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Scott A. Davison

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CRAIG ON THE GROUNDING OBJECTION TO MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE

Scott A. Davison

Recently William L. Craig has argued that the so-called "Grounding Objection" against Molinist theories of providence can be answered. I show that despite Craig's clever arguments to the contrary, the Grounding Objection has not been answered, so it still represents a serious obstacle to the acceptance of Molinism.

According to Luis de Molina's theory of providence ("Molinism"¹), logically prior to the creation of the world, God knew what people would freely choose to do if placed in certain situations, and this knowledge guided God's choices about what to create. (If we follow St. Augustine in thinking that God created time itself, then we cannot talk about what happened before creation in a temporal sense of 'before'; but we can still talk about the logical sense of 'before', which refers to the order of explanation, instead of the order of time.) In other words, Molina's theory implies that God knew many propositions of the following form: "If creature S were placed in circumstances C, then S would freely perform action A." Following a somewhat misleading tradition, let's call this type of proposition a counterfactual of creaturely freedom.

Molinists believe that the word 'freely' as it appears in counterfactuals of creaturely freedom must be understood in some Libertarian sense, so that a person's action is free only if it is not determined by prior events, the laws of nature, or the activity of other agents. Now the Grounding Objection claims that Molinism must be wrong because logically prior to creation, there were no truths about what people would freely choose to do if placed in certain situations. William L. Craig has argued recently¹ that the Grounding Objection is quite mistaken. By contrast, I think that the Grounding Objection (or something in the neighborhood, perhaps something that the Grounding Objector could have said or should have said) is much stronger than Craig thinks it is.

Professor Craig claims that "The Molinist is under no obligation to provide warrant for [the assumption that there are true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom], since he is merely proposing a model which is intended as one possible solution to the alleged antinomy of divine sovereignty and human freedom" (Craig, p.339). But this seems wrong to me: true Molinists claim not just that God's providence *might* involve knowledge of true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, but rather that *it actually does*.



(True Molinists include Molina, of course, and Craig himself, as far as I can tell from his other writings.) There may also be "Modal Molinists" out there (that is, persons who regard Molinism as just one possible picture of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom), but the true Molinists are the ones making a positive assertion here, so they have the initial burden of proof concerning the assumption that there are true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

To his credit, Craig does say three things (pp.338-9) in defense of this assumption (even though he does not feel obligated, as a Molinist, to do so). But they are not very convincing. First, I disagree with Craig's claim that "we ourselves often appear to know such true counterfactuals" (338), and his claim that they play an indispensable role in our rational conduct and planning (338). Instead, to repeat a well-worn point in this debate, what we really know is what people will *probably* do, not what they will *freely* do, and this is what plays an indispensable role in our rational conduct and planning. In fact, we are probably never in a position to say with much confidence that any particular action is free (in the Libertarian sense employed by Craig and the Molinists). This is because for all we know, actions that seem to be free might very well have hidden causes.²

Second, Craig says that the Law of Excluded Middle is plausible for counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (338). But since this argument assumes that *there is* a fact of the matter concerning what an agent would freely do if placed in some circumstances C, I think that it comes too close to begging the question to be useful in this context.

Third, Craig claims that the Bible is full of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (338). In response, I don't think that this is at all clear, since the Bible never explicitly says that we are free in a Libertarian sense (and the counterfactuals of freedom that interest the Molinist are all about Libertarian freedom). The scriptures never seem to address this issue directly, and some authors have argued persuasively that one could interpret many passages in terms of a compatibilist account of freedom.³ Craig suggests without much argument that if we do not possess Libertarian freedom, then God is the author of sin (339), but people have also argued that Molinism makes God the author of sin,⁴ and there seems to be no hope of resolving that disagreement in a non-question-begging way.

Incidentally, it is worth pointing out that other Molinists have tried to provide warrant for the assumption that there are true counterfactuals of freedom. Alvin Plantinga, for example, suggests that if we know that Curley freely accepted a bribe of \$35,000, then we have good reason to think that Curley would have freely accepted a bribe of \$36,000⁵. Of course, the counterfactual of creaturely freedom concerning Curley and the larger bribe seems plausible to us only given that we know that Curley accepted the smaller bribe. Hence the Grounding Objector will not find this example plausible, because the situation is not parallel to the situation that obtained logically prior to creation, when Curley did not exist and hence had not accepted any bribes.

But even if Craig is right in thinking that there are *now* some true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, this does not necessarily answer the Grounding Objection. The crucial claim that the Grounding Objector

needs to hold on to is that there *were* no true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom logically prior to creation. At the beginning and the end of his paper, Craig quotes Alvin Plantinga's reply to the Grounding Objection: "It seems to me much clearer that some counterfactuals of freedom are at least possibly true than that the truth of propositions must, in general, be grounded in this way" (337, 348). Craig says that no anti-Molinist has yet responded to this simple retort to the Grounding Objection. Well, I am not an anti-Molinist (in fact, I'm inclined to be a Molinist myself, making this commentary an instance of "friendly fire"), but I am happy to respond to Plantinga on behalf of the Grounding Objector. His simple retort poses the problem incorrectly. First of all, the *current* truth of some counterfactuals of freedom is not sufficient for Molinism; instead, Molinists need to assume that a large number of counterfactuals of freedom were true logically prior to creation. Second, the Grounding Objector need not claim that all true propositions are grounded in a certain way.

