

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

Calvinism Is Unnecessary

PART 1 — PASTOR JOSH MERRELL

The entire concept of what it means for something to be ‘true’ unravels.

In my three most recent articles I have argued that Calvinism in its most popular form¹ cannot be true because it either rests on positions that are internally contradictory or it collapses into absurdity.² Some reformed authors readily admit this and simply advise us to live with the contradiction, euphemistically calling it an “antinomy” or “mystery.”³

But this approach, too, fails utterly for, as I have shown, if contradictory claims can simultaneously be true then it becomes impossible to prove that *anything* is false. The entire concept of what it means for something to be “true” unravels. The case against the Calvinist worldview, then, would seem to be well under way. Nevertheless, while there are a variety of other tenets in Calvinist theology that are vulnerable to similar lines of attack,⁴ and while I would like to follow those lines and to prosecute this case until the verdict is inescapable, alas, the project would never end. Instead, I want to offer an alternative to Calvinism that provides all that is best within the reformed position without its logical and moral shortcomings.

In short, I want to argue that Calvinism is unnecessary. To defend this thesis, I shall offer an alternative account of God’s providence that harmonizes the relevant biblical data. Of course, I realize that in contemporary Christianity, there is hardly a more controversial and divisive subject than the way in which and the degree to which God exercises His sovereignty.⁵ The Calvinist versus Arminian debate has raged for centuries, and more recently open theism has entered the picture and upset the apple cart. While this is a complex issue and godly men can differ,⁶ in the next several articles I shall nevertheless argue that Molinism (particularly the doctrine of middle knowledge) offers the best available explanation of divine providence because: (1) It fully supports the biblical doctrine of meticulous sovereignty. (2) It offers a coherent explanation of human free will despite such sovereignty. (3) It shields God’s character from charges of capricious malevolence by logically allowing for His genuine desire that all be saved. (4) It places “mystery” where it should be located—namely in God’s infinite attributes rather than in His character.⁷

MOLINISM EXPLAINED

Before proceeding to the arguments in its favor, I will define Molinism and set forth its key premise. Named after Luis de Molina, a 16th-century theologian, Molinism is an attempt to explain God’s sovereign providence by means of His *omniscience* rather than His *omnipotence* as, for example, in Calvinism.⁸ Although he was not the first to posit,⁹ nor the first to utilize it,¹⁰ Molina “fully developed a tripartite structure of omniscience.”¹¹ Molina recognized that there must be three discernable “moments” in God’s knowledge. It is important to understand these moments in terms of logical priority rather than temporal sequence. To say that one thing has logical priority over another is not to say that it comes before the other in time, but rather to say that it provides the grounding or serves to explain it.¹² For example, in temporal sequence a bullet and the hole it creates in the target happen simultaneously. But in logical priority, the bullet comes “first” because it provides the grounding or serves to explain the hole.

NATURAL KNOWLEDGE

The first such moment in God’s omniscience Molina labeled “natural knowledge.”¹³ In this, God knows everything that is possible—everything He *could* do, such as all the possible worlds He could create as well as the individuals or creatures that could conceivably populate them. This knowledge also extends to every act those individuals could do in any set of circumstances in which they found themselves.

To help make this concept clear, consider the question of whether God could create silicon-based life on Mars. Immediately we see that He could. And if He were to do so, then God would know all the activities in which such Martians could engage. This is the essential point in this first moment. God knows what He could do. It is important, however, to recognize that God does not determine to actualize any of these possibilities; rather, this first logical moment *precedes* and is *independent* of any decision on God’s part. Moreover, as the title suggests, such knowledge is natural or *essential* to God. That is, He could not lack it and still be God.¹⁴

¹By far the most popular form of Reformed thought is ‘infralapsarian’ Calvinism often referred to as ‘low Calvinism’ or ‘compatibilism.’ ‘Supralapsarian’ or ‘High Calvinism’ does not suffer from these problems but its teaching that God never loved the wicked and does not offer them salvation is distasteful to most in the Reformed tradition. ²If God needs the world with its evil in order to manifest His glory, grace, and wrath then His aseity and thus His sovereignty itself is destroyed. If He does not need these things to benefit (i.e., glorify) Himself, then we are left with the absurd conclusion that damning sinners to hell for all eternity is for their good. ³Cf. discussion in J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1961), 21-23. ⁴For example it takes an inconsistent position on human freedom vacillating between libertarian and compatibilist definitions of the term. ⁵Cf. Laurence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, Rev. ed. (Pensacola, Fla.: Vance Publications, 1999). James R. White and Norman L. Geisler, *The Potter’s Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler’s Chosen but Free* (Amityville, N.Y.: Calvary Press Publ., 2000). ⁶Bruce A. Ware et al., *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2008). ⁷Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2010), 161. ⁸Paul M. Gould, “Foreknowledge and Human Freedom,” (Classroom Lecture, PHIL 4313-A, photocopy: Spring 2015: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary). ⁹Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas also utilized a three-moment understanding of God’s knowledge. See William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle*

