

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

Calvinism Is Unnecessary

PART 2 — PASTOR JOSH MERRELL

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MOLINISM SUPPORTS METICULOUS SOVEREIGNTY

For those who have lost count, this is the sixth article in the series against Calvinism. The first four sought to demonstrate that Calvinism is illogical and internally self-contradictory. In the last installment, I began a new critique in which I hope to show that Calvinism is unnecessary because it is possible to account for the meticulous degree of sovereignty that Calvinists champion without resorting to determinism.¹ That alternative is Molinism. The most useful feature of Molinism is its explanation of middle knowledge by which God knows not only everything that *could* or *will* happen, but also everything that *would* happen if He were to create a different set of circumstances than actually exists.

The implications of such a doctrine cannot be overstated for, armed with middle knowledge, God would be able to control all things not by determining them to happen, but simply by selecting the state of affairs (i.e., possible world) in which the best feasible outcome is accomplished through the free decisions of men. And this is, in fact, exactly what the Scripture suggests. In fact, to be viable, one’s account of divine providence must concur with the scriptural affirmations of the Lord’s sovereign rule over the universe in general and this world in particular. I Chronicles 29:11-12 states the concept succinctly, *Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power... thine is the kingdom... and thou reignest over all*. As McClain explains, “Nothing lies outside its vast reach and scope... The nations of the earth may rebel, follow other gods, even deny the existence of the true God; but all to no avail; Jehovah is still the ‘King of nations’” (Jeremiah 10:7).² The all-encompassing scope of this truth suggests at least three implications.

GOD METICULOUSLY CONTROLS ALL SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

First, God meticulously controls all the significant events of life. This seems intuitive for if God really is a loving Father with unsurpassable power, as Christians believe, then it seems fitting that He would not allow major events to occur apart from His superintendence. Yet this notion is not simply reasonable, it is taught explicitly in Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. The apostle Paul asserts that God *hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation* (Acts 17:26). Likewise the prophet Daniel says boldly, *... all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What does thou?* (Daniel 4:35). With no caveats, the psalmist declares, *Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places* (Psalm 135:6). Citations

such as these could be multiplied *ad nauseam*;³ thus, it seems safe to say that God controls the world’s major affairs.

GOD METICULOUSLY CONTROLS INSIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Second, God meticulously controls the little things.⁴ To many Christians, this also seems intuitive for if God has control over the big things why would He not have control over the little ones?⁵ On the other hand, not a few believers reject such reasoning. They argue that even if God does control the ‘big things’ His control does not extend to the trivial, the mundane, or the inconsequential.⁶ It is nevertheless not the case that God merely controls the ‘big picture’ leaving the details up to chance. Proverbs 16:33 reminds us, *The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD*. Thus, even that which men call ‘luck’ or ‘chance’ is, in reality, under divine providential control.⁷ Jesus used this truth to comfort His followers, *Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered* (Matthew 10:29-30). Such a thought certainly seems consonant with Paul’s declaration that *...all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28). God providentially orders both the big and little things of life.

GOD METICULOUSLY CONTROLS AFFAIRS INVOLVING MORAL AGENTS

Third, God has meticulous control over things that involve other agents.⁸ It is especially at this point that God’s control seems counterintuitive. After all, we are free. That truth notwithstanding, the Scripture says flatly, *The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD* (Proverbs 21:1a). Consider a case from the book of Esther. Serving in the palace of the Persian king Ahasuerus, Mordecai, a Jew, saved the king’s life by exposing a planned assassination. Yet Mordecai himself, along with the rest of the Jews in the kingdom, found themselves the target of a planned genocide because of a personal affront to Haman, the king’s chief of staff. With the date set and the devastating decree signed, doom crept ominously near.

For the spiritually attentive, this was one of the most critical junctures in human history. If Israel were destroyed, Messiah’s appearing, redemption, and the entire plan of God would perish with it. With so much at stake, one might expect a mighty inbreaking of supernatural power; but we read nothing of the kind. Rather, the author merely remarks, *On that night could not the king sleep* (Esther 6:1). As a result of his insomnia, Ahasuerus called for the records to be read in the course of which Mordecai’s good deed in uncovering the plot against the king’s life was found. In the end the king’s heart toward

both Mordecai and his people was so changed that Israel was rescued from extinction and the villain Haman and his sympathizers were executed in their place.⁹ *The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will* (Proverbs 21:1b).

