

*An Introduction to Molinism*

**Benjamin J. Williams**  
**THEO 5003 Contemporary Theology**  
**Dr. Chip Kooi**  
**Summer 2014**

## Introduction

Freedom and omniscience have been philosophical and theological contention points for millennia. Every attempt to defend each truth harmoniously with the other has managed to increase frustration, but attempts to jettison one or the other position have led to even worse ends. Calvinism seems to suffer beneath the weight of limited atonement, Universalism appears to lack God's judgment, and all third option schemes walk down the road of Pelagius. Into this quagmire enters Molinism, a centuries old notion that has been revitalized with the force of some of today's brightest minds. Molinism is an attractive option that has much to offer the Christian faith. This paper will attempt to introduce the reader to the history of the view, clarify its premises, offer substantial critique, and then finally imagine the theological implications of Molinism should it prove to be coherent and faithful to Christianity.

## History of Molinism

Molinism is derived from the work of Luis De Molina, a 16th century, Jesuit theologian.<sup>1</sup> His work resulted from a dispute with the theologians of the Dominican order. Craig summarizes:

Catholic theologians of the Dominican order held that God's hypothetical knowledge is logically *subsequent* to his decree to create a certain world. ... By contrast, inspired by Luis de Molina, Catholic theologians of the Jesuit order maintained that God's hypothetical knowledge of creaturely free decisions is logically *prior* to his creative decree. This difference between the Jesuit Molinists and the Dominicans was no mere matter of hairsplitting! ... Not only does this view make room for human freedom, but it affords God a means of choosing which world of free creatures to create.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See as a primary source: Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> William Lane Craig, "God Directs All Things" in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 81-82. For clarity, throughout this work, individual entries in this edited collection will be cited by author and title as appearing in Jowers ed., *Four Views*. One bibliographical reference at the end will stand for all the references to Jowers.

Molina's particular expression of God's foreknowledge has survived the intervening centuries and has risen to prominence in recent decades. In addition, Alfred Freddoso's translation and accompanying essay have served as "an important presentation of (and commentary on) Molina's views, and it has been highly influential in the subsequent evaluation of those views and their application to the traditional problem of the relationship between an omniscient God and human freedom)."<sup>3</sup>

The ideas of Molina have risen to the front of Christian theology through the advocacy of a few high profile proponents of the view, two of which stand out above most others. First, Alvin Plantinga is the father of modern Reformed Epistemology and is also a vocal Molinist. Famous as an apologist, Plantinga is well known for setting forth the ideas of Reformed theology in the language of modern philosophy.<sup>4</sup> His positioning of himself as a Molinist and his credibility as a philosopher and theologian have paved the way for many others to take up the view. Second, but more important for the purposes of this paper, William Lane Craig stands out as one of today's most vocal spokesmen for Molinism. As another philosophically trained Christian apologist, Craig brings to the discussion a depth of understanding and a breadth of language that has given Molinism its fullest modern expression.

### **Middle Knowledge**

In order to reach even a rudimentary grasp of Molinism, one must first approach a handful of carefully defined terms and complicated ideas. The most important concept pertains to God's omniscience.

---

<sup>3</sup> John Martin Fischer, "Molinism," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 1.*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Dewey J. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 175.

Orthodox Christianity affirms the omniscience of God, however, determining how to define and clarify that characteristic is a matter of some debate. At least two types of knowledge have been ascribed to God. As Craig explains:

Everybody agreed that logically prior to God's decree to create a world, God had knowledge of all necessary truths, including all the possible worlds he might create. This was called God's *natural knowledge*. It gives him knowledge of what *could* be. Moreover, everyone agreed that logically subsequent to this decree to create a particular world, God knows all the contingent truths about the actual world, including its past, present, and future. This was God's *free knowledge*. It involves knowledge of what *will* be.<sup>5</sup>

Even within that explanation, a few terms need clarification. For example, in this discussion the term "logically subsequent" refers to logical order without any necessary temporal ordering. In dealing with divine decisions, God is often discussed as processing an enormous number of logical considerations in proper order but in the same instant of simultaneity.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the terms "contingent truths" and "necessary truths" have specific definitions that, while being beyond the purview of this paper, would need to be considered more fully in order to properly understand this topic.