To make this point more clear, let's consider Craig's criticism of the idea that all true propositions must be caused to be true by concrete objects. Clearly Craig is right that this idea is mistaken. (He provides several counterexamples in his paper on p.341.) But the Grounding Objector need not claim that *all truths* are grounded in a certain way, just that *certain truths* must be. In particular, the Grounding Objector needs to insist on something like the following principle:

GO: The truth of a true proposition concerning a specific human person must be explained in terms of the actual situation of the person in question.

None of Craig's examples is a counterexample to this principle. (There may be counterexamples out there, but my point is just that this is the direction in which the Grounding Objector is clearly pointing.)

Craig's suggestion that the causal terminology often used to state the Grounding Objection is actually just a rhetorical flourish seems quite right to me (340). The real issue behind the Grounding Objection is not really causation *per se*, but explanation. The big question is this: logically prior to creation, what explains why a given true counterfactual of creaturely freedom is true, and what explains why a given false counterfactual of creaturely freedom is false?

In response to this question, which seems to me to be the essence of the Grounding Objection, Craig offers nothing very promising for the Molinist to say. He does suggest that the truth-makers for counterfactuals of creaturely freedom might be the corresponding states of affairs disclosed by the disquotation principle (Craig, p.18), so that (for example) "If I were rich, I would buy a Mercedes" is made true by the "counterfact" that if I were rich, I would buy a Mercedes. (I like the term "counterfact", by the way.) But this is not really a satisfying explanation. Facts (or obtaining states of affairs, as Craig uses this term) are themselves abstract entities. As Plantinga points out, it is customary to regard contingent states of affairs (or facts) as obtaining in virtue of some arrangement of concrete objects. ("*Obtaining* or *actuality* for states of affairs is like truth for propositions. The proposition [(3) G.

Cantor is a mathematician] is true; had things been appropriately different, it would have been false"⁶.) So the truth of a contingent proposition concerning a specific human person (or the obtaining of a state of affairs involving a specific human person) is customarily to be explained in terms of the actual situation of the specific human person in question. In sum, it is unsatisfying to explain the truth of the proposition in terms of the obtaining of the state of affairs, since the obtaining of such states of affairs seems itself to require grounding (and if it does not, then its obtaining will be just as mysterious to the Grounding Objector as the ungrounded truth of a counterfactual of freedom). Finally, since the Grounding Objector will no doubt deny the (ungrounded) obtaining of the relevant counterfactuals (and reasonably so), this style of explanation is also dialectically ineffective.

Craig's appeal to counterfactuals confirms the suspicion that Molinists must simply accept the truth of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom logically prior to creation as a brute, unexplained fact. There seems to be no dialectically effective way to answer the Grounding Objection, so perhaps the Molinist should simply reply that *there is no explanation at all* for these truths. Craig suggests that the demand for an explanation here essentially denies the existence of Libertarian freedom, but I'm not sure about that. Libertarians need not be committed to the truth of counterfactuals of freedom logically prior to creation. (And in any case, the Grounding Objector need not accept Libertarian freedom.)

If Molinists claim that there is no explanation for the truth of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom prior to creation, is that bad for them? Not necessarily. It depends on what you want from a theory of providence, really. The costs and benefits of Molinism must be considered carefully, from different points of view. In the end, it may be the case that Molinism is worth the price of admission, brute facts and essences and all. (That is my own suspicion, for the record.) Even Robert Adams, perhaps the most prominent of the Grounding Objectors, concedes in one place that his arguments do not amount to refutations of Molinism and that he himself simply cannot understand how counterfactuals of freedom could be true without some explanation of their truth⁷. So maybe Molinists are able to conceive of something that Grounding Objectors are not. In any case, I still disagree with Craig's overall negative assessment of the Grounding Objection because I think that it raises a good question based on a plausible view concerning the explanation of contingent truths about specific human persons. (Or at least that's the direction in which the Grounding Objector is pointing.) So although I myself think that Molinism is probably the best game in town, I also think that the Grounding Objection gives non-Molinists a plausible reason to play a different game instead.

Morehead State University

NOTES

1. "Middle Knowledge, Truth Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection'", *Faith and Philosophy* volume 18, number 3, July 2001, pp.337-52; page numbers in what follows refer to Craig's paper.

2. This is an old point in the debate about free will. One person who makes it very clearly is Daniel Dennett. See his book *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), pp.135-6.
3. For example, see Donald A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1981).
4. For example, see William Hasker's *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989).
5. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp.174-80, especially p.177.
6. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p.47 (his emphasis).
7. See Robert Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil" in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1987), pp.82, 93.