GOD'S METICULOUS CONTROL IS ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH THE FREE DECISIONS OF AGENTS

The case of meticulous control *par excellence* is that of Jesus' crucifixion. After significant reflection and the Spirit's illumination, Peter recognized that while *Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together against Jesus, it was only to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done* (Acts 4:27-28). The point was not wasted in Peter's preaching:

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain (Acts 2:22-23).

"Through sinful men, God accomplished the offering of His Son for the sins of men."¹⁰ Just to contemplate it makes the heart cry out with Paul, *O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!* (Romans 11:33).¹¹

SIMULTANEOUS CONCURRENCE

Molinism accounts for this incredible degree of providence in both a broad and a narrow sense. Broadly speaking, armed with middle knowledge, "the very act of selecting a world to be created is a sort of predestination."¹² This is so because, down to the very last detail, God knew precisely what His act of selection would entail. As important as this is, however, it does not seem to do justice to the present tense language used in many passages where God's activity is described not in terms of past selection but in terms of present involvement. Consider these excerpts from Psalm 29, *The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars... The voice of the LORD divideth the flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shaketh the wilderness... The voice of the LORD maketh the*

hinds to calve, and discovereth the forests (Psalm 29:5, 7-9).

Texts like this, although clearly poetic, suggest that God is not only ultimately responsible but in some sense presently active in the workings of the material universe. Hebrews 1:3 plainly declares Christ to be *upholding all things by the word of his power* and Paul adds that *by him all things consist* (Colossians 1:17).

It appears then that the traditional Christian teaching that God 'concur' with the operation of secondary causes has some merit. Aquinas assumed that God acts on the secondary causes to produce their operations calling his view premotion.¹³ Molina recognized, however, that such a view is "utterly deterministic and incompatible with the existence of sin."¹⁴ Thus, he replaced premotion with what he called simultaneous concurrence whereby God acts not *on* the will but concurs *with* the will of any secondary cause to produce the effects *they* desire.¹⁵ In this sense, God is not responsible for the sinfulness of actions since He does not act on the will to cause them; He merely *permits* such actions out of a desire to allow human freedom. In the end, however, by "either willing or permitting everything that happens... God acts to produce every event in the actual world."¹⁶ In sum, Molinism renders Calvinism unnecessary because it upholds the most robust account of God's sovereignty yet without in any way relying on determinism. In the next article I will provide a coherent explanation of human free will despite such meticulous sovereignty. **BT**

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¹ Determinism (referred to in this series as 'S') is the belief that God is sovereign over any event E if and only if God determines that E occurs. It alleges further that God is sovereign over any agent A if and only if God determines all of A's actions. ² Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God as Set Forth in the Scriptures* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1959), 24. ³ Cf. Psalm 33:10-11; 93:2-4; Isaiah 14:24; 46:10; etc. ⁴ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2010), 23. ⁵ Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 13. ⁶ Many Arminians for example, who eschew meticulous sovereignty, assent to general providence. Cf. Paul M. Gould, "Foreknowledge and Human Freedom," (Classroom Lecture, PHIL 4313-A, photocopy: Spring 2015: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary). ⁷ This does not necessarily rule out 'chance' happenings. Molina's definition of providence included secondary causes. Thus, God could factor the 'chance' outcomes of coin tosses, for example, into His world selection criteria thereby bringing them under the sphere of His control (cf. Ecclesiastes 9:11). ⁸ Keathley, 24. ⁹ McClain, 27-28. ¹⁰ Keathley, 25. ¹¹ Notice that Paul attributes this to God's wisdom and knowledge (as Molinism suggests) rather than to God's will and power (as any form of determinism such as Calvinism suggests). ¹² William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 136. ¹³ William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case of Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnoch (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989), 153-154. ¹⁴ Ibid., 154. ¹⁵ Luis de Molina and Alfred J. Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 4.53.3.2. ¹⁶ Craig, "Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement," 154.