Molinism then adds to this discussion by positing the existence of "middle knowledge." By asserting first that free knowledge (knowledge of the actual world) is logically subsequent to natural knowledge (knowledge of possible worlds), Molinists can assert that prior to the creative decree that actualizes the created world, God possesses knowledge of feasible worlds. As Craig explains,

Not only does this view make room for human freedom, but it affords God a means of choosing which world of free creatures to create. For by knowing how persons would freely choose in whatever circumstances they might be, God can, by decreeing to place

---

<sup>5</sup> William Lane Craig, "God Directs All Things" in Jowers ed., *Four Views*, 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> For more thorough consideration of a Molinist approach to God and Time, see William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

just those persons in just those circumstances, bring about his ultimate purposes *through* free creaturely decisions. Thus, by employing his hypothetical knowledge, God can plan a world down to the last detail and yet do so without annihilating creaturely freedom, since God has already factored into the equation what people would do freely under various circumstances. Since God's hypothetical knowledge lies logically in between his natural knowledge and his free knowledge, Molinists called it God's *middle knowledge*.<sup>7</sup>

Though historically connected to Molinism, a certain number of others, including Calvinists, have also found middle knowledge to be a helpful concept. Terrance Tiessen writes, "Molinists have correctly identified the benefits that this concept provides. The fact that their own proposal is incoherent because creatures are assumed to be libertarianly free should not prevent compatibilists from assessing the validity of the middle knowledge construct."<sup>8</sup>

### **Central Critique: Is It Free Will?**

A legitimate concern for Molinism is whether or not it presents a purely deterministic universe devoid of truly free will. While Calvinists are more concerned with maintaining divine omniscience and sovereignty, those concerned with maintaining free will worry that this particular view protects free will in name only and not in any meaningful reality of libertarian choice.

*What Is Free Will?* One very helpful and notable contemporary author on this topic is Linda Zagzebski from the University of Oklahoma. For clarification of free will, Zagzebski offers first the Temporal Contingency Principle: "An act A at T is non-determined (temporally contingent) if and only if there is a possible world W that has exactly the same history up to T as

---

<sup>7</sup> William Lane Craig, "God Directs All Things" in Jowers ed., *Four Views*, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Terrance L. Tiessen, "Why Calvinists Should Believe In Divine Middle Knowledge, Although They Reject Molinism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 2 (September 1, 2007): 366. For more examples of Calvinists wrestling with this concept, see also: Paul Helm and Terrance L. Tiessen, "Does Calvinism Have Room for Middle Knowledge? A Conversation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 2 (September 1, 2009): 437-454. Also, John D. Laing, "The Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 455-467.

the actual world and in which A does not occur at T.”<sup>9</sup> Finding this possibly too strong, Zagzebski then offers the Principle of Causal Contingency: “An act A is non-determined (causally contingent) if and only if there is a possible world W in which all the events in the causal history of A in the actual world occur and in which A does not occur.”<sup>10</sup> In another article, Zagzebski states her perception of “incompatibilist free will” as, “there are times when person A does *x* at time *t*<sub>2</sub>, and it would be correct to say that given the entire causal history of *x* and the world’s causal laws, A could nevertheless have refrained from doing *x* at *t*<sub>2</sub>.”<sup>11</sup> A similar but slightly different statement of a deterministic event is offered by Anglin, who states, “Roughly speaking, an event, act or state of affairs *e* is *determined* in a possible world *W* if and only if there is no possible world *W*’ such that (1) *W*’ does not contain *e* and (2) *W*’ is the same as *W* (having the same natural laws, for example) except that it does not contain *e* or the consequence (in *W*) of *e*.”<sup>12</sup> This set of definitions, while technical, should give a sufficient basis for examination of the construction of free will in Molinism.

*Molinism & Free Will.* To hear language from Molinism that raises this concern over free will, one need only hear Craig’s explanation of perseverance and apostasy: “In the moment logically prior to creation, God via His middle knowledge knew who would freely receive Christ as Savior and what sorts of warnings against apostasy would be extrinsically efficacious in

---

<sup>9</sup> Linda Zagzebski, “Does Libertarian Freedom Require Alternate Possibilities?” *Noûs* 34, Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives, 14, Action and Freedom (2000): 231.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Zabzebski, “Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will,” *Religious Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Sep., 1985): 280.

<sup>12</sup> W. S. Anglin, *Free Will and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 4.

keeping them from falling away.”<sup>13</sup> In this statement, it seems as though God has actualized a scenario where a creature will with certainty choose a particular option. If a free creature is placed into a scenario with two options but with circumstances designed to intentionally drive the choosing of one of the choices (say, option *x*), is the choice still free? If God knows with certainty that in this set of circumstances, a creature will choose a particular option *x*, was the creature free to begin with? Or, stated yet another way, if there is no possible world, identical to the actualized world, wherein the creature does chooses *not x*, was that a free decision? As Campbell objects, “If God infallibly knows that, for example, Jay will eat steak for dinner tomorrow at 7:00 p.m., then Jay will certainly do so. Hence, there is some sense in which Jay is unable to not eat his steak.”<sup>14</sup> Campbell elaborates on a specific, biblical example:

Concerning, for example, Peter’s choice to deny Christ, proponents of middle knowledge will insist that God, knowing those circumstances in which Peter would (if placed in them) choose to deny Christ, placed Peter in just those circumstances. But we are left asking, “What is it about those circumstances which influenced Peter to make his choice?” If the answer is, “Nothing about the circumstances influenced Peter,” then we are left asking about the relevance of saying, “God knew under which circumstances Peter would choose to deny Christ.” If the answer is, “There is something about the circumstances which influenced Peter to make his choice,” then the circumstances become the determining factor in Peter’s decision, not Peter himself.<sup>15</sup>

The challenge is indeed formidable to the theologian coming to Molinism with a prior commitment to free will.

