

CALVINISM IS UNNECESSARY (PART 1)

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 offers 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

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, FL: 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 to Suarez*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History ; (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 173.

¹⁰Nearly 50 years before Molina, in his 1527 treatises *Von der Freiheit des Willens* and *Das andere Büchlein 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, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 127.

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

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 1 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

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.Y.: 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.

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.

Article 6, Part 2 of 4? "Calvinism is Unnecessary"

Molinism Supports Meticulous Sovereignty

For those that 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.²³ That alternative account is called 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. 1 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).²⁴ 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

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.

²³Determinism, (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.

²⁴Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom : An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God as Set Forth in the Scriptures* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1959), 24.

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 doest 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*;²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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?²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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 along with his sympathizers were executed in their place.³¹ The heart of kings truly is in the hand of the Lord so that “*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

²⁵Cf. Psalm 33:10-11; 93:2-4; Isaiah 14:24; 46:10; etc.

²⁶Keathley, 23.

²⁷Flint, 13.

²⁸Many Arminians, for example, who eschew meticulous sovereignty, assent to general providence. Cf. Gould.

²⁹This 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).

³⁰Keathley, 24.

³¹McClain, 27-28.

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.”³² 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).³³

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”.³⁴ 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*.³⁵ Molina recognized, however, that such a view is “utterly deterministic and incompatible with the existence of sin”.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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”.³⁸ 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.

³²Keathley, 25.

³³Notice 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).

³⁴Craig, *The Only Wise God : The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, 136.

³⁵William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case of Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 153-154.

³⁶Ibid., 154.

³⁷Molina and Freddoso, 4.53.3.2.

³⁸Craig, "Middle Knowledge, a Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement," 154.