if  $X$  is part of middle knowledge, and  $X$  entails  $Y$ , and  $Y$  is a contingent

truth, then Y is part of middle knowledge. It is this truth that justifies the move I make here. For (3') clearly entails the conjunction of (3') and (3\*), and since (3') itself is contingent, so is that conjunction.

28. For the reasoning that justifies this conditional, see note 27.

29. See note 27.

30. See note 27.

31. Note that the power being ascribed to CHN here is a power that the *assumed* CHN has, not simply a power that CHN *would have had* had it *not* been assumed.

32. Some might argue that the two cases are not parallel. Divine foreknowledge, they might say, does not *make* Cuthbert do anything, but divine assumption of a human nature *does* make that nature necessarily impeccable. Such an objection, though, simply trades on the ambiguity of "make". If we take "make" in the sense of "logically guarantee", then being assumed does make one impeccable. But, of course, in *this* sense of "make", foreknowledge too makes one act in a certain way. For example, God's foreknowing that Cuthbert will call Bert logically guarantees Cuthbert's making the call. On the other hand, if we take "make" in the sense of "causally guarantee", then there's no reason to think God's foreknowledge makes Cuthbert do anything. But, by the same token, there's no reason to think that being assumed makes one do anything either – at least, not so long as Molina is correct in claiming that an assumed nature might not receive all the gifts it is "owed".

33. The name, though widely used, is a bit misleading, since not all followers of Aquinas see themselves as advocating this account of divine providence.

34. For more on the infelicities associated with the Thomist view of providence, see my *Divine Providence*, pp. 84-94.

35. Earlier versions of a longer essay that included an ancestor of this paper were presented to the Center for Philosophy of Religion Discussion Group at the University of Notre Dame and at the Society of Christian Philosophers session at the APA Eastern Division Meetings in December, 1998. I am grateful to the members of the Center for their help with the paper, and to David Hunt, William Craig, William Hasker, Hugh McCann, and two anonymous *Faith and Philosophy* referees for stimulating and challenging comments and questions.