Craig, for his part, negotiates this objection with a different definition of free will. He writes, “Freedom requires only that in a given set of circumstances one be in some sense capable of refraining from doing what one would do; it is not required that one might not do what one

---

<sup>13</sup> Williams Lane Craig, “‘Lest Anyone Should Fall’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective On Perseverance And Apostolic Warnings,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29, no. 2 (April 1, 1991): 73.

<sup>14</sup> Travis James Campbell, “Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

would do.”<sup>16</sup> After the reader’s head stops spinning from this definition, one must ask why the normally careful Craig has offered such a vague set of terms. “In some sense capable” is a logically useless phrase. Furthermore, the statement does nothing to explain how it is that God knows with certainty the outcome of the choice without the choice also being determined. In another statement, Craig writes, “If a choice is freely made in *C*, then it would be freely made in *C\**, which includes some causally irrelevant event not included in *C*. If God places *S* in *C*, then *S*’s freedom is not compromised by the mere fact that had God placed *S* in *C\** instead, *S* would have chosen differently.”<sup>17</sup> Craig makes this strong assertion, but he does not explain how it can be true, at least taking the definitions of Zagzebski and others for free will and determined events.

### **Theological Implications**

If however, the above concerns for Molinism could be responded to in a logically coherent fashion, then the Molinist position does provide some fascinating theological implications.

*Dialogue with Skeptics.* If Molinism is true, then some of the standard accusations of skeptical atheists can be handled in a surprisingly effective fashion. For example, consider the Problem of Evil. Plantinga’s strategy is to say that “although God freely contributes causally to the actual state of the world, He is *not* responsible for the evil in the world. ... Although God (weakly) actualizes worlds in which evil occurs through the actions of free creatures He creates,

---

<sup>16</sup> William Lane Craig, “God Directs All Things,” in Jowers ed., *Four Views*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

nevertheless God is not morally responsible for that evil.”<sup>18</sup> In a fantastic interview concerning the rationality of theism, Plantinga himself states:

I suppose your thinking is that it is suffering and sin that make this world less than perfect. But then your question makes sense only if the best possible worlds contain no sin or suffering. And is that true? Maybe the best worlds contain free creatures some of whom sometimes do what is wrong. Indeed, maybe the best worlds contain a scenario very like the Christian story.

Think about it: The first being of the universe, perfect in goodness, power and knowledge, creates free creatures. These free creatures turn their backs on him, rebel against him and get involved in sin and evil. Rather than treat them as some ancient potentate might — e.g., having them boiled in oil — God responds by sending his son into the world to suffer and die so that human beings might once more be in a right relationship to God. God himself undergoes the enormous suffering involved in seeing his son mocked, ridiculed, beaten and crucified. And all this for the sake of these sinful creatures.

I’d say a world in which this story is true would be a truly magnificent possible world. It would be so good that no world could be appreciably better. But then the best worlds contain sin and suffering.<sup>19</sup>

With seeming simplicity, Plantinga has woven together the orthodox Christian story with the philosophy of Molinism to create a devastating response to the philosophical problem of evil.

However, critics of Molinism continue to assert that this philosophy creates more problems than it solves, at least in regards to the emotional problem of evil.<sup>20</sup> Boyd claims that Molinists “must accept that each and every one of the unthinkable atrocities that has ever befallen a human throughout history had God’s specific stamp of approval.”<sup>21</sup> For example,

---

<sup>18</sup> As summarized by Joseph Shieber, “Personal Responsibility and Middle Knowledge: A Challenge for The Molinist,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 66, no. 2 (October 1, 2009): 65-66. Shieber, for his part, sees this construction to be a problem, because it requires the Molinist to deny the principle of personal responsibility, that “if S freely contributes causally to its being the case that *p*, then S is personally responsible for its being the case that *p*.”