FREE KNOWLEDGE

To skip ahead, the third logical moment in divine omniscience Molina called free knowledge. This is God's exhaustive knowledge of the actual world He freely created. More than His knowledge of what every creature *could* do, free knowledge is God's absolute knowledge of what every creature *will* do. It is further to be distinguished from natural knowledge because God has complete control over what will be true or false in His free knowledge. For example, if God had chosen to create silicon-based life on Mars rather than carbon-based life on Earth, or even never to create at all, then His knowledge of what *will* happen would be completely different. Again, if God had chosen to create a world that did not include King David, then the story of David's victory over Goliath would never have taken place and thus all the true statements about that event would be false. This is not a minor point for what it demonstrates is that "neither the content nor even the existence of free knowledge is necessary to God. God could lack such knowledge and still be God."¹⁵

MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE

This brings us to Molina's most helpful contribution to philosophical theology, the second logical moment in his structure of omniscience, which he designated middle knowledge. It's called middle knowledge not simply because it falls between God's natural and free knowledge but because it shares properties of both. Whereas natural knowledge is filled with things that are necessarily true because of who God is, and free knowledge is filled with things that will only be true *if* God decides to create a particular world,¹⁶ middle knowledge is filled with truths that are "contingent and yet independent of God's will."¹⁷ In other words, middle knowledge is filled with things that would have been true if God had created a different set of circumstances (what philosophers call a different possible world).¹⁸

By middle knowledge, God knows what we *would do* if we were to face a different set of circumstances than we will, in fact, face. These are called counterfactuals. Perhaps an illustration will help. By natural knowledge God knows that He could create a world in which my wife and I could or could not exist and could or could not get married. But, once He created this world, He knows by His free knowledge that we will, in fact, exist and that we will, in fact, be married. But middle knowledge allows God to know who my kids *would have been* and what they would have looked like *if* I had married someone else. That didn't happen, but God knows what the result would have been if it had happened.

Although most people take it for granted that God has such knowledge, Scripture offers many proofs. In I Samuel 23:10-13, David asked the Lord if Saul would come to Keilah and if her citizens would surrender him into the king's custody. When the Lord answered both affirmatively, David fled. When news of David's escape came to Saul, he decided not to besiege the city after all. This episode clearly shows that God knew what would have happened if different circumstances than actually obtained had occurred. Again, consider the story of Peter on the night of

the betrayal. Molina showed that God knew via natural knowledge that Peter, if placed in Annas' courtyard that night, *could* freely affirm or deny Christ, but He knew via middle knowledge that Peter *would* freely deny Jesus under those circumstances.¹⁹ It is not that God forced or causally determined Peter to deny Christ by placing him in such a circumstance. Peter was entirely free and could have chosen to act differently. "But God knew which way Peter *would* freely choose."²⁰

The implications of such a truth are astounding for it means that God cannot help what He knows via middle knowledge any more than He can help what He knows via natural knowledge.²¹ Think about it. If it is true that Peter *would* sin if placed in certain circumstances, then it follows that even though a world with identical circumstances in which Peter does not sin is possible to conceive, it is nevertheless not feasible—not within God's power to create that world. Why? Not because of a defect in God, but rather because if He were to create such circumstances and place Peter in them, then Peter *would* sin. This does not mean that God could not prevent Peter from sinning. Obviously He could, but to do so He would have to change the circumstances. Hence, there are many possible worlds in God's natural knowledge that He cannot create because free creatures would not cooperate. His middle knowledge serves to limit the range of possible worlds to those He could create, *given* the free choices, which He knows men would make in them.²²

This is critically important to grasp. It is impossible for God to allow someone to face a given situation and yet change the particular decision they will freely choose to make.

Now, with this understanding, Molina was free to break ranks with the Calvinists of his day because it allowed Him to show that God could control all things not by determining them to happen, but simply by selecting the world in which the best feasible outcome is accomplished through the free decisions of man. In sum then, God's omniscience is such that He knows (1) what *could* happen in all possible worlds; (2) what *would* happen were He to actualize any one of those possible worlds, and (3) exactly what *will* happen based on His decision to create this particular world.

In the next article I will begin to unpack the ramifications of such a doctrine for the Calvinism controversy. **BT**

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to Suarez, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History (Leiden, N. York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 173. ¹⁰Nearly 50 years before Molina, in his 1527 treatises *Von der Freiheit des Willens* and *Das andere Buchlein von der Freiwilligkeit*, Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier argued for something very similar to Molinism. See Kirk R. MacGregor, "Hubmaier's Concord of Predestination with Free Will," *Direction* 35, no. 2 (2006), 281-283. ¹¹Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 38. ¹²William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 127. ¹³Luis de Molina and Alfred J. Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 4.50.17. ¹⁴Ibid. ¹⁵MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology*, 38. ¹⁶Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N. York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 41. ¹⁷Kenneth J. Perszyk, "Molinism and Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44, no. 3 (1998), 165. ¹⁸Joseph Shieber, "Personal Responsibility and Middle Knowledge: A Challenge for the Molinist," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 66, no. 2 (2009), 62. ¹⁹Molina and Freddoso, 4.51.1, 17-19. ²⁰Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 130. ²¹MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology*, 39. ²²Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 130.