<sup>19</sup> Gary Gutting, “Is Atheism Irrational?” *New York Times*, February 9, 2014, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/is-atheism-irrational/> (accessed June 1, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Here, a distinction is being made between the philosophical problem of evil (which is largely agreed to have been answered), and the emotional problem of evil (which remains a devastating force). As in the following example, it is one thing to claim that Hitler could have brought about part of God’s purpose, but it is another thing to desire such to be true or to love a God whose purpose takes such a shape.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, “Response to William Lane Craig,” in Jowers, *Four Views*, 139.

Perszyk restates Hasker's objection, "If God, knowing Hitler's counterfactuals of freedom, went ahead and actualized their antecedents, and thereby ensured that the world *would* contain the Holocaust, it's hard to see how such a God could be supremely good moral agent."<sup>22</sup> Perszyk for his own part states, "There's no *a priori* reason to think that Molinism *by itself* is either a bane or boon to theodicy. A case-by-case analysis is needed."<sup>23</sup>

*Neither Universalist, Calvinist, Nor Pelagian.* Another helpful application of Molinism relates to the actual purpose or desire of God for humankind. In the great debates over Christian worldview, Calvinists propose a scheme that maintains God's sovereignty, but they require that God's will not include the salvation of all humans. In fact, in definite or limited atonement, Calvinists must explicitly assert that God has foreordained some to damnation for His glory. On the other hand, Universalists stand on the desirable ground of claiming that God desires all humans to be saved and that His sovereign will ultimately accomplishes that end. However, the Universalist is required to turn a blind eye (or a gymnastic hermeneutic) to much of the canon that speaks of judgment and damnation. Those wishing to maintain the doctrine of eternal damnation and the desire of God for universal salvation are left holding the undesirable conclusion that God's sovereign will is thwarted by human will to sin, not to mention that God's sovereign will for salvation is only accomplished in so much as humans choose freely for it to be accomplished in them.

The Molinist enters this debate and changes the landscape. The Molinist can affirm that God's sovereign will is responsible for all that is in the created world. The Molinist can also affirm that God desires salvation for all, with one important caveat. God's will is stated as

---

<sup>22</sup> Perszyk, Kenneth J. "Molinism and Theodicy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Dec., 1998): 166.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

desiring that as many free creatures as possible be in His eternal kingdom. God is then thought to have freely and sovereignly created the world that best accomplishes that task. The question that remains is whether or not the above critiques make these accomplishments illusory. If successful, Molinism is an ecumenical juggernaut, synthesizing the best of all traditions while jettisoning each view's least desirable consequence. If unsuccessful, Molinism is nothing more than philosophical wishful thinking.

### **Conclusion**

With the weighty support of names like Craig and Plantinga, Molinism seems to be here to stay. Its influence on the world of apologetics is already noticeable, and its inroads into broader theology is inevitable, especially with Craig being such a prolific writer and frequent author for "Four View" type books. Molinism acknowledges the need to harmonize the apparent character of creaturely freedom with the sovereignty of the Creator demanded by faith, tradition, and canon. Whether or not Molinism effectively accomplishes this task remains open for debate. What is clear is that the work of Molina and his modern interpreters have forced the proponents of all views to sharpen their arguments and more finely tune their language - this to the benefit of all people of faith.

## Bibliography

- Anglin, W. S. *Free Will and the Christian Faith*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Campbell, Travis James. "Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique." *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 1-22.
- Craig, William Lane. "'Lest Anyone Should Fall': A Middle Knowledge Perspective On Perseverance And Apostolic Warnings." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29, no. 2 (April 1, 1991): 65-74.
- Craig, William Lane. *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001.
- Fischer, John Martin. "Molinism" In Kvanvig, Jonathan L. ed. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Gutting, Gary. "Is Atheism Irrational?" *New York Times*. February 9, 2014. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/is-atheism-irrational/> (Accessed June 1, 2014).
- Helm, Paul, and Terrance L. Tiessen. "Does Calvinism Have Room For Middle Knowledge? A Conversation." *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 2 (September 1, 2009): 437-454.
- Hoitenga, Dewey J. *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Jowers, Dennis W. ed. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Laing, John D. "The Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 455-467.
- Molina, Luis de. *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*. Translated by Alfred J. Freddoso. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Perszyk, Kenneth J. "Molinism and Theodicy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Dec., 1998): 163-184.
- Shieber, Joseph. "Personal Responsibility and Middle Knowledge: A Challenge for The Molinist." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 66, no. 2 (October 1, 2009): 61-70.
- Tiessen, Terrance L. "Why Calvinists Should Believe In Divine Middle Knowledge, Although They Reject Molinism." *Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 2 (September 1, 2007): 345-366.

Zabzebski, Linda. "Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will." *Religious Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Sep., 1985): 279-298.

Zagzebski, Linda. "Does Libertarian Freedom Require Alternate Possibilities?" *Noûs* 34, Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives, 14, Action and Freedom (2000): 